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Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

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A Latter-day Saint Colloquium on the Gospel of Judas

Media and Message

Richard Neitzel Holzappel

An increasing number of strident voices are questioning the reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in reconstructing the life of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ Some scholars argue that the New Testament Gospels are not faithful to the real Jesus of history.² These individuals also suggest that if other accounts, which the early church lost or suppressed,

1. A number of significant studies have demonstrated the superiority of the four Gospel accounts and their reliability in comparison to other documents; see, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003). For a listing of the earliest New Testament manuscripts and an overview of the canonization process, see John W. Welch and John F. Hall, eds., *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), charts 18-3 through 18-5. Additionally, other studies suggest that even if scholars have concerns about the time lag between the ministry of Jesus Christ and the recording of the four Gospels, the New Testament itself preserves texts written even earlier than the four Gospels. That fact of history substantiates the core stories preserved by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; see Richard Neitzel Holzappel, “Early Accounts of the Story,” in *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection: The Savior’s Final Hours*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzappel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 401–21.

2. The Jesus Seminar has been the most successful forum in providing a radically different picture of Jesus. Its particular efforts have been adequately criticized by a number of competent New Testament scholars; see, for example, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 21–22, provides a context for the Jesus Seminar in a general overview of the modern effort to reconstruct the life of Jesus.

The Gospel of Judas at a Glance

What is the Gospel of Judas?

An Early Christian text probably written by AD 150–200. It was considered a lost text until an ancient papyrus document containing the text was discovered in Egypt about 1978.

Is the document that was found in Egypt a genuine ancient artifact?

Most probably yes.

Who wrote the text?

Most likely a member of a group of early Christians known as Gnostics, whose views varied widely from those of mainstream Christianity.

How old is this copy of the Gospel of Judas?

The document that was found about 1978 dates to AD 300–400.

What is the Codex Tchacos?

Codex Tchacos is the official name of the document found in 1978. The Gospel of Judas fills 26 pages; the rest of the document contains three other writings, also apparently Gnostic. It is named after its current owner, Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos.

What is the Nag Hammadi Library?

A large group of ancient, mostly Gnostic documents discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. The Nag Hammadi documents and the Codex Tchacos appear to have some texts in common.

What does the Gospel of Judas say?

It says that Judas was privy to secret information and direction from Jesus. See the summary on pages 12–13 of this issue.

Why is the Gospel of Judas suddenly in the news?

It was restored (the document being very damaged) and transcribed only recently. The text was published in English in 2006 with much media attention.

What are scholars saying about the Gospel of Judas?

A few oft-quoted New Testament scholars with radical views claim that it overturns the record of Jesus as we know it from the traditional Bible. But for Latter-day Saints, the Gospel of Judas fails as a “Gospel” because it fails to recognize the Atonement of Jesus Christ as the way to salvation. Early Christian scholars rejected it as apostate in AD 150–200, and Latter-day Saint scholars agree.

were available and used by readers today, they would provide a radically different interpretation of Jesus' ministry from the one preserved in the New Testament.³

Some of those questioning the legitimacy of the New Testament canon have found alternative voices in ancient texts that they believe may help them reconstruct the story of Jesus.⁴ Among these alternative gospels are a number of texts discovered in Egypt in 1945 known today as the Nag Hammadi Library.⁵

In a remarkable set of coincidences, these scholarly topics have become the subject of a very public and popular discussion. Intense media attention has been cast on Jesus Christ, the early history of Christianity, and ancient Christian texts. At the same time, Western society continues to become increasingly secularized, and there is evidence of increasing hostility toward organized religion.⁶ In this often confusing discussion, lay people need context for the headlines and the reports of newfound documents that claim to overturn traditional Christianity.

Certainly one of the significant catalysts for the present state of affairs was the 2003 publication of Dan Brown's remarkably popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, which claims, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."⁷ But scholars and students familiar with the history of early Christianity and the context of ancient texts used in *The Da Vinci Code*—primarily texts from the Nag Hammadi Library used in the novel to support radical and provocative interpretations of the past—realize that the book is deeply flawed because it misrepresents and misinterprets basic historical facts.⁸ Catholic and Protestant scholars alike believe that the novel unfairly distorts early

3. See, for example, Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), which reveals her own spiritual journey from a traditional Christian understanding of Jesus' ministry to one imbued with Gnostic ideas—what she identifies as "forgotten Christianity."

