

Richmond Times Dispatch

April 8, 2007 Sunday  
Final Edition

## In light of old text, a new focus on Judas

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Judas Iscariot, long depicted as the rotten apple in the Easter story, is now being hailed by some as a hero.

As Christians gather today to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, there is renewed interest in his betrayer because of the Gospel of Judas, a second-century text made public last year. A number of books about Judas have hit stores in time for Easter. As authors and scholars absorb and interpret the text, some people are starting to look at Judas in a different light.

The Gospel of Judas, discovered in the 1970s in Egypt, describes Judas as a close ally of Jesus. It also says Jesus asked Judas to betray him so that the Messiah could fulfill his destiny.

But two Richmond-area biblical scholars argue that the New Testament Gospels paint a consistently unfavorable picture of Judas.

Little is known about him except that he decided, at the close of Jesus' public career, to provide information to the elite priestly circles in Jerusalem that facilitated the arrest and execution of Jesus, said the Rev. John T. Carroll, professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education in North Richmond.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all describe Judas as a traitor. John's Gospel also portrays Judas as the greedy treasurer of the disciples, who objected to the waste of money when Mary poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, said the Rev. F. Scott Spencer, professor of New Testament at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, also in North Side.

But to Bart D. Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Gospel of Judas is the most important discovery of a Christian text in the past 60 years.

Not only does it give a more positive picture of Judas, "it conveys an alternative understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus," said Ehrman, author of "The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed."

The Gospel of Judas also offers insight into the diversity of beliefs in the early Christian church.

"For this Gospel, the creator of the world is not the one true God, but is a lesser, malevolent divinity," Ehrman said. "Jesus is not the son of this God, but of a higher God in a higher realm. Salvation comes not to those who believe in his death and resurrection, but to those who understand his secret teachings about where we really came from and what our ultimate destination is."

Chesterfield County resident James J. Lewis said after reading National Geographic's "The Gospel Of Judas" recently that "it certainly gave me a different perspective, but it didn't change my interpretation of the Bible. It does make me think about it."

Carroll views the picture of Judas developed in the Gospel of Judas and in some modern films as legendary embellishment.

It is possible that Judas misunderstood or was troubled by Jesus' refusal to exert his messianic power to rid Palestine of the occupying Roman armies. "That

is speculative, but it is plausible. I believe Judas' motives were more complex, and mixed, than the New Testament accounts suggest. However, the idea that Judas acted at Jesus' prompting when he 'betrayed' Jesus repairs Judas' reputation at the expense of historical probability," Carroll added.

The Bible's Gospel stories do not prepare people for Judas' betrayal of Jesus, Spencer said. "You don't have little asides of the Judas figure as grumpy, and there's no indication he's going to do anything sinister. There's no deep motivation, either. There's the greed thing. He is getting paid 30 pieces of silver."

Matthew contains a scene where Judas regrets his betrayal of Jesus and tries unsuccessfully to return the money.

Judas' part was not necessary for the Romans to arrest and execute Jesus, Carroll said. But Judas' betrayal made the arrest easier and quieter. Jesus' controversial action in the temple in Jerusalem and his provocative teaching ensured his arrest and execution as a dangerous teacher and disturber of the peace.

"Beyond providing a tip about the location where an arresting police force could find Jesus and identifying him at the arrest scene, did Judas also provide inside information about Jesus' teaching and activities that could be used in the proceedings against Jesus, perhaps to confirm the allegations that he claimed to be king of the Jews, the charge that was the basis for Jesus' execution order?" Carroll asked. "This is certainly plausible, but our sources don't tell."

The New Testament offers two accounts of what happened to Judas after the crucifixion, Spencer said. In Matthew, Judas hangs himself.

The other account is a grisly scene in the book of Acts: "With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out," according to the account in the New International Version.

"It's clearly a death scene," Spencer said.

Carroll suggests a way for people to better understand Judas, as well as other Bible villains. Ask how the character's experience invites the reader to self-examination, he said.

"Might I have made the same choice had I been in that circumstance? Are my own loyalty and commitment above risk of similar failure? And might the motives driving such a character's actions, like all human motivation, have been more complex than the Gospel narrator's dismissive judgment suggests?"

"Yes, probably so, even for Judas," Carroll answered himself. "This sort of empathetic re-reading of the story may not yield better history, but perhaps it makes for better religion."

#### Reading list

Want to know more about the Gospel of Judas? Here are some recently published books:

"Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth About Christianity?" by N.T. Wright, who formerly taught at Oxford University in England, published by Baker Books

"The Gospel of Judas," edited by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, