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Forgiving Judas: The Ultimate Test

Ask any serious Christian about forgiveness, and you are likely to hear what Jesus taught—that we are to forgive others, not once or twice, but countless times; that God only forgives us to the extent that we forgive one another. Yet later, Christians made one famous exception: Judas Iscariot.

For thousands of years, Christians have pictured Judas as unforgivable--the incarnation of evil. Motivated by greed and inspired by Satan, he is the betrayer whom Dante placed in the lowest circle of hell. Only one famous Christian teacher, so far as we know, suggested that Judas could be redeemed and forgiven.

The Egyptian teacher Origen, recognized as the most brilliant and original teacher of his time (c. 240 CE, and, some would say, of all time) offered a vision in which all beings ever created—including Judas and Satan himself—could turn and repent, and eventually be restored to full communion with God. For this teaching above all, Origen himself was condemned as a heretic by Catholic councils—posthumously, fortunately, since over a hundred years earlier, his death had been hastened by torture he suffered for confessing his faith in Christ.

Judas has always fascinated writers and artists, who find the usual stereotype of a wholly evil man unpersuasive. Those who expect to find more complexity in human character have asked what was his motive? What was his relationship to Jesus? Was he a disappointed man? Was it greed or bitterness—or both—that led him to do what he did? What about anyone who commits an act of betrayal or violence against another: are we simply to assume that the person is evil, or do we ask questions like these? Can we—should we—reflect on the possibility of forgiveness for those who willfully destroy the life and well being of others?

One unexpected gift of the many occasioned by the discovery of the Gospel of Judas, first published last April—well, first published since nearly two thousand years ago, when it was written—is that it offers different perspectives on a character who has become a stock figure, a caricature of what is human. Suggesting that Jesus may have enlisted Judas to do what he did is not a new idea; the New Testament Gospel of John pictures Jesus, knowing full well what Judas has in mind, tells him to "Go, do quickly what you are going to do." The Gospel of Judas goes further, picturing Judas as the single disciple to whom Jesus entrusts this mission. Here "the twelve" entirely fail to understand Jesus, while Judas alone receives from him "the mysteries of the kingdom." Is it possible there was nothing to forgive?

Does this have anything to do with what happened? We can't tell, and it doesn't sound likely. But reading this weirdly unfamiliar version of the passion story shakes our sense of certainty, and loosens up our vision of the characters and the course of events, allowing us to reflect on them again, ask questions in new ways—such questions as who wrote up these events, how we

came to accept as "gospel" the versions we call by that name, and why we believe what we have accepted unthinkingly for so long.

New Testament scholar Elaine Pagels is a religion professor at Princeton University. Her latest book, written with Karen L. King, is "Reading Judas - The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity," published in March.

Read an excerpt from "Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity," by Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, published by Viking. *Copyright c Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, 2007. Used by permission. All rights reserved*

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