

faith-based

## The Gospel of Judas

The text, the scholarship, and the scandal.

By Larry Hurtado

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In a few weeks, we'll be bombarded with exhortations to see the movie of *The Da Vinci Code*, an entertaining yarn riddled with historical errors. Just in time for Easter, though, the focus isn't on author Dan Brown's fiction but on a real ancient artifact and the story behind its discovery and publication.

The Gospel of Judas, which reflects the penchant of some early Christian circles for things mystical and mythic, lay in the sands for many centuries before being found, probably by local Egyptians, perhaps as long ago as the late 1940s. Why was it out of sight for so long? It was not suppressed by ecclesiastical figures in *Da Vinci Code* style; indeed, it is more likely that this copy of the text came from the library of an Orthodox Christian group. The Gospel of Judas wasn't hidden, it was just forgotten.

After it was found—the official story is that this happened in the 1970s, but it was probably much earlier—shadowy figures in the black-market antiquities trade took the text to Europe and kept it out of public view. The reason for their secrecy was not theology, but greed. The sorry tale is a narrative of venal irresponsibility.

The 26-page Coptic text of the Gospel of Judas is part of 62 pages containing several writings (some in Coptic and others in Greek) copied in one codex, or ancient papyrus book. It appears to have been produced by Egyptian Christians sometime in the fourth century. It's quite possible that the codex was part of the cache of 13 codices discovered in 1947 at Nag Hammadi, including the famous Gospel of Thomas. Retired professor James Robinson, who coordinated the editing and translation of the Nag Hammadi material, has long suspected that there might be additional codices from the site. And news of this particular artifact, and its inclusion of the Gospel of Judas, has been circulating around the scholarly rumor mill for at least 20 years. Robinson says that unnamed dealers showed him grainy pictures of it in the early 1980s; several libraries, including Southern Methodist University's, were also quietly approached. The idea was to sell the codex for an extravagant sum. When this effort proved unsuccessful, art dealer Bruce Ferrini allegedly placed the codex in a bank vault in Ohio, where it lay for 16 years, left to decay so badly that scholars despaired of the codex's condition when they were finally allowed to examine it. So much for the advancement of historical knowledge!

Eventually, Mario Jean Roberty, a Swiss lawyer who is head of the Maecenas Foundation, which is also Swiss, bought the codex for a reported \$1.5 million plus half the proceeds from the future marketing of its contents. In 2004, Roberty struck a deal with the National Geographic Society to finance scholarly conservation and publication. In other words, the various owners of the codex couldn't sell the artifact because legitimate potential buyers suspected it had been illegally obtained. And then Roberty cleverly hit upon the idea of making his money back by marketing the *contents* of the codex.

So, finally, this humble book from ancient Christianity comes to light. But only after the exchange of hundreds of thousands of dollars, deals that require secrecy of the scholars invited to work on the text, and the pressuring of those who hoarded it over the years to do the right thing. Later this year, a proper critical edition of the Coptic original is expected from the respected specialist Rodolphe Kasser of the University of Geneva. In the meantime, check out the project's [impressive Web site](#), where you can download a free PDF of the Coptic or an English translation.

This is welcome news, but along with the merchandising of the codex have come exaggerated claims.

For instance, National Geographic spokesperson Terry Garcia reported anonymous claims that the discovery of the text ranks with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi collection. Garcia also suggested that by presenting Judas as Jesus' special confidante, the Gospel of Judas may be seen as threatening two millennia of Christian doctrine. This is all ballyhoo designed to get us to buy the books and CDs and watch the TV specials, all of which National Geographic is producing to make back the \$1 million it reportedly invested in the project.

The Gospel of Judas has genuine historical value—as one of several bits of evidence showing the diversity of early Christianity, like the writings of such figures as [Irenaeus](#), the bishop of Lyons in about 180 A.D. The text's depiction of Judas as the disciple to whom Jesus gave unique mystical revelations is not itself really unique. It somewhat resembles the portrayal of Thomas in the Gospel of Thomas. Nor is there evidence that the Gospel of Judas ever enjoyed much popularity as an alternative to the canon of the New Testament or was considered for inclusion in that canon. This text reflects a profoundly elitist viewpoint, claiming a specially conveyed revelation of religious truths withheld from ordinary Christians and their leaders.

Still, all of us interested in early Christianity are grateful for this text and the others in the codex. And if we're lucky, this won't be the last ancient Christian book to reappear. Let's just hope that the next such text falls into responsible hands and escapes the careless treatment that this one for so long endured.

*Larry W. Hurtado is a professor of New Testament language, literature, and theology at New College, University of Edinburgh.*

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