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The Nag Hammadi Library, discovered in 1945 in Egypt, dates from about AD 350. The collection of thirteen documents, generally associated with the Gnostic movement, represents the largest single collection of noncanonical Christian texts. Among the individual works bound together with the Gospel of Judas in the Codex Tchacos is a variant version of one of the works found in 1945 in the Nag Hammadi Library. The relationship of the Gospel of Judas to the Nag Hammadi documents is uncertain. Photograph by Jean Doresse, Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California.

# The Manuscript of the Gospel of Judas

S. Kent Brown

**B**ecause of the fractured path that led to the recovery of the Gospel of Judas, some details of the discovery of this document and its three companion texts are already lost, though a story reporting many details has been published. Herbert Krosney's *The Lost Gospel*<sup>1</sup> recounts that these four documents, bound into one codex (the ancient form of a book), came to light in Middle Egypt some sixty kilometers north of the town of Al Minya. The report may or may not be true. Stories of this sort, originally told in straightforward language, tend to develop wobbles in the retelling, as one of the editors of the recently published Gospel of Judas has hinted.<sup>2</sup>

## Authenticity and Connection to Other Early Christian Texts

Soon after the publication of this gospel, questions arose about its authenticity and the possibility of forgery. For me and a colleague of mine, the issues centered on a few unusual idioms in the text, idioms that did not appear to come from Greek, which is most probably the original language of the document. But our questions have been satisfied by one who has been involved in translating this text.

We cannot rule out the possibility that the codex from which the Gospel of Judas came to us may have formed part of the Nag Hammadi

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1. The long story is rehearsed in Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 9–229, and is recapped in Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 11, 50–68.

2. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 48–50.

Library, a fourth-century collection of early Christian texts discovered in Upper Egypt in 1945. The discoverer of the Nag Hammadi documents maintained firmly that the library had consisted of thirteen codices but claimed that his mother had burned some of the papyrus leaves to heat water for tea. Additionally, the eight leaves that make up Codex XIII in the Nag Hammadi collection were tucked into the cover of Codex VI and may not have been counted as one of the thirteen codices that the discoverer reported, opening the possibility that not all of the manuscripts from the Nag Hammadi discovery are accounted for.<sup>3</sup> But one must not rush to judgment about a possible connection between the Nag Hammadi documents and the Gospel of Judas because the codex that includes the Gospel of Judas exhibits an unusual pattern. Among its four treatises, the codex containing the Gospel of Judas includes two that duplicate texts known from the Nag Hammadi Library—the Letter of Peter to Philip and the First Revelation of James. This pattern differs notably from what is known about the Nag Hammadi Library, which, among its fifty-two documents, features only six duplicates.

### The Language of the Gospel of Judas

The language of the extant text of the Gospel of Judas and its three companions is Coptic, the last written form of ancient Egyptian, which was displaced in the seventh and eighth centuries AD by Arabic. The written script of Coptic employs the Greek alphabet, along with seven letters borrowed from the Egyptian Demotic script to reproduce sounds in spoken Egyptian that Greek did not possess. In the case of the Gospel of Judas, Rodolphe Kasser, an expert in Coptic dialects of late antiquity, judges that the language of the Gospel of Judas was spoken in Middle Egypt. Therefore the Gospel of Judas must have been translated in this region or was translated by a native speaker from this area. In fact, the original language of the Gospel of Judas was most likely Greek. It was in

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3. See Birger A. Pearson, “Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman and others, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:985; and James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3d ed., rev. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 1–26. The fact that a part of a page, or folio, of the Gospel of Judas had been separated and only later came to the notice of the editors, just before the book about the Gospel went to press, shows that there are possibly a number of other texts that have not yet come into the possession of people who can preserve them properly. See Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 14–15.

Greek that Irenaeus, the late-second-century Christian bishop of Lyons in southern France, knew the Gospel of Judas or a version of it.<sup>4</sup>

### The Condition of the Manuscript

Even though experts have poured superb efforts into conserving the four documents of the codex, now called the Codex Tchacos, the current state of its preservation is woeful. When Rodolphe Kasser first saw the manuscripts on July 24, 2001, he “let out a cry.”<sup>5</sup> His practiced eye told him immediately that the papyrus leaves had suffered much between their discovery and his first encounter with them. The leaves had been torn or bent so that the top part had detached from the bottom section. Pages were out of order, and fragments were everywhere in the box where the codex lay. Because of long exposure to humidity and then freezing temperatures, the ink had lifted off the surface of the papyrus sheets in some places, leaving the text illegible in those spots. Stabilizing the papyrus so that it did not crumble to the touch was an enormously delicate task that Kasser and Florence Darbre of the Atelier de Restauration in Nyon, Switzerland, set themselves to accomplish.<sup>6</sup> Now the whole has been stabilized and photographed with the bright



Rodolphe Kasser, the world-renowned Coptic scholar and professor emeritus at the University of Geneva, first saw the badly damaged manuscript on July 24, 2001. He organized the effort of the restoration and preparation of the final Coptic text transcription and assisted in the English translation of the Gospel of Judas. © Kenneth Garrett

4. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994): 1:358; see Gregor Wurst’s discussion in Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 121–35.

5. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 47.

6. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 47–76.

expectation that a full publication of all four documents in the codex will appear soon, translated into several languages.<sup>7</sup>

### The Date of the Manuscript

The handwriting style of the four treatises points to the early fourth century as the era when these surviving documents were copied, although the Gospel of Judas text was composed perhaps as early as the middle of the second century AD.<sup>8</sup> As noted, Irenaeus knew of the Gospel of Judas text in the late second century.

Irenaeus wrote,

They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, 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.<sup>9</sup>

There is no reason to doubt that Irenaeus refers here to the same Gospel of Judas text that was later recorded in Coptic.<sup>10</sup>

### Dissident Early Christian Views

The fourth century was the age when certain Christians consolidated their influence because they had finally won the attention of the Roman Emperor Constantine. But not all Christians stood with those who had begun to consort with the powerful Roman elite. Some held differing beliefs, as is apparent from the contents of the four documents in Codex Tchacos. The evident fact that these documents were translated, circulated, and then hidden in Middle Egypt is an indicator that the long arm of the Romans, and their Christian confederates, did not control the outlying areas of their shared hegemony and thus could not smother incompatible views. On the other hand, the fact that someone hid the codex points to an

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7. See Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 13.

8. See Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 132–33.

9. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1.

10. Gregor Wurst argues that Irenaeus had the Gospel of Judas in mind, but that that he only knew it by hearsay. Irenaeus does not count the Gospel of Judas among the books in the main Gnostic library. Still, Wurst concludes, “We can be confident in saying that the Gospel of Judas mentioned by Irenaeus is identical with the newly discovered Coptic Gospel. . . . We have no reason to assume a complex history of editing” of the Gospel of Judas. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 132, 135. Even though the extant manuscript dates much later than Irenaeus, there is no reason to assume it changed much from Irenaeus’s time to its translation into Coptic.

ever-strengthening influence of fourth-century orthodoxy in these remote areas of North Africa and to a silencing of certain Christian voices.

### Contents of the Codex Tchacos

As already noted, the Codex Tchacos consists of four separate works. All represent theological points of view that were not at home within the Christian orthodoxy of the fourth century AD. The first, which covers pages one through nine of the papyrus leaves, is a slightly variant form of the Letter of Peter to Philip known from Codex VIII of the Nag Hammadi Library. This letter focuses on the Apostles' concern for the suffering of believers. The second text consists of a short version of the First Revelation of James wherein Jesus entrusts certain heavenly secrets to James the Just, also known as "the brother of the Lord."<sup>11</sup> The third is the Gospel of Judas, a wholly fresh text. The last document, of which only the beginning remains (and even that is preserved only in fragmentary condition), bears the tentative title *Allogenes*, a Greek term that means "stranger," referring to the otherworldly nature of Jesus. Though the translators have assigned to this last text the same title as a treatise from Codex XI of the Nag Hammadi collection, from their description its contents appear to be completely different.<sup>12</sup>

### Other Documents Still Lost

As Kasser has noted, private individuals, seemingly driven by a desire for wealth rather than an interest in Christian heritage, still hold manuscripts that are on the market, so to speak.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-five years ago, another BYU faculty member and I became aware of the aggregate of documents described briefly by Kasser.<sup>14</sup> I was able to identify the James text in the Codex Tchacos from a very blurry Polaroid photograph, which showed the manuscript to be in better shape than it is now. I later traveled to New York City where, in the company of Mr. Bernard Rosenthal, a rare-books dealer from San Francisco, I examined briefly some other texts in a hotel room.<sup>15</sup> The papyrus manuscripts, which included a few damaged leaves

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11. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 71; Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 260–61.

12. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 14, 49–50.

13. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 61.

14. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 52–53.

15. Despite our recent combined efforts, Mr. Rosenthal and I have not been able to establish the exact date that we visited New York City to examine the documents that were for sale.

from a very early Greek copy of the book of Exodus, two letters of the Apostle Paul in Coptic translation, and a Greek mathematical treatise, were then in very bad shape, having been wrapped in an Arabic newspaper and placed into a small box. When the owner and his agent opened first the box and then the newspaper, Mr. Rosenthal and I gazed upon a mass of documents that were disintegrating before our eyes, with tiny fragments lining the bottom of the newspaper cradle. Before the day was over, Mr. Rosenthal estimated that a skilled conservator would require a full two years to bring stability and order to the tattered texts. Mr. Rosenthal's estimate of the value of these texts, only a small fraction of the announced selling price, minus the costs of hiring a conservator for two years, must have provided the moment that Kasser points to wherein the owner came to understand that "his asking price was too high."<sup>16</sup> Alas, the asking price for the documents was so high that only a very wealthy collector could enter a negotiation. To date, these texts have not come into the custody of someone who can conserve them for posterity.

### **Effect of the Gospel of Judas on Studies of Early Christianity**

Naturally, we ask ourselves, What long-term impact will the Gospel of Judas carry into Early Christian studies, especially into New Testament scholarship? In my estimation, after the initial flurry of interest, it will be low. Even though this gospel presents a very different view of Judas, both in his relationship to the Savior and in his actions that lead to Jesus' death, it does not mesh with earlier sources that appear in the New Testament. Hence, this text does not lead us closer to events chronicled in the canonical gospels, nor does it open a clearer window onto the ministry of the Savior. On the other hand, the Gospel of Judas does offer to students of Early Christianity a superb example of how some Early Christians came to portray Judas in a completely different light in their efforts to grasp the underlying relationship between Jesus and his closest followers, perhaps applying their conclusions about this relationship to their own devotion to the Savior.

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16. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 60.

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