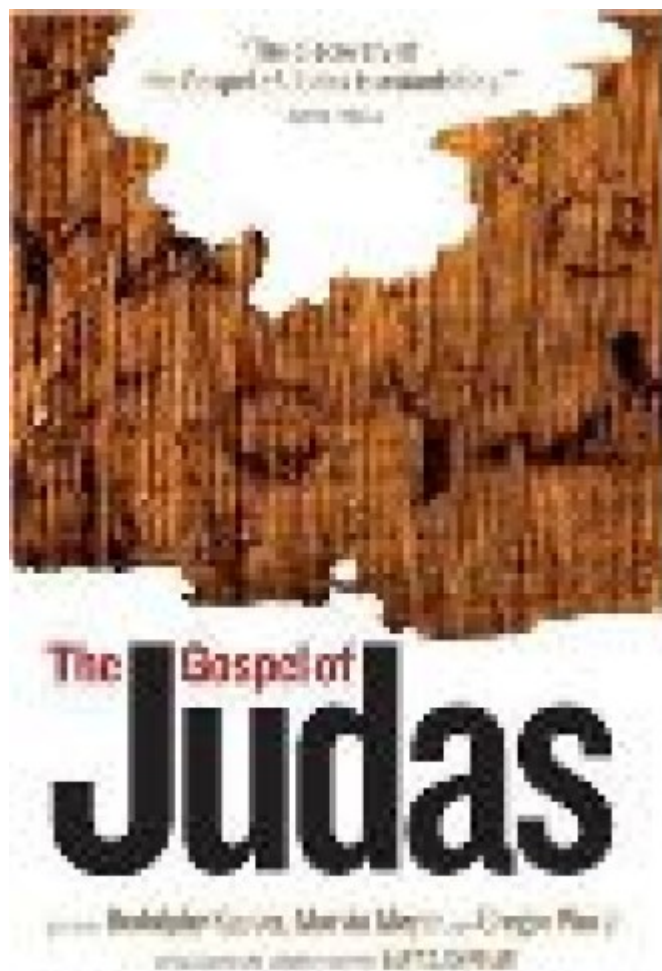


The lost Judas

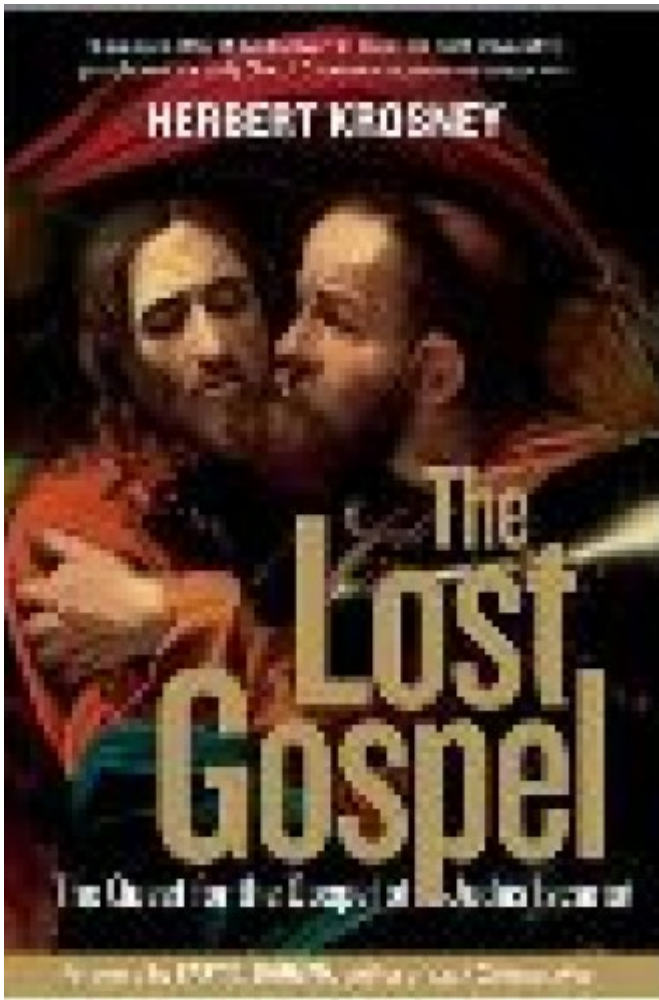
By [Luke Timothy Johnson](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Gospel of Judas

Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregory Wurst, eds.
National Geographic



The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot

Herbert Krosney
National Geographic

The media campaign surrounding publication of the ancient Gospel of Judas is well launched with a television broadcast and two books sponsored by the National Geographic Society. In situations of this sort, Christians naturally wonder: Should they ignore the commotion in the hope that it will go away? Should they work themselves into a froth of defensive denial? Should they embark, as some recommend, on a fundamental rethinking of Christian convictions? Deciding how to respond is made more difficult because it is exceedingly hard to find honest brokers of the facts.

The Gospel of Judas was found around 1978 in a papyrus codex, or manuscript, written in the Coptic language. The codex contains substantial portions of four

ancient compositions (two of them copies of works already discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945). The codex certainly seems to be an authentic witness from antiquity. It was discovered in Egypt and passed around among antiquarians and scholars for over 20 years—steadily disintegrating—until a process of preservation and restoration was undertaken by the Maecenas Foundation in Switzerland in 2001. The designation Codex Tchacos comes from the name of the antiquarian who sought for decades to bring the discovery to light in a responsible manner. The codex has been examined by experts and meets all the tests for being dated around the fourth century—radiocarbon dating matches papyrological and paleographical analysis.

There is every reason to suppose that the Gospel of Judas in the codex is the work identified by Irenaeus of Lyons in 180 (in *Against Heresies*) as a production of a gnostic sect called the Cainites. The manuscript bears that title, and the composition begins, “The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover.” The composition takes up nine pages in the codex, and consists of dialogues between Jesus and the disciples, with the bulk of the work being a dialogue between Jesus and Judas (the “thirteenth”), who is portrayed as superior in understanding to the 12 apostles. The composition contains a narrative description of Judas entering into a numinous cloud, and concludes with Judas receiving money from the high priests who come to arrest Jesus.

The appearance of the text is reason for intellectual excitement: a composition known only by an outsider’s description can now be read on its own terms. The past gives such treasures so grudgingly that we rightly embrace the actual physical remnants from antiquity with enthusiasm and joy. In this respect, the discovery of the codex is comparable to the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents, if much less extensive. Those who labored diligently to bring the manuscript to a responsible form of publication should be appreciated.

Comparison with other Nag Hammadi writings enables us to identify the Gospel of Judas as expressing a form of gnosticism called Sethian. These gnostics were intensely hostile to the creator God of the Old Testament and therefore toward all material things. They regarded physical existence as the realm of corruption and error brought into being by a malevolent creator. Truth and salvation must be found through escape from the body, which is available through the saving knowledge (*gnosis*) revealed to the elect. In this case, the elect one is Judas. The other disciples

are ignorant of the truth and only Judas understands. The 12 are captive to physical forms; Judas attends to spiritual knowledge.

The intense dualism of this ideology helps frame the most attention-getting line in the composition. The exact significance of the line is uncertain (there are extensive lacunae in the text leading up to it), but it is undoubtedly striking: "But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me."

The text's intention seems to be to mitigate Judas' betrayal in two ways. First, Jesus is aware of the betrayal and secretly approves of it. Second, what is going to die is not the divine spark in Jesus but only "the man that clothes me." This Jesus is a docetic Jesus: his humanity is only an appearance. The writer's effort to embarrass the larger Christian tradition is obvious: the one regarded as evil by the 12 disciples because of his betrayal is portrayed as a benefactor. We see also the same subversive attitude that regards the God of the Old Testament as a lesser and malevolent deity.

