

The Gospel of Judas: Perspective on Some Crucial Questions

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On the first week of April, 2006, the National Geographic Society announced the discovery of a lost gospel titled, "The Gospel of Judas." Every major news outlet covered this event with some hailing it as the greatest discovery of the century. Others remarked that this gospel would rock many Christians and force a re-examination of our faith. The National Geographic Society then aired a global television special on Palm Sunday, April 9th, telling the story of the discovery and discussing its significance. The Society has made the entire text of the Gospel of Judas available on its website (www.nationalgeographic.com) both in Coptic (the Egyptian language in which it was written) and in English translation.

This discovery, along with its attendant hype, have raised many questions for people. I would like to provide some perspective on a few of those questions.

Were you shocked by this discovery?

No. Numerous papyrus documents of many kinds have been discovered in the past 100 years, including over 100 papyrus fragments of the New Testament, which, incidentally match up precisely with the New Testament text as we already have it. About 60 years ago, a large number of papyrus documents very similar in character to the Gospel of Judas were discovered near the upper Nile river in Egypt at a village called Nag Hammadi. The Nag Hammadi find would have made a bigger media splash if it had not been overshadowed by the far more significant discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls shortly afterward.

Did the Nag Hammadi collection contain any other gospels?

Yes, the Nag Hammadi manuscripts contained nearly 50 different documents that included a number of "secret" gospels. These included titles such as, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Gospel of Truth*, *the Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Mary*, as well as a number of other texts purporting to give special truth and insights into God, spiritual realities, and secret knowledge. Although each of these documents was called a "gospel," they are very different from the four canonical gospels. They do not contain accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry, his passion, and his resurrection. They tend to be discourses on secret knowledge.

Aren't all of these additional gospels what Dan Brown was alluding to in, The DaVinci Code?

Probably so. His plot about Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene is derived from a passage in *The Gospel of Philip* that says, “And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene, [...] her more than the disciples [...] kiss her on her [...]. The rest of [...]. They said to him, ‘Why do you love her more than all of us’” (the ellipsis [...] indicates where the papyrus is broken away and lost). From this lone partial text, Brown makes the incredible inferential leap that Jesus must have had sexual relations with her and that she bore children to him. *The Gospel of Philip* is also a Coptic text found in Egypt not far from where the *Gospel of Judas* was discovered. More importantly, they are both Gnostic texts.

Shouldn't this be unsettling to Christians to find out that there are other gospels out there?

Not at all. They all come from one offshoot form of Christianity called Gnosticism. We have always known about Gnosticism from many church leaders living in the second, third, and fourth centuries. These church fathers interacted extensively with the Gnostic Christians often quoting from their works. In fact, the famous church leader Irenaeus actually mentions the *Gospel of Judas* in his work, *Against All Heresies*. So, it is really not surprising that the document was eventually discovered. Irenaeus explicitly says that the Gnostics wrote many different gospels and books, but he, along with all other church leaders of the second through fourth centuries, regarded them as grossly inaccurate and harmful in what they taught. He warned, “they adduce an unspeakable number of apocryphal and spurious writings, which they themselves have forged, to bewilder the minds of foolish men, and of such as are ignorant of the Scriptures of truth.”

So the Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic document?

Yes, it is quite clearly a document written by someone who was a Gnostic. The language, the ideas, the theology, and the names mentioned in it all suggest it was written by someone who was an ardent advocate of Gnosticism. The church father Irenaeus (A.D. 180) classified the Gospel of Judas as a form of “Cainite” Gnosticism of which he says, “They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things [Gnostic secret knowledge], and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas.”

What exactly was Gnosticism?

Gnosticism was a religion of redemption that surfaced as early as the late first century A.D. and was popular among some communities through the fourth century A.D. At the

heart of Gnosticism is a belief in *two* gods—the creator God that we know about through Genesis 1, but also a secret, hidden, unknown god that exists in the kingdom of light. It is this unknown god that Gnosticism purports to reveal. At the heart of the Gospel of Judas is a revelation of this unknown god.

But Gnostics apparently believed in Jesus?

Yes, but their Jesus was very different than the Jesus who is revealed in the Bible. The Gnostic Jesus did not become incarnate to die on the cross to make atonement for the sin of the world. He came to reveal the higher knowledge about the existence of the unknown god and that every person has a “divine spark” of this god within them. This divine spark is trapped in our physical bodies and longs for release from the entombment of the flesh to be reunited with the unknown god in the kingdom of light.

So this is why Judas’s betrayal of Jesus was a good thing according to the Gospel of Judas?

Right. The only reason the death of Jesus was important was to free Jesus from the constraints of the physical body. Most Gnostic groups, however, believed that Jesus never truly became incarnate, that it only seemed like he was human. This belief is often referred to as “docetism” (from the Greek word *dokeō*, “it seems”). This dim view of physical existence is why some Gnostic communities could advocate the practice of abortion and infanticide.

When did Gnosticism begin?

This has been a long-debated question, but the current generation of scholars are suggesting that Gnosticism did not come into existence until *after* the creation of the New Testament. We certainly have no firm historical evidence that Gnosticism existed at the time of Jesus and the Apostles. If this is true, it is devastating to the idea that the Gospel of Judas gives an accurate depiction of Jesus’s ministry and teaching. I personally tend to follow the conclusions of a group of scholars who argue that the catalyst for the development of Gnosticism was the disillusionment in certain segments of Judaism following the two Jewish wars (A.D. 70 and 135) resulting in a form of mysticism in which heretical rabbis began reporting seeing *two* powers in heaven.

After conducting many scientific tests, the National Geographic Society has declared the Gospel of Judas to be authentic. What do they mean?

They only mean that the document is not a recent forgery. In other words, they wanted to prove that some profit-seeking individual did not fake the whole thing in a garage laboratory 20 years ago. The radio carbon test, the handwriting analysis, and the similarity to the Nag Hammadi documents all suggest that it was written in the late third or early fourth century. I have no reason to doubt these conclusions. On the other hand,

the National Geographic Society was not saying that the historical or theological statements of the document were accurate and correct.

Do you think any of the historical statements in the Gospel of Judas are authentic?

In the NGS television special, Dr. Craig Evans stated categorically, “it does not contain any authentic Jesus tradition.” This means that he believes that there is nothing the document contains reporting what Jesus did or said that is true. I would agree with him. It is first of all important to observe that the document says very little about events in Jesus’ life. It mainly consists of dialogues he has with his disciples during his final week. These dialogues become a framework within which the writer can give Gnostic teaching.

Does any of the purported teaching of Jesus in this document ring true?

First of all, most people would not be able to understand the vast majority of things that Jesus is purported to say in this document. It reads *very* differently than Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Whereas the four canonical gospels are written for all people to read and understand, the Gospel of Judas (as well as the other Nag Hammadi documents) are written by and for an educated elite with some level of philosophical sophistication. I doubt if the vast majority of people in the ancient world would have understood what this was all about.

Secondly, I would say that this document is “true” only insofar as it reflects what Gnostics taught in the third century A.D. That is its principal value. It gives us an important historical window on one form of religious belief in the late Roman period. There is really nothing in it that fits with the life of Jesus as we know it and can establish it on many other historical grounds.

What are some of the teachings given in the Gospel of Judas?

Here is a random selection of the ideas found in the document:

- The unknown god in the hidden kingdom (Jesus to Judas): “[Come], that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen. For there exists a great and boundless realm, whose extent no generation of angels has seen, [in which] there is [a] great invisible [Spirit].”
- Revelation of the unknown realm (Jesus to Judas): “A great angel, the enlightened divine Self-Generated, emerged from the cloud, and they became attendants for the angelic Self-Generated.”
- The origin of immortal beings and the first man (Jesus to Judas): “The multitude of those immortals is called the cosmos—that is, perdition—by the Father and the seventy-two luminaries who are with the Self-Generated and his seventy two aeons. In him the first human appeared with his incorruptible powers.”

- The origin of Jesus (Judas's insight): "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo [the unknown god]. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you."
- On entering the eternal kingdom (Jesus to Judas): "No person of mortal birth is worthy to enter the house you have seen for that place is reserved for the holy." In another passage: "The souls of every human generation will die. When these people, however, have completed the time of the kingdom and the spirit leaves them, their bodies will die but their souls will be alive, and they will be taken up."

The teaching found in the Gospel of Judas is thoroughly consistent with the kind of Gnostic teaching that is reflected in the Nag Hammadi documents and other Gnostic sources. There is nothing here that is consistent with biblical Christianity.

Should we be concerned that our Bible is incomplete?

Not at all. Our New Testament has been complete for nearly two thousand years. Christians throughout history in every part of the world have recognized this to be the case.

The NGS special gave the impression that Irenaeus (A.D. 180) may have chosen what gospels to include in the New Testament. Is that an accurate depiction of what happened?

Neither Irenaeus nor any church leader arbitrarily selected which books would become part of the New Testament. From the moment that the gospels were first written, they were circulated throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond and used in the churches for teaching, worship, and devotion. Lists of New Testament writings were later drawn up by some church fathers and early church councils to recognize and formalize what Christians were using in churches throughout the world. The formal recognition became essential because some groups were wanting to add to the New Testament and other people (like Marcion) were wanting to subtract from what was widely used and recognized as authoritative.

The NGS special gave the impression that there were a variety of competing Christianities in the first century? Is that true?

From the very beginning, there was one Christianity. It began with the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and became encapsulated and disseminated by the twelve apostles who spent three years with Jesus in his public ministry. This is why the book of Acts says that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). This good news about Jesus Christ was taken to the Gentile world principally by Paul the Apostle, who was directly commissioned by the resurrected Lord. What Paul proclaimed in his missionary travels was thoroughly consistent with the "good news" that was proclaimed from the very beginning. This is quite evident from what Paul says to the Corinthians: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the

third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3-5). This was the common confession of the church throughout the world at that time. No Gnostic (including the writer of the Gospel of Judas) could have agreed with this statement.

There were variations from this core Christianity that emerged from time-to-time and place-by-place. But it is inaccurate to portray the first century as a time in which there was a buffet table of Christianities that afforded a person a variety of choices.