

Long-lost Gospel of Judas to be published: Translations of Coptic-language text forthcoming

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 27, 2005](#) issue

The heresy-fighting bishop Irenaeus of Lyon, France, mentioned the Gospel of Judas about 180 AD, linking the writing to a Gnostic sect. Some two centuries later, Epiphanius, bishop of Cyprus, criticized the Gospel of Judas for treating the betrayer of Jesus as commendable, one who “performed a good work for our salvation.”

Until recent years, no copy of the text was generally known to exist. It was not among, for instance, the 46 different apocryphal texts of the Nag Hammadi Library discovered 60 years ago this month in Egypt. Other fragmentary texts, such as the Gospel of Mary, were discovered well before that.

But in 2004, Rodolphe Kasser of the University of Geneva announced in Paris that by the end of 2005 he would be publishing translations of the Coptic-language version of the Gospel of Judas. As it turned out, the owner was a Swiss foundation, and the torn and tattered papyrus text had been hawked to potential buyers in North America and Europe for decades after it was found at Muhazafat Al Minya in Middle Egypt.

The “Judas” saga was confirmed in detail last month at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia. Retired Claremont Graduate University professor James Robinson, general editor of the English edition of the Nag Hammadi Library, said he was first contacted in 1983 about negotiations to buy certain texts, including the Gospel of Judas. Many years later, he saw blurry photographs of part of the text.

Robinson said that early in November he learned that Kasser and several European, Canadian and U.S. scholars had signed agreements with the National Geographic Society to assist with a documentary film and a *National Geographic* article for an Easter 2006 release and a succession of three books.

Robinson was critical of the secrecy and inaccessibility surrounding the document—a recurring academic problem that delayed for decades the publishing of translations of some Dead Sea Scrolls and many Nag Hammadi codices. In his talk, Robinson called the practice “skullduggery”—with a glance at fellow panelist Marvin Meyer of Chapman University, a longtime colleague in the field and one of the contracted authors.

Meyer refused to describe the text’s content, but he essentially confirmed the basic publishing arrangements to Robinson and to the Century at the Philadelphia meeting.

In amended remarks to his speech, Robinson said Meyer told him that he was sworn to secrecy—not by the document’s owner but by the National Geographic Society, a procedure Meyer said was justified by the organization’s large financial investment.

A spokeswoman for the National Geographic headquarters in Washington declined to comment. But Meyer said in a brief interview, “It will all be out for everyone to see by the spring.” He added without elaboration, “It will be good. It will be good.”

Hardly anything is known about the document’s contents “other than a few personages” it names, said Robinson, identifying them as the mythological figure Allogenes (literally, “the stranger”) known from some Nag Hammadi texts, and Satan, Jesus and Judas.

Another scholar, Charles Hedrick, who recently retired from Missouri State University, saw photographs of six damaged pages from the gospel in 2001. Hedrick agreed with Robinson that the original Gospel of Judas was probably written in Greek in the second century AD. Scholars also agree that the scribal hand used in the Coptic translation would date that text to the fourth or fifth century.

“I don’t think it will unsettle the church,” Hedrick said in an interview. “I mean we are not talking history here. We know very little about Judas from the New Testament, and some people have even challenged whether Judas was a historical person.”

The Coptic texts, owned by the Maecenas Foundation, consist of 62 pages and also contain “The First Apocalypse of James” and “The Letter of Peter to Philip”—two texts also found at Nag Hammadi. How many of the 62 pages contain the Gospel of Judas has not been disclosed.

Hedrick said the last six pages of the Judas document describe a heavenly scene in which Allogenes is being tested and tried by Satan, followed by an earthly scene in which Jesus is being watched closely by scribes. At one point Judas is told, "Although you are evil at this place, you are a disciple of Jesus." The last line of the text says, according to Hedrick: "And he [Judas] took money and delivered him [Jesus] over."

So, Hedrick said, "it appears that Judas is working at the behest of God when he betrays Jesus as part of the divine plan." When translations of the Gospel of Judas are released with accompanying analyses, Hedrick expects that "there will be a lot of sensationalism, but it will dribble out, leaving only the scholars interested."

Yet, in academic and religious circles, the text may stir excitement for years, according to a scholar from the University of Ottawa. "It is a major discovery not only for Coptic, Gnostic or apocryphal studies, but also for ancient Judaism and early Christianity," said Pierluigi Piovanelli in an e-mail to colleagues in 2004 when the first plans to publish were announced.

Some scholarly discussions will focus on whether the document was produced by a branch of the Sethian Gnostics called Cainites by church leaders. The Cainites were said to have glorified Cain and other disgraced figures in the Bible because, according to Gnostic viewpoints, they were doing God's work.

Church discussions conceivably could revolve around the extent to which New Testament Gospels present events in Jesus' life and passion as ordained from the start. Judas Iscariot, depicted minimally by the Gospel of Mark, receives elaboration in Matthew, Luke and John. The latter Gospel says Satan entered Judas at the Last Supper just before Jesus told the disciple, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

For Robinson, the significance of the Gospel of Judas has to do not with first-century history but with second-century mythology. Still, he offered these half-serious reflections in his closing remarks last month: "Where would Christianity be, if there had been no Judas, and Jesus—instead of dying for our sins on the cross—had died of old age?" he asked. "So: Thank God for Judas? Even the most broadminded among us would call that heresy!"