But what does the act of Judas mean, if the body is insignificant? The effort to subvert the Gospel account remains dependent on the authority of the Gospel account. The betrayal of an illusory body would not have any significance in itself for the gnostics; it is important only when set against the force of the dominant tradition.

What, then, do we learn from the publication of the Gospel of Judas, which appears along with commentary in the volume edited by Rodolphe Kasser and colleagues? We learn more about what we already knew, but not anything we did not know. We are reminded once more how much Irenaeus knew about the heretics he attacked. He not only names this composition, but his short description still stands as a decent summary of its import. Irenaeus distorts it mainly by making his opponents sound more sensible than they do on their own.

We also learn again how aggressive and subversive Sethian gnosticism really was. Like the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip, this composition has an overt hostility to the leaders of the church (represented by the 12), who are portrayed as ignorant and captive to illusion. These gnostics denigrated all forms of physical, and therefore moral, endeavor. Irenaeus and other defenders of the traditional faith in the second century rightly perceived such teachings as ruinous.

But we do not learn anything more about “the historical Judas,” much less the “historical Jesus.” The historical Judas is in any case irrecoverable even from the canonical gospels, each of which shapes the actions and especially the fate of Jesus’ betrayer in distinct ways. Like other characters provided by the biblical accounts (James, Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene come to mind), the figure of Judas is here shaped by the ideological commitment and literary imagination of the author, in this case a second-century author who grinds a particular kind of ax.

Apart from a slightly breathless tone, the editors and essayists of Kasser et al.’s *The Gospel of Judas* blessedly avoid exaggeration and seek to inform more than entertain. The same can’t be said of the other book simultaneously published by the National Geographic Society, Herbert Krosney’s *The Lost Gospel*. Much of the book is an entertaining journalistic account of the intrigues, plots, errors and betrayals that made the codex bounce around the world for some 25 years before publication. I would like to believe every word. I certainly find the incidents it relates plausible. But I grew cautious after reading the part of the book dealing with the supposed significance of the codex. On this topic Krosney is completely out of his depth.

My skepticism started when I discovered on page eight that Krosney offers a translation of the famous line completely different from that found in the companion volume: “You will become the apostle cursed by all the others. Judas, you will sacrifice this body of a man which clothes me.”

Potentially more harmful to the uninformed reader is the catalogue of characterizations that Krosney has lifted from those purveyors of the new gnosticism whose interest is far less the past than the present, and who use the gnostic writings as leverage in their own challenge to the contemporary church. Irenaeus is called the “Enforcer, ” and the problems in publishing the codex are ascribed to “dark forces.” Krosney repeats the unverifiable position that women played a prominent role among “Christians who were Gnostics,” and that the Nag Hammadi writings were “new biblical texts whose existence had never been known.” Concerning this codex, he says that the announcement of it has “earthshaking implications”; that it is “as valid as the version told in the New Testament”; that it is not a “dissident” writing, but “written from within a particular tradition of Christian belief”; and that it is “as close to a contemporary account of what happened as many other accounts of Jesus. ”

None of these judgments is correct. They are mixed in with other, equally wrong statements arising from ignorance, such as the one that Judas' betrayal of Jesus is "an essential element in Christian religious belief." Essential? I conclude with one quote that can stand for many others: "This scriptural text could shatter some of the interpretations, *even the foundations*, of faith throughout the Christian world. It was not a novel. It was *a real gospel straight from the world of early Christianity*" (italics mine).

Such a mélange of half-truth, distortion and flat-out error is not responsible journalism, much less history. This is the sort of production to which the National Geographic Society has attached its name and its reputation. It is not the discovery or publication of the codex that is disturbing (it is cause for rejoicing), nor is there anything in its contents that is disturbing (it confirms what we knew). What is disturbing to Christians and all those committed to serious scholarly work is the distortion—perhaps even deliberate distortion—built into such sensation-seeking publications.