



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



Occasional Essays
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for Christian Students
Presented by the
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—[Kevin T. Bauder](#)

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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May 19, 2006

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The Gospel of Judas

Kevin T. Bauder

Not often do archeological discoveries and the publication of ancient manuscripts make headline news, but this is one of those times. The Gospel of Judas is the celebrity document, one of four ancient texts that were included in Codex Tchacos. The discovery and publication of this gospel has been hailed as a major breakthrough in the study of early Christianity. Special excitement has been generated because the Gospel of Judas depicts Judas Iscariot as a hero rather than a traitor.

The recovery and reconstruction of Codex Tchacos makes a fascinating story in its own right. It includes the plundering of ancient graves, illegal trade in antiquities, robbery, deception, betrayal, intrigue, and conspiracy. So interesting is the story that it has been published separately by National Geographic.

The text of the Gospel of Judas that is contained in Codex Tchacos is the only one known to exist. As far as we know, no one has read this document for well over a thousand years. As an artifact and a curiosity, it is enormously valuable. Its discovery and publication are to be welcomed.

The date of Codex Tchacos is almost certainly between 240 and 320 AD. It is written in Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language that used a modified Greek alphabet. The actual Gospel of Judas is considerably older than the codex, however. Irenaeus of Lyons described it during the latter half of the Second Century. Given the time that the gospel would have taken to come to the attention of Irenaeus, it must have been written no later than about 150.

Irenaeus treats the Gospel of Judas as a Gnostic gospel, and the actual text of the document confirms his assessment. Gnosticism was a network of ancient religions that combined elements from Middle Platonism, Zoroastrianism, sometimes Christianity, and occasionally Judaism or other sources. Gnosticism exhibited bewildering variety. Some forms pretended to be Christian while others did not.

All Gnostics agreed about certain core insights, however. They all agreed that matter was evil and spirit was good. They all agreed that the true and ultimate god was not the creator of the material world. They all agreed about the existence of a *Pleroma*, a chain of divine beings who stood between the ultimate god and the malevolent creator of the material world. They all agreed that some humans had sparks of divinity trapped within them, and that these spirits could be liberated and return to the Pleroma. They all agreed that salvation consisted in liberation from the material body through the reception of secret knowledge or “gnosis.” They all agreed that the gnosis had to be mediated to humans by one of the members of the Pleroma.

The “Christian” versions of Gnosticism recognized Christ as the one who brought gnosis to humans. Obviously, the Christ could not have been a human, and Gnostics disagreed about the relationship between the divine Christ and the human Jesus. Docetic Gnostics believed that there was no human Jesus—the Christ simply projected the appearance of a body. Cerinthian Gnostics believed that the Christ spirit came upon Jesus, perhaps at His baptism, and then left Him before or during the crucifixion.

The writers of the New Testament were certainly aware of early Gnostic ideas, and they wrote vigorously against them. Paul’s epistle to the Colossians opposed an incipient version of Gnosticism that merged elements of Jewish legalism with a Gnostic view of Jesus. John’s first two epistles sharply contradicted an early predecessor of Cerinthianism. John actually opens his first epistle by insisting that “our hands handled” the Word of Life. This blunt assertion of Jesus’ materiality was a direct denial of Gnostic teaching.

The Gospel of Judas is undoubtedly Gnostic. Judas alone of the disciples recognizes that Jesus is not from earth but from “the immortal realm of Barbelo.” In response, Jesus takes Judas aside and imparts to him Gnostic secrets. He congratulates Judas on being the privileged one among the disciples, but warns Judas that he will have to face rejection and recrimination. He tells Judas: “you will exceed all of [the other disciples]. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”

In other words, the Gospel of Judas presents a Cerinthian view of Jesus. Christ is clothed by the material body of Jesus; in order to return to the immortal realm, the human must be sacrificed. Judas’ job is to arrange the sacrifice, ensuring that Jesus gets turned over to His enemies so that death will free the spirit within. Judas fulfils this responsibility, incidentally receiving “some money” as he hands Jesus over. From the point of view of the Gospel of Judas, this is not a betrayal, but a duty. Judas is vindicated in performing this duty by being transfigured in a luminous cloud.

Obviously, the Gospel of Judas presents a different view of both Jesus and Judas than the New Testament does. This comes as no surprise. The Gnostic view of Jesus has always been well known. The role that Judas plays in this gospel was described by Irenaeus during the Second Century. Therefore, the document offers few surprises.

As a matter of fact, the document contributes little or nothing to the state of knowledge about either Gnosticism or early Christianity. It presents the same cosmology that students of Gnosticism have always known. It reproduces a standard, Gnostic view of Jesus. It reiterates a typical Gnostic spirituality. It is a rehash of the same teachings that were known to and opposed by Irenaeus, John, and Paul.

We know which churches were founded by apostles. We know that the apostolic churches taught the same beliefs with great uniformity. We know that these beliefs correspond to the teachings of the apostles in their authentic writings. These teachings together form the substance of New Testament Christianity. The Christianity of the New Testament rested itself upon public criteria.

The Gnostics appealed, not to any public criteria, but to secret teachings and hidden writings. Books like the Gospel of Judas were not meant for wide circulation: they were intended only for the elite, the spiritual. Gnostics disagreed sharply with the Christians of the apostolic churches. They disagreed sharply with the authentic apostolic writings. They even disagreed with one another on many points.

Irenaeus noted the difference between the public tradition of the apostolic church and the secret tradition of the Gnostics. He argued persuasively that the former had to be acknowledged as genuine, but that the latter could not be. One of the documents that he dismissed as a forgery was the Gospel of Judas. His assessment was correct.

The recovery of the Gospel of Judas is a significant and welcome event. Some degree of excitement is appropriate. The document really adds nothing to the stock of knowledge, however. It is a curiosity and an artifact of significance, but it does not contribute greatly (or at all!) to understanding Jesus, Judas, Gnosticism, or early Christianity. With respect to these areas of study, its discovery and publication changes exactly nothing. X



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This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.



Giotto. *The Betrayal of Judas*. 1304-1306.

HOLY SONNETS. XIV.

John Donne (1572-1631)

Batter my heart, three-person'd God ; for you
As yet but knock ; breathe, shine, and seek to mend ;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy ;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. X



ΤΟΥΤΟ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΤΕ ΕΝ ΥΜΙΝ

