

The Gospel of Judas - Part 1

Ben Witherington III

from Dr. Witherington's Blog (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>)

Right at Easter time, just as the dandelions are starting to appear in my yard, a new crop of theories about Jesus and the Gospels usually pop up as well, often rushed into the Easter market. Clearly the appropriate amount of fertilizer has been applied to these supposed 'new revelations' to make such hot house theories grow, seemingly over night.

We have "The Jesus Papers" reviving the old "Passover Plot" theory that Jesus never really died on the cross, he only swooned and was revived, a theory supported by no first century source whatsoever (even our Roman sources are clear that he was executed under Pontius Pilate--- see Tacitus and Suetonius), and with much more fan fare we also have the Gospel of Judas which we have known about for a long time. It is yet another Gnostic document, which Elaine Pagels says helps to explode the theory of a monolithic early Christianity. Of course the only conservative Protestant scholar of the group National Geographic engaged to comment on this work, Craig Evans, has a very different take on the matter. So do I. So also do conservative Catholic scholars.

First let us deal with the facts: 1) we do not have a Greek text of this Gospel, we have a Coptic one from which the English translation has been made. To simply state this text was based on Greek text is to argue without hard evidence. The fact that Irenaeus mentions this document may suggest there was a Greek original, but we do not have it, and the translation done is not based on any Greek text. We need to be clear on this: 2) You will find a link above to the article in today's NY Times about this find. You will see me suggesting we all need to take a deep breath before consuming too much baloney; 3) this papyrus carbon dates to about 300 A.D. We only know some document called the Gospel of Judas existed around 180 because Irenaeus mentions it. One could also raise the question of whether Irenaeus is referring to the same document, but probably he is. 4) This document reflects the same sort of dualism that we find in many other Gnostic documents-- matter or flesh is evil or tainted, spirit is good. Thus at one juncture in the Gospel of Judas Jesus says to Judas that he will become the top disciple for "you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." In other words Judas is the good guy who helps Jesus get rid of his tainted flesh and become a true spiritual and free being.

This of course is miles from early Jewish theology about the goodness of creation and the flesh, much less the belief that God intends to redeem the flesh by means of resurrection. Much of what Jesus is depicted as saying in the Gospel of Judas the historical, thoroughly Jewish, resurrection believing Jesus could never have said. In other words it is revisionist history being done by a splinter group of Gnostics. This group was at variance with the theology and praxis of the church whose beliefs could in fact be traced back to Jesus and his earliest disciples.

But my greater concern is not so much with this document which is interesting and tells

us more about the Gnostic heresy of the 2nd-4th centuries. This is important to know about and reminds us just how vibrant early Christianity was that it could create sectarian split off groups like the Gnostics. My greater concern is the revisionist history being touted by Elaine Pagels, Karen King, Bart Ehrman, Marvin Meyer and others, on the basis of such Gnostic documents, wanting to suggest that somehow, somehow these documents reflect Christianity at its very point of origin--- the first century A.D.

Such scholars indeed represent a small minority of NT scholarship, and in fact, like the early Gnostics, are busily creating a new myth of origins that suggests that Christianity was dramatically pluriform from the beginning. Unfortunately, as a historian I have to say that this is argument without first century evidence.

We have no first century evidence of Gnostics or Gnosticism. This is a movement that reacted to mainstream Christianity, and emerged from it sometime in the middle of the second century A.D. Every shred of first century evidence we have suggests that the actual physical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was at the heart of the belief of the earliest Christians--- all of whom were Jews, not Gnostics. It simply will not do to suggest that the esoteric Gospel of the Gnostics bears any resemblance to the Jewish creation and redemption theology of Jesus and his first Jewish followers.

More will be said on this after the National Geographic special on Palm Sunday.

posted by Ben Witherington at [8:29 AM](#)

The Gospel of Judas - Part 2

Ben Witherington III

from Dr. Witherington's Blog (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>)

I was on the phone yesterday with my close friend Dr. A.J. Levine who teaches at Vanderbilt Div. School. She was called in late in the game to give a bit more balance to the group of scholars unveiling the Gospel of Judas. I asked her point blank: " Well A.J. is this document of any importance at all in helping us understand the historical Jesus or the historical Judas and their relationship?" She said unequivocally--- "none whatsoever". In other words, we need to all have our baloney detection meters set to 'heightened alert' as we watch the special on the Gospel of Judas tonight. While this document will tell us more about the split off movement called Gnosticism, and so is of considerable interest as we learn more about church history in the period from the late 2nd century through the fourth century, it tells us nothing about the origins of Christianity or the beginnings of the Jesus movement.

But there is more. I asked A.J. about whether there was in her view any hard evidence that this document existed in Greek, or does it first appear in Coptic. We discussed the evidence from Irenaeus. As she reminded me, the way Irenaeus describes the content of the Gospel of Judas that he knows, it has very different content from this Coptic Gospel

of Judas which we are now being regaled with. In other words, it is not at all clear that this Coptic Judas document is the same document referred to by Irenaeus. This needs to be demonstrated, not assumed to be the case. I would just add that it is perfectly possible that the document Irenaeus knows became a source for this later Coptic document, which again does not date, by carbon dating to before the beginning of the 4th century A.D. This places the Coptic Gospel of Judas at even a further remove from the first century A.D. and its documents. It is entirely possible that the Gospel of Judas we now have is not the original document created by the Cainite Gnostics that Irenaeus knows and speaks of.

A.J. was also in agreement with me that this document has no material which could or should shake the faith of Christians in what is said in the NT about Jesus and Judas for the very good reason that it comes from a much later source, and one that not even its advocates are really suggesting is written by the historical Judas. In fact it is just another example of the phenomenon known as pseudonymity--- documents with falsely attributed authors--- other such examples are the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, The Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip and so on.

Pseudonymity was a practice of those who did not have enough authority themselves to create sacred texts and so borrowed the name of an earlier illustrious or in this case notorious figure to create the air of an authentic eyewitness document. It needs to be said that this practice was very clearly denounced not only by church fathers like Tertullian and Irenaeus and Hippolytus who tell us about monks and priests being defrocked for dreaming up such documents, but in the wider Greco-Roman world there were plenty of persons who deplored this practice and saw it as a form of deception and fraud. For example, Cicero and Quintilian both complain about people creating documents in their name which they had nothing to do with. There was indeed a moral issue with such documents, then as now. It was not an 'acceptable literary practice of that era' as some might lead you to believe. I have much more to say on this subject, and you will find it in the Introduction to my Letters and Homilies of the NT Vol. 1 on the Pastorals and Johannine Epistles. It is my view that we do not have any such documents in the NT--- all of them are written by persons connected directly or indirectly with eyewitnesses and apostolic figures of the first century. But more on this later.

For those interested, it would serve you well to listen to all the sound clips on the National Geographic Gospel of Judas website about the Gospel of Judas. Evans is a Canadian scholar widely known for his excellent work and temperate approach to sensational claims. He reflects the mainstream of NT scholarship far more than Pagels, Meyer, or Ehrman.

In my opinion, of the three great supposed 'revelations' of this season, the one to pay the most attention to is James Tabor's work "The Jesus Dynasty" which argues for a messianic Jesus who set up a family dynasty. I will be posting a full critique of it later this week. In the meantime, watch the National Geographic Special with a critical eye, and the baloney detection meter fully operational.

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