

# The Gospel Truth?

Questions about that Judas manuscript

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**L**AST year on Palm Sunday, the National Geographic Society presented a two-hour television special called *The Gospel of Judas*. It told the incredible story of an ancient document, from its mysterious discovery in the sands of Egypt to its strange life on the underground antiquities market to its secret restoration in modern labs. Even more amazing was what the fragile papyrus seemed to say about Christ's betrayer. He wasn't the world's worst bad guy, but actually a heroic figure who has received history's biggest bum rap. Everything you think you know about Judas is wrong: The manuscript, according to the narrator of the television show, "tells a different story, one that could challenge our deepest beliefs." It was like a preposterous subplot from *The Da Vinci Code*, the controversial novel by Dan Brown—except that the Gospel of Judas was an authentic text from the earliest days of Christianity.

Biblical scholar April D. DeConick watched the program on the night it aired. "I was excited to think that a lost gospel had been found," she says. When it was over, she printed out a version from the National Geographic website. "As I read it over, the pit of my stomach started to contract. I thought to myself, 'something's not right here.'" When she came across what she considered to be a blunder in the translation, she knew she was on to something. "I just about fell out of my chair," she says. It turns out that the Gospel of Judas, which caused such a stir upon its release, may indeed tell a different story—one that challenges the way National Geographic has chosen to portray it.

It isn't often that a codex almost as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls comes to light. In the case of the Gospel of Judas, scholars

knew it had existed as early as the 2nd century because St. Irenaeus had written about it (and condemned it). None had seen it and many assumed that it would remain missing forever. Details are murky, but apparently in 1978 a tomb raider found the manuscript in an Egyptian cave. He sold it to an antiquities dealer. From there, it was stolen, reacquired, and finally stashed in a safe-deposit box at a bank in Hicksville, N.Y., where it stayed for 16 years. It eventually came into the possession of the Swiss-based Maecenas Foundation, which partnered with National Geographic to preserve and promote the old manuscript.

The preservation was painstaking because the codex had disintegrated into nearly 1,000 separate fragments. "The manuscript was so brittle, it would crumble at the slightest touch," said Rodolphe Kasser, one of the translators. The conservators nevertheless reassembled the document, which is now 85 percent complete. People involved with the project signed non-disclosure agreements so that when National Geographic at last unveiled the Gospel of Judas, shortly before Easter, it would make a big impact. That's precisely what happened: National Geographic put it on the cover of its magazine and held an exhibition at its headquarters in Washington, D.C. The story made headlines around the globe, the television show attracted 2 million viewers, and a pair of books zoomed onto the bestseller charts.

The first of these books, *The Lost Gospel* by Herbert Krosney, told of the text's "bizarre cloak-and-dagger journey." National Geographic, its publisher, says that 350,000 copies are in print. The second, *The Gospel of Judas*, whose centerpiece is a translation of the Coptic-language original, also flew off the shelves, with 250,000 copies currently in print.

It's the translation that April DeConick found wanting. At one point in the Coptic text, Jesus refers to Judas as a "daimon." National Geographic's translators—Kasser, plus Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst—render the word in English as "spirit." Yet this is a mistake, says DeConick: "The word means 'demon,' and that's the standard way of translating it." She identified other discrepancies as well, including a line in which Jesus tells of Judas's "ascent to the holy generation."

To arrive at this, the translators actually altered the original Coptic text, eliminating a negative from the passage. In doing so, they reversed its meaning. Jesus really says that Judas “will not ascend to the holy generation.”