4. See, for example, Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, eds., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

5. The standard English translation is James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

6. Highlighting why the West is a "Jesus haunted" culture even in the face of intense secularization is N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), especially 12–15, 93–95.

7. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1.

8. See, for example, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Andrew C. Skinner, and Thomas A. Wayment, *What Da Vinci Didn't Know: An LDS Perspective* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).

Christian history—with the result that relatively few readers are able to sort out fact from fiction.

In this heightened atmosphere, another announcement caught the attention of the media and the public at large: an ancient “gospel” manuscript was found—the long-lost Gospel of Judas.⁹ One writer has even suggested that “an unseen hand must have arranged for the Gospel of Judas to be published while the ‘Da Vinci Code craze’ still had life in it.”¹⁰

The Content of the Lost Gospel of Judas

The Gospel of Judas purports to be a dialogue between Jesus and Judas Iscariot: “The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover.”¹¹ The text is composed of three related scenes, but the climax is Jesus’ revelation to Judas about the secret of salvation and Jesus’ request that Judas hand Jesus over to his enemies, thus facilitating his escape from the physical, corrupt world: “For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”¹²

Instead of being Jesus’ nemesis and betrayer, Judas is portrayed as Jesus’ most loyal friend and dedicated disciple. Because of Judas’s faithfulness, he receives the promise that he will be exalted above all the other Apostles, despite the fact that for a while he will be despised and hated: “You will exceed all of them. . . . You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].”¹³

This “gospel” ends rather dramatically: “Their high priests murmured because [he (meaning Jesus)] had gone into the guest room for his prayer. But some scribes were there watching carefully in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet. They approached Judas and said to him, ‘What are you doing here? You are Jesus’ disciple.’ Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them.”¹⁴

9. Ironically, as many scholars have already pointed out, the Gospel of Judas is not a gospel in any meaningful sense—that is, it does not provide a story *about* Jesus because it highlights only one episode in his life.

10. David Gates with Jac Chebatoris, “Sealed with a Kiss,” *Newsweek*, April 17, 2006, 49.

11. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 19.

12. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 43, Codex Tchacos 56.

13. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 32–33, 43, brackets in original, Codex Tchacos 46, 56.

14. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 44–45, brackets in original, parentheses added, Codex Tchacos 58.

The story preserved in the Gospel of Judas presents a radically different portrait than the one preserved in the New Testament. The text raises many questions, including why it does not contain a crucifixion narrative or a story about an empty tomb and why a group of Christians would choose Judas as the hero of the story.

Publicity Surrounding the Gospel of Judas

Although New Testament scholars had known about this copy of the Gospel of Judas since July 2004,¹⁵ the public and the media became aware of and interested in it only in the wake of the National Geographical Society's publicity campaign to highlight its television special on the subject (April 9, 2006) along with the release of its publication of the English translation of the document. New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman declared the Gospel of Judas to be "one of the greatest historical discoveries of the twentieth century. It rivals the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Gnostic Gospels of Nag Hammadi."¹⁶ Others jumped on the bandwagon, declaring that the text would radically change our reconstruction of early Christianity and making provocative claims about the value of the text and what might happen in the wake of its publication.¹⁷ These statements were followed by reports in various media outlets, including *Time* and *Newsweek*, just before Easter 2006.¹⁸ *National Geographic* ran a special story on the Gospel of Judas in its May 2006 issue, reaching another wide audience.¹⁹

Finally, as it had announced earlier, the National Geographic Society published two books relating to the provenance and actual translation of the Gospel of Judas. The shorter but more important of the two, *The Gospel of Judas*, contains an English translation of the ancient text, with

15. An official announcement was made by Rodolphe Kasser at the International Association for Coptic Studies, Eighth International Congress of Coptic Studies, in Paris July 1, 2004. There were rumors prior to the announcement but no public acknowledgement.

16. See the same promotional quotation by Bart D. Ehrman on the back cover of *The Gospel of Judas*.

17. National Geographic Society announced its teaser the day of the showing of the TV special: "Tonight, will a dramatic discovery rewrite Biblical history? . . . Now hidden for nearly 2000 years an ancient gospel emerges from the sands of Egypt. It tells a different story, one that could challenge our deepest beliefs." Video at www.shop.nationalgeographic.com.

