

## Jesus Laughing: The “Gospel” of Judas?

This past Thursday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, the National Geographic Society published an English translation of an ancient Gnostic text called *The Gospel of Judas*, and then followed this up with a television special that aired the following Sunday, April 9<sup>th</sup>.

A carefully planned marketing ploy, it was certainly no accident that the National Geographic Society chose to air their television program on Palm Sunday for Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians, one of the most important of all Christian holidays, and leads up to the events of Good Friday and Easter. Let's face it: religion sells.

In a frenzy of media coverage occasionally bordering on sensationalism, newspapers around the country carried front page stories with titles like that of an article found in *The Baltimore Sun*: “Gospel of Judas rattles beliefs. Newly translated ancient documents challenge orthodox teaching on Jesus and his betrayer.” Or an article in *The Washington Post*: “Ancient Gospel of Judas translation sheds new light on disciple.”

Why these headlines? Because the anonymous author of *The Gospel of Judas* – unlike the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that are found in the New Testament – writes that Judas alone among the twelve disciples received a special revelation and understood the true meaning of Jesus' teaching; and that Jesus himself asked Judas to hand him over to the Romans for execution, making Judas a sympathetic figure rather than a traitor.

But what is *The Gospel of Judas*? *The Gospel of Judas* is part of a poorly preserved papyrus codex that was discovered in the 1970's in a cave near El Minya, Egypt. Also found in this codex are several other Gnostic documents such as *The Apocalypse of James*, *The Letter of Peter to Philip* and what scholars are, for now, calling *The Book of Allogenes*, all written in Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language based on Greek that is still used among the Christians of the Coptic Orthodox Church, a persecuted minority in today's overwhelmingly Muslim Egypt. On the basis of careful examination of the codex, scholars are in general agreement that the text of *The Gospel of Judas* released by the National Geographic Society may be dated to somewhere around the beginning of the fourth century, between 300 and 340AD, roughly the same time as the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, called the First Ecumenical Council and established the city of Constantinople and therefore some 300 years *after* the encounter of Jesus with Judas in Jerusalem during the third decade of the first century. Basically, *The Gospel of Judas* is just another notoriously unhistorical Gnostic gospel like some of the texts that were found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt some sixty years ago.

Therefore, it must first be clearly stated that *The Gospel of Judas* is **not** a gospel written by Judas himself. In an *Associated Press* interview, one of the world's foremost experts on Coptic manuscripts and Gnosticism, Professor James M. Robinson, an *emeritus* professor at Claremont Graduate University, was asked whether or not this text goes “back to Judas” and his unequivocal answer was simply “No.” Expanding on this point, Robinson continued, “There are a lot of second, third and fourth century gospels

attributed to various apostles. We don't really assume they give us any first century information."

In an interview that appeared in *The Boston Globe*, Robinson stated that, in his opinion, some participants in the National Geographic effort "are making the sly suggestion that the Gospel of Judas is more or less equally valid" with the Gospels of the New Testament and that it "contains things that could pull the rug out from Christianity as we know it." Robinson's blunt response to such a suggestion: "This is just ridiculous." In fact, Robinson speculated that the timing of the release of *The Gospel of Judas* was aimed at capitalizing on interest in the film version of *The Da Vinci Code*, due to be released on May 19<sup>th</sup>, a fictional story by novelist Dan Brown that centers on ancient Gnostic texts and a conspiracy by the Roman Catholic Church to cover up a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Because, as all scholars agree, *The Gospel of Judas* is a Gnostic document, perhaps the most important question to be asked is: what is Gnosticism? The root of the word Gnosticism is the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." Gnosticism is an umbrella term that modern scholars use to describe a number of religious movements in the ancient Roman world, many of which were not at all related to Christianity, all of which had several common themes: that the members of various Gnostic sects had a secret knowledge not available to others; that there exists a series of lesser, mediating divinities and luminaries sometimes called Archons, sometimes called Aeons; and a dualistic outlook, an antithesis between matter and spirit, body and soul; and a hatred of the physical world that was often believed to have been created not by God, but by a lesser, evil demigod to imprison the souls of human beings. In Gnosticism, human beings are literally trapped in their bodies and the content of salvation is to be released from the body "that clothes me" as the Jesus of *The Gospel of Judas* says to Judas. Only the Gnostics, those "in the know," understand this.

None of these beliefs are Christian.

Early Christian teachers like St. Irenaeus (+202AD), the martyred bishop of the city of Lugdunum in what was then the Roman province of Gaul but is today Lyons in France, wrote a series of books called *Against Heresies*, refuting the teachings of various Gnostic teachers and, in one of them, even mentions *The Gospel of Judas*. Around 180AD, St. Irenaeus wrote of the Gnostic sect of the Cainites, who attempted to "rehabilitate" a number of Biblical villains such as Cain (who murdered his brother Abel), the Sodomites (the inhabitants of the city of Sodom notorious for their sexual immorality), Esau (who sold his birthright to his brother for a single meal), Korah (who led a revolt against the leadership of Moses) and Judas, turning them into spiritual heroes. In order to do this, they produced what St. Irenaeus called "a fictitious history...which they style *The Gospel of Judas*."

