

Judas is a 'demon' in new read of gospel: The long-lost Gospel of Judas

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

When the first translation of the long-lost Gospel of Judas was published last year amid considerable publicity, a few scholars trumpeted its apparent depiction of Judas Iscariot as a positive figure who was rewarded in the heavens for betraying Jesus.

This alternative view of Judas, based on a tattered sectarian manuscript probably written in the second century, was not touted as the historical Judas. But one essayist described this Judas as “the ultimate follower of Jesus, one whose actions should be emulated rather than spurned.”

Within months after the National Geographic Society–sponsored announcement, however, other scholars familiar with Gnostic texts began saying that some early assessments were dead wrong. In their reading, the gospel ridicules Judas as a “demon,” the tool of the evil Sethian Gnostic god, for turning over Jesus to the authorities for execution.

The scholarly debate is significant because a flood of books on the Judas gospel hit bookstores starting in the spring of 2006. Authors of 10 such books—including big-name writers N. T. (Tom) Wright, Marvin Meyer and Bart Ehrman—were given a few minutes each to comment on the text at one session of the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Diego last month.

Emotions were taut in another SBL session, held November 17 in an overcrowded room, as scholars critical of early translations and interpretations were answered by Elaine Pagels and Karen King, coauthors of *Reading Judas*, on their sympathetic view of Judas in the text. The critics raised these points, among others:

- The word *daimon* to describe Judas was translated *spirit* rather than *demon* as the term is read in Christian and Gnostic writings. Though a *daimon* in Greek literature can be a neutral figure, even one of the lesser gods, that is not so in biblical works.

- Judas is called the “thirteenth *daimon*” in the text, but that doesn’t improve the image of Judas, scholars said. Other Sethian Gnostic writings link Judas to the disreputable god of the 13th realm in the cosmos, who rules over the world.
- Some initial translations had Judas being rewarded and “set apart for” ascension to “the holy generation” peopled by Gnostics who believed that a greater deity existed above the evil creator god. But other scholars said the betrayer of Jesus was to be “set apart *from*” and would not ascend to that holy generation.

“All this Jesus mocks and laughs, while Judas resists and laments,” said Rice University’s April DeConick, whose book *The Thirteenth Apostle* was published this year. She was the lead-off speaker in the sometimes combative San Diego session.

“Whoever wrote the Gospel of Judas disliked mainstream or apostolic Christians, disapproved of their doctrine of atonement and its liturgical performance as the Eucharist, and went about pointing out the errors of apostolic Christianity,” she said.

The second speaker, Birger Pearson, professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said he looks upon the Gospel of Judas “as an ironic literary caricature of a gospel.” Jesus takes Judas aside to tell him certain things, “but he does not instruct or request Judas to do anything,” Pearson said. “He simply prophesies what Judas will do.”

Jesus tells Judas “you will become the 13th, and you will be cursed . . . and you shall not ascend on high to the holy [generation],” Pearson said. At another point, Judas is told that his star will rule over the 13th aeon, an undesirable region found in certain Gnostic texts. Jesus then laughs.

“So the 13th aeon is not a happy place to wind up,” said Pearson.

A third speaker, Louis Painchaud of Laval University in Quebec City, echoed Pearson, saying, “I would say that Judas has reason to grieve.”

In her response, Princeton University’s Pagels said that she felt that the cosmic realms are ambiguously described in the gospel. She noted that by the end of the text, Judas had evidently received secret knowledge and that a nearby reference to baptism could even suggest that Judas would be initiated into a higher realm of light.

“I do think that the complexities of this text require a lot more discussion,” Pagels said.

“This is a really tough text,” added King, who teaches at Harvard. She asked, for instance, whether Jesus’ laughter “is mocking or corrective” and suggested that grammar and translation issues remain. “I think we all agree this will give us no new information about the historical Judas and the historical Jesus, but it does give us some very important conversation about what [was] going on in the second to fourth centuries.”

Interpretation of the Gospel of Judas has been complicated by the fact that pieces are missing from the papyrus text. The text, along with at least two copies of Gnostic texts already known from the Nag Hammadi discoveries, was found in Egypt in the 1970s and had been shopped around to potential buyers for years.

Another seasoned scholar in Gnostic studies, John Turner of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, told the Century in San Diego after the November 17 session that he thought Pagels and King did not “take seriously” the criticisms from colleagues.

“Moreover, in my opinion they relied excessively on what certain [missing] passages might have said about the positive salvational prospects for either Judas or the mortal generations of ordinary ‘apostolic’ Christians,” he said. “I see no evidence that such ideas were ever present in the text.”

Turner continued: “Judas is an evil figure who carries out the will of the stars and the evil god Saklas by handing over Jesus for execution.”