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Gospel of Judas manuscript found and authenticated; Elaine Pagels from Princeton and Terry Garcia from National Geographic talk about the Gospel of Judas

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KATIE COURIC, co-host:

But first, Matt, he is the Bible's greatest villain, Judas, who betrayed Jesus Christ and sent him to his death on the cross. But what if Judas was actually doing what Jesus asked him to do? That is the context of an ancient manuscript National Geographic calls "The Gospel of Judas," that dates back to the third century, and is now being revealed to the public. We were very intrigued, and we asked Natalie Morales to find out more.

NATALIE MORALES reporting:

Lost in the sands of Egypt for more than 1700 years, and almost lost forever to Christianity, the Gospel of Judas tells a story that contradicts centuries of Christian belief, that Judas was not the friend who betrayed Jesus, but rather obeyed him.

Professor MARVIN MEYER (Bible and Christian Studies, Chapman University): He was the closest one to Jesus, he understood Jesus. And when he turned Jesus in, he just followed the wishes of his good friend Jesus, because that allowed Jesus to get rid of his attachments to the physical body, and to realize the true spiritual being within.

MORALES: The Gospel of Judas was condemned in the second century as heresy by one of the church's most influential leaders.

Reverend DONALD SENIOR, CP (President, Catholic Theological Union): This one early teacher that refers to this gospel, he considered it a heretical gospel, an erroneous view.

MORALES: The National Geographic Channel documents the more than 30-year-long journey of the manuscript's discovery and authentication. It's believed the Gospel of Judas was found by chance along the banks of the Nile in the 1970s and was nearly destroyed after being stored in a safe deposit box before finally falling into the right hands of scholars.

We can only see the document now in this low lighting so as to not compromise its integrity. What was left was it was over a thousand tiny little pieces that took scholars about five years to be able to put back together. Now 80 percent of it exists today.

Careful radio-carbon dating of the 66 pages of papyrus prove it dates back to the third century. What's still unknown: just how important the Gospel of Judas could be to religion and history.

COURIC: That was NBC's Natalie Morales.

Meanwhile, Terry Garcia is an executive vice president at the National Geographic Society, and Elaine Pagels is a professor of religion who studies early Christianity at Princeton, and worked on the Judas gospel.

Good morning to both of you, nice to see you.

Mr. TERRY GARCIA (National Geographic Society): Good morning.

Professor ELAINE PAGELS (Princeton University Professor of Religion): Good morning.

COURIC: Elaine, let me start with you. This codex, or manuscript, dates from about 300 AD. So this is, it seems like an odd question, it's writ--based on something written earlier, so is it a--a historical document?

Ms. PAGELS: Well, the--the actual copy that we have is a third century text, but what it's copied is an early Greek text, which probably comes from the first or second century. Yes, it's a very ancient document, it's been authenticated, we know it's--comes from the beginning of the Christian movement.

COURIC: As someone who studies this for a living, how exciting is this for you?

Ms. PAGELS: It's amazing. It's the first time in 60 years that we've had a remarkable new discovery like this.

COURIC: I know that Christians believe that--that Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. In this--as this gospel tells it--tells it, Judas was asked--excuse me--by Jesus to betray him to fulfill Christ's destiny. So is this an effort by an early Christian sect to rehabilitate the image of Judas, who's one of the most reviled figures in history?

Ms. PAGELS: This is a new perspective on what happened. I mean historically, you know, it completely agrees with the New Testament, that one of Jesus' closest disciples handed him over to the authorities. The question here is why, and in the New Testament that's not clear. Two of the gospels say that he did it for money, or that the devil inspired him. This one is gives a different point of view about his motives, saying that it was an agreement between him and Jesus, that this had to happen.

COURIC: But doesn't this contradict what many of us are taught?

Ms. PAGELS: It contradicts the motivation, but, you know, Luke and the other Gospels say that Jesus had to die for the sins of the world, or had to--had to go through this ordeal. This simply says that he anticipated it, and--and that Judas understood that.

COURIC: How controversial do you think this is going to be? Because I know the Vatican has already dismissed this as--they're calling it, quote, "a religious fantasy." How accepted do you think this will be, and how controversial will it be?

Ms. PAGELS: As a historical document it's enormously important. Now, how Christians understand, you know, how--what they think the meaning of it is, is--is the whole issue under debate. What we do know is that Christians in the early centuries were already debating, why did Judas do it? And--and you know, and they obviously had different views about that.

COURIC: Terry, when you first learned of the existence of this, what did you think?

Mr. GARCIA: Well, after picking myself off the floor--no, it--it occurred to us that this is likely one of the most significant documents of the last century, next to the Dead Sea Scrolls in the... (unintelligible)... library, and what we wanted to do was authenticate it and make sure that we were dealing with a genuine work of ancient literature. And through carbon dating and various other tests, it is in fact genuine.

COURIC: What kind of condition was it in? Because I know it spent quite a bit of time in a safe deposit box on Long Island?

Mr. GARCIA: Yeah. Right. Yeah that is not--that is not an ideal place to keep an ancient papyrus, OK?

COURIC: I mean--that's so...

Mr. GARCIA: That is not approved by museums or scholars, and...

COURIC: That's so strange.

Mr. GARCIA: ...it--it was literally in thousands of pieces. This was like putting a jigsaw puzzle together, and it took five years to do it, where tiny little pieces had to be fitted together, and--imagine taking 10 sheets of paper, ripping it in half, throwing half of it away and then tearing the rest up, and then trying to piece together a document. That's what had to happen.

COURIC: I know "The Da Vinci Code," for example, Elaine, has created a lot of controversy, suggesting that Jesus was in fact--had a family. It--do you think that the Gospel of Judas will be sort of a discovery of the same magnitude, or at least an assertion of the same magnitude? It's hard--hard to say--call what's in "The Da Vinci Code" necessarily a discovery.

Ms. PAGELS: Well, "The Da Vinci Code" is fiction. What I find much more exciting is to find out what really happened. And here we have new perspectives on that in a way that we simply haven't had. It goes with many other secret gospels that we know about, and is changing the way we see the early Christian movement.

COURIC: And what do you think people will think about all this?

Mr. GARCIA: I think that it's going to encourage a significant amount of debate, and we hope that people read it. We hope that people pay attention to the commentary and want to learn more about it.

COURIC: All right. Well, Terry Garcia and Elaine Pagels, thank you both so much for coming in this morning. Nice to see you.

Mr. GARCIA: Thanks.

COURIC: If you'd like to learn more about this, you can see "The Gospel of Judas," a two-hour documentary, this Sunday night on the National Geographic Channel at 8 PM.