18. David Van Bleva, "Judas: Foe or Friend?" *Time*, April 17, 2006, 22; Gates with Chebatoris, "Sealed with a Kiss," 48–49.

19. Andrew Cockburn, "The Judas Gospel," *National Geographic* 209, no. 5 (May 2006): 78–95.

annotated footnotes, along with a short account of the history behind the text, and is edited by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst. The other is Herbert Krosney's *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*.²⁰ This well-written account of the discovery, preservation, translation, and publication of the Gospel of Judas is a tale of mystery, intrigue, academic jealousy, double crosses, and illegal activities. The book recounts how scholars and interested parties began fighting over access to the text and rights associated with its publication almost immediately after stories began to circulate among antiquity dealers about its existence. James M. Robinson, who was the general editor of the Nag Hammadi Library, was unable to obtain the text himself and was not invited to be involved in its translation, so he released his own book full of criticism, sarcasm, and pettiness.²¹ His book merely added to the media frenzy, further increasing the controversy that played well into the hands of the news media and financial promoters.

One of the most interesting and engaging aspects to the story is associated with the monumental task of restoring and preserving the text. The manuscript, discovered most likely sometime in 1978, was damaged by mishandling and consists of more than a thousand fragments. Over time, fiber by fiber, letter by letter, line by line, and section by section, eventually a story that was unread for over fifteen hundred years became readable. The cost in resources, including money and time, was astronomical in this Herculean effort.²² Considering the poor condition of the text when it finally came into the hands of scholars, we should appreciate the remarkable outcome that resulted in the restoration of about 80 percent of the text.

Conclusion

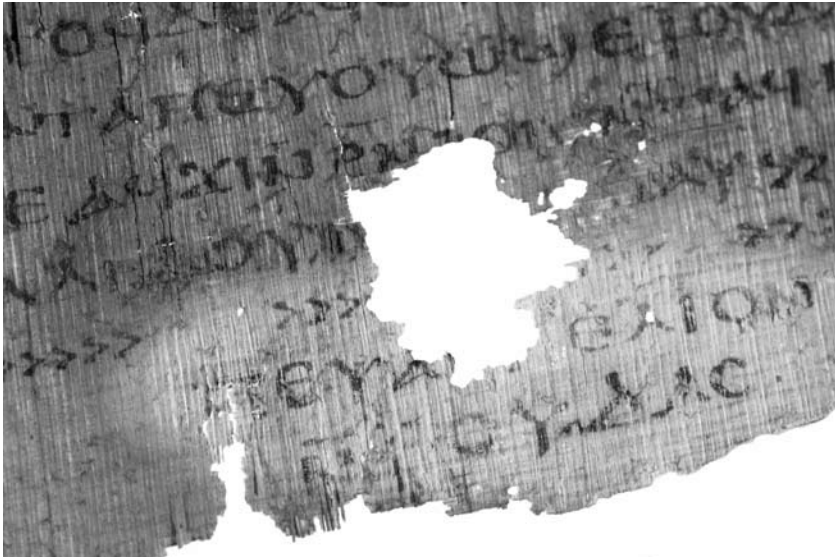
While the Gospel of Judas presents an alternative portrait of Jesus Christ that most Christians would not recognize, the discovery of any ancient document is remarkable. The discovery and restoration of this text brightens academics' hopes that other ancient texts may still find their way into the hands of scholars in the future.

Eventually, media attention and popular interest in the Gospel of Judas will wane. Yet the door, which will hopefully never be closed again, has been opened in a very public way, allowing us to continue to talk about Jesus Christ, the rise of early Christianity, and the story of ancient texts.

20. Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006).

21. James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

22. See Krosney, *Lost Gospel*, 264–65.



Detail view of the final page of the Gospel of Judas. The title of the lost gospel, as was the custom in antiquity, is found at the end of the text and reads “The Gospel [euaggelion] of Judas.” © Kenneth Garrett

With more than a million copies in print, the translation of the Gospel of Judas has become a bestseller in several languages, ensuring a long life for this alternative account of the night Jesus was handed over to his enemies. And with the Coptic text available for study, scholars will begin to move beyond the hype created by popular media to determine the importance and meaning of this discovery.²³

Because of the timely nature of the discussion and the timeless importance of the topic, several Brigham Young University faculty members have been invited to answer, in a roundtable discussion format, some of the many questions raised in the wake of publication of the Gospel of Judas, providing context to story. The result is this series of short articles.