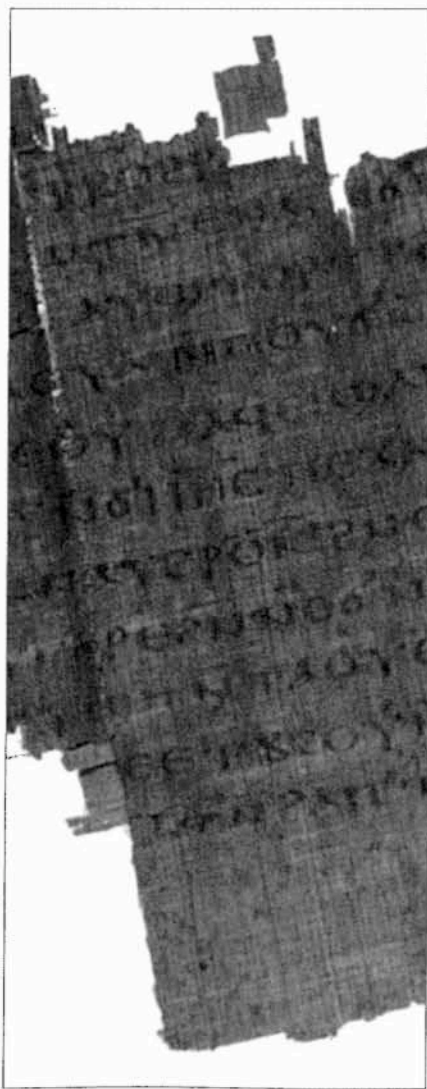
The problem wasn't incompetence. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst are in fact highly regarded academics in their obscure field. The number of people who are proficient in Coptic—an Egyptian language written with Greek letters—is tiny. Yet DeConick thinks she knows what went wrong: “They were trying to translate the text while it was still coming together, which worked against seeing the text as it really is, in its entirety.” They also wound up with a provocative interpretation that turns a key part of the traditional Christian story on its head. Coincidentally, this was just a few weeks before the movie version of *The Da Vinci Code* reached theaters. “That was great for selling the book,” observes DeConick. National Geographic's television show certainly played to the conspiracy-theory crowd when it noted, ominously, that the Gospel of Judas was “a document some might wish had remained buried forever.” It never got around to saying exactly who these people might be, but Mario Roberty, head of the Maecenas Foundation, pointed a finger at the all-purpose bogeymen who live in the Vatican.

DeConick just wanted to take an honest look at what the Gospel of Judas says. In the months following its release, she worked on her own translation, setting it aside only to move from Illinois Wesleyan to Rice University, where she is now a professor. By August, she was just about done and getting ready to present her views at a conference in France—but she was also growing nervous. “I was completely against what they were claiming,” she says of the Kasser-Meyer-Wurst translation. So she e-mailed a colleague, John Turner at the University of Nebraska, and asked for his input. “I thought she was right on target,” says Turner, “and that's what I told her.”

She wasn't alone. Independently, Louis Painchaud of Laval University in Quebec was reaching similar conclusions about the Gospel of Judas. So was Craig Evans of Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia—and he was actually on a National Geographic advisory board. He hadn't

been charged with translating the codex, but with examining the Kasser-Meyer-Wurst translation and trying to determine its significance. “In hindsight, I should have looked at the text,” he says. “Some of these errors are serious errors.”

By the end of 2006, DeConick was completely convinced and decided to write a book: *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*, which came out in October. “The public was misled and it needs to be made aware of the fact that Judas is no hero in this gospel,” she says. DeConick finished her own translation of the original Coptic text and kept up with a brand-new cottage industry of rapid-response books about the Gospel of Judas—books such as *Reading Judas* by Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, who committed many of the same errors as the National Geographic transla-



Fragment of the Gospel of Judas

tors. For their part, Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst released a “critical edition” of their translation, which made a few adjustments to account for some of DeConick's criticisms, but not, in her view, nearly enough of them.

“There are fundamental principles of interpretation upon which we disagree,” says Meyer, who is a professor at Chapman University in California. “These critics are just a little group of people.” Yet their ranks seem to be growing. Birger Pearson, a professor emeritus at the University of California–Santa Barbara, has joined them: “When something like the Gospel of Judas appears, enterprising scholars are tempted to rush into print with their own books, sometimes to their later embarrassment.” Pearson agrees with just about every aspect of DeConick's analysis. On December 1, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by DeConick, providing her with a large, mainstream audience.

If academic opinion continues to shift in DeConick's direction, the rarefied world of early-Christian scholarship may want to examine its own practices, to determine how it bungled so badly. There's no denying that the experts who worked with National Geographic did a lot of things right: Their restoration efforts deserve a round of hosannas, as DeConick and others are quick to point out. Yet the culture of confidentiality that surrounded the Judas project also insulated National Geographic from contrary ideas and second opinions. It was a success mainly in the sense that it kept the old manuscript under wraps until the stars were aligned for what was essentially a commercial product launch.

The problem has lingered on, too. Although National Geographic has devoted enormous resources to the Gospel of Judas, it still hasn't released full-sized facsimiles of the actual text. Scholars like DeConick are forced to squint over a version that's only about half-size, making it difficult at times to distinguish between a flaw in the papyrus and a smudge of ink.

The good news is that National Geographic now says that high-resolution images of the original Gospel of Judas will appear on its website soon. For some irritated scholars, that's almost two years too late. For others, it could be an early Christmas gift. **NR**