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Embracing Judas; A recently translated gospel argues that betraying Jesus was the right thing to do.

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READING JUDAS

The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity

By Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King

Viking. 198 pp. \$24.95

The Christian Gospels are surprisingly ridden with conflict. Each one -- whether officially part of the New Testament or not -- contains a sometimes acrimonious debate about faith or practice, theology or authority, this leader or that one.

In the recently published Gospel of Judas, for example, that archetypal traitor becomes the only true believer, the one who "lifted up his eyes . . . saw the luminous cloud and . . . entered into it." The gospel was discovered sometime in the 1970s along with some other texts in a papyrus book in Egypt. The original 2nd-century Greek text had been translated into Coptic -- the Egyptian language using the Greek alphabet -- in the 4th century. This version was stored inadequately, protected irresponsibly and bartered greedily for maximum profit. Finally, last year, the badly damaged gospel received expert preservation, scholarly restoration and public presentation by the National Geographic Society.

In their slim but excellent *Reading Judas*, Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King rightly focus on the text's ancient and provocative theology rather than on the codex's modern and tortured history, with King also providing a new and very well annotated translation of this early Christian document.

The Gospel of Judas records conversations between Jesus and his 12 disciples in the week before his death. But while the other disciples are derided for their incomprehension "about the mysteries which are beyond the world and about the things which will occur at the end," Judas is praised for his understanding. And as the only perfect disciple, his destiny is to betray Jesus. But what theology can possibly equate ultimate treachery with supreme sanctity?

On the one hand, this gospel launches a brutal polemic against the glorification of martyrdom. It argues that God does not desire martyrdom, let alone demand it, believers should not want or seek it, and bodily resurrection should neither be promised by God nor expected by martyrs as the reward for bodily torture.

But on the other hand, Jesus commands Judas to betray him and thereby guarantee his martyrdom, as well as Judas's own eventual martyrdom for that treachery. How can the gospel be for and against sacrificial martyrdom at the same time? Because the Gospel of Judas is not debating the fact of martyrdom but the meaning of it. And in this text, the meaning of martyrdom depends on a much deeper and more fundamental layer of the gospel's theology -- one derived from Greek philosophy.

Plato's famous pun of soma as sema, the body as tomb of the soul, emphasizes a giant fissure in Western sensibility between two interpretations of human identity. One interpretation claims that we are souls temporarily residing in bodies, spirits provisionally lodging in flesh. Eventually, that soul will be "freed," said Socrates as he prepared for martyrdom, "from the shackles of the body by death." The other interpretation claims that we are ensouled bodies or incarnate spirits, indissoluble unions of body and soul, flesh and spirit, able -- like two sides of a coin -- to be distinguished but never separated. In the first interpretation, the body is never of any lasting value or ultimate importance. And it is with that former or platonic understanding of the human being that the Gospel of Judas faces the problem of martyrdom.

Martyrdom leads not to a resurrection of the body, it says, but to a liberation from the body. It bears witness not to the body's importance but to its unimportance. And how does martyrdom, which depends so absolutely on the body's suffering, prove the body's unimportance? The answer appears most clearly in the gospel's climactic moment: "As for you, you will surpass them all," says Jesus to Judas. "For you will sacrifice the human being who bears me." So, in the gospel's final lines, "Judas received some copper coins. He handed him [Jesus] over to them." This is "good news," the authors explain, because Judas "has discovered through Jesus's teaching and his death that what dies is only his mortal self, and that his soul, filled with the spirit, already recognizes its home in God."

In a world where suicide and martyrdom have started to merge, it is hard to imagine an ancient text debating a more modern question. But martyrdom and sacrifice can hold more meanings than bodily resurrection after death or bodily liberation by death. In a brutal world, some people become martyrs -- without God demanding it or themselves wanting it -- whenever nonviolent justice confronts violent injustice. In a tragic world, some people sacrifice themselves -- that is, make their lives sacred (from the Latin *sacrum facere*, to make sacred) -- by giving up their own lives for others; recall, for example, the man who drowned saving fellow passengers when Air Florida 90 crashed into the Potomac off the 14th Street Bridge. Martyrdom and sacrifice can bear witness, as in the Gospel of Judas, to the body's unimportance, but they can also bear witness to precisely the opposite. ?

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