23. An initial attempt is Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott, and Philippa Townsend, “The Betrayer’s Gospel,” in *The New York Review of Books* (June 8, 2006): 32–37.

Richard Neitzel Holzappel (holzappel@byu.edu) is Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. He is the director of the Religious Studies Center publication office and is a photography editor for *BYU Studies*. He earned a PhD at the University of California–Irvine in 1993. He received the Alcuin Fellowship in General Education for 2005–2008. He is a co-author, along with Andrew C. Skinner and Thomas Wayment, of *What Da Vinci Didn’t Know: An LDS Perspective* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).

Highlights of the Gospel of Judas

This summary is based on the English translation by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), the *editio princeps* of this text. These scholars worked from a preliminary Coptic transcription of the text, constituting about 80 percent of the original document. An ongoing effort to reconstruct the text in light of the discovery of additional fragments, continued efforts to refine the translation, and the revision of some conjectural emendations will form the basis of the critical edition of Codex Tchacos to be published at the end of 2006. The Coptic text contains many Greek loan words, highlighted in italics below, which are familiar to New Testament students.

Introduction. “The secret account [*logos*] of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover” (*Gospel of Judas*, 19, Codex Tchacos 33).

Jesus’ ministry summarized. “When Jesus appeared on earth, he performed miracles and great wonders for the salvation of humanity. And since some [walked] in the way of righteousness while others walked in their transgressions, the twelve disciples were called. He began to speak with them about the mysteries” (*Gospel of Judas*, 20, Codex Tchacos 33).

Jesus laughs at the disciples’ prayers and sacrifices; they become angry. “When he [approached] his disciples, gathered together and seated and offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread [he] laughed. . . . ‘Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving?’ . . . ‘They said, ‘Master, you are [.] the son of our god.’ Jesus said to them, ‘How do you know me? Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me.’ When the disciples heard this, they started getting angry and infuriated and began blaspheming against him in their hearts” (*Gospel of Judas*, 20–22, Codex Tchacos 33–34).

Jesus responds, challenging them to stand before Him. “When Jesus observed their lack of [understanding, he said] to them, . . . ‘[Let] any one of you who is [strong enough] among human beings bring out the perfect human and stand before my face’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 22, Codex Tchacos 34–35).

Judas is singled out as Jesus’ greatest disciple. “But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him. . . . Judas [said] to him, ‘I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 22–23, Codex Tchacos 35).

Jesus teaches Judas privately following his confession. “Knowing that Judas was reflecting upon something that was exalted, Jesus said to him, ‘Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 23, Codex Tchacos 35).

Jesus again speaks to the disciples; they continue to be confused. “The next morning, after this happened, Jesus [appeared] to his disciples again. They said to him, ‘Master, where did you go and what did you do when you left us?’ Jesus said to them, ‘I went to another great and holy generation’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 24, Codex Tchacos 36).

Judas and Jesus again converse privately; the climax of the gospel is revealed. “Judas said, ‘Master, as you have listened to all of them, now also listen to me. For I have seen a great vision’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 31, Codex Tchacos 44).

Jesus reveals Judas’s destiny. “Jesus answered and said, ‘You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation]’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 32–33, Codex Tchacos 46–47).

Jesus teaches Judas about hidden things: the deepest mysteries about Adam, Creation, Angels, and the Cosmos. “Jesus said, ‘[Come], that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 33, Codex Tchacos 47).

The Gospel of Judas’s most startling announcement: Judas will help Jesus sacrifice his body, allowing Jesus to complete his mission. “Jesus said, ‘You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me. . . . Look, you have been told everything. Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star’” (*Gospel of Judas*, 42–44, Codex Tchacos 56–57).

Conclusion. “Their high priests murmured because [he] had gone into the guest room [*kataluma*] for his prayer. But some scribes were there watching carefully in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, since he was regarded by all as a prophet. They approached Judas and said to him, ‘What are you doing here? You are Jesus’ disciple.’ Judas answered them as they wished. And he received some money and handed him over to them” (*Gospel of Judas*, 44–45, Codex Tchacos 58).

Titular subscript. “The Gospel [*euaggelion*] of Judas” (*Gospel of Judas*, 45, Codex Tchacos 58).

National Geographic has posted the full text of the Gospel of Judas at <http://www9.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/document.html>. The site may be available for only a limited time.