You may ask: what are St. Irenaeus' credentials as a teacher of Christianity? Why should we pay any attention to what he has to say? According to Eusebius of Caesarea in his *History of the Church*, probably written in 326AD, St. Irenaeus as a young man had heard the preaching and teaching of St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna in modern Turkey, who

was martyred in 155AD; and St. Polycarp, as a child and young man, had learned the Christian faith from no less a figure than St. John the Evangelist, who had eventually settled in the city of Ephesus, also located in modern Turkey.

But there is no clearer way to understand that *The Gospel of Judas* is not a Christian text and in some ways not even a Gospel at all than to simply read it and not merely all the media hype surrounding its release. One of the good things about the National Geographic Society website promoting the sale of DVD's of their television special as well as the two books on the subject that National Geographic published this month, is that you can download the entire *Gospel of Judas* in both its original Coptic form and a seven page English translation. Yes, that's correct: the entire *Gospel of Judas* in English translation is only seven type-written pages long, a far cry from the length of even the Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four canonical Gospels found in the New Testament. And, unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there is little actual history in *The Gospel of Judas*, no real telling of the story of the Lord Jesus from birth to death and resurrection.

Instead, *The Gospel of Judas* begins just before Jesus' last Passover in Jerusalem as the disciples are offering a prayer to God over the dinner table. Watching them do this, Jesus laughs at them. Interestingly enough, in none of the canonical Gospels does Jesus ever laugh. But in *The Gospel of Judas* he laughs often, usually a sardonic how-little-you-know kind of laugh. The disciples become furious with Jesus for laughing at them – all except Judas, who says to Jesus, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo." Who is Barbelo, you may ask? In ancient Gnostic texts, Barbelo is the Divine Mother of all and the Forethought of the Infinite One. Confused? If you are at all familiar with the story of Jesus, you should be. But things only get more obscure and confusing as you continue reading the text.

Because of Judas' "knowledge" that Jesus comes from "the immortal realm of Barbelo," he is promised a revelation "about secrets no person has ever seen." Cutting to the chase, here is the last part of the "revelation" that the Gnostic "Jesus" gives to Judas. Brackets indicate gaps in the text. Notice just where "Christ" appears and who he is in this text.

"The multitude of those immortals is called the cosmos – that is, perdition – by the Father and the 72 luminaries who are with the Self-Generated and his 72 Aeons. In him the first human appeared with his incorruptible powers. And the Aeon then appeared with his generation, in whom the cloud of knowledge and the angel is called El. [...] aeon [...] after that [...] said, let 12 angels come into being to rule over chaos and the underworld. And look, from the cloud there appeared an angel whose face flashed with fire and whose appearance was defiled with blood. His name was Nebro, which means rebel; others call him Yaldabaoth. Another angel, Saklas, also came from the cloud. So Nebro created 6 angels – as well as Saklas – to be his assistants and these produced 12 angels in the heavens, with each one receiving a portion in the heavens. The 12 rulers spoke to the 12 angels [...] the first is Seth, who is called Christ. The second is Harmathoth. The third is Galila. The fourth is Yobel. The fifth is Adonaios. These are the five who ruled over the underworld, and first over all chaos."

This is the “truth” of *The Gospel of Judas*. Little wonder that no Christian would consider *The Gospel of Judas* to be a Christian text. It is clearly a Gnostic text, this particular codex written nearly two centuries after the Gospel of John, the last of the four canonical Gospels in the New Testament to be written and, as can be seen from actually reading it, this newly published “gospel” has virtually nothing in common with the four Christian Gospels or the Christian faith except the use of the names Jesus and Judas.

Adam Gopnik, writing in *The New Yorker*, summarizes the place of *The Gospel of Judas*: “Orthodox Christians will point out, correctly, that there is no new challenge to the Church in the Judas Gospel, much less a crisis of faith. This is an ancient heresy, dealt with firmly...throughout Church history. The finding of this new Gospel, though obviously remarkable as a bit of textual history, no more challenges the basis of the Church’s faith than the discovery of a document from the nineteenth century written in Ohio and defending King George III would be a challenge to the basis of American democracy.”

Or, as Metropolitan Bishoy, a bishop and spokesman for the Coptic Orthodox Church has said: *The Gospel of Judas* is “non-Christian babbling resulting from a group of people trying to create a false amalgam between Greek mythology and far Eastern religions with Christianity.” It was “written by a group of people who were alien to the mainstream of early Christianity.” Such “texts are neither reliable nor accurate.”

The furor over *the Gospel of Judas* will continue to be hot and heavy for a few weeks, as National Geographic intends to air an encore of their television special on April 13<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, the latter date being Holy Saturday for Eastern Orthodox Christians around the world. But, as Professor Robinson said in his *Boston Globe* interview, *The Gospel of Judas* is, in the end, “a tempest in a teapot.”



An ancient mosaic icon of the kiss of Judas  
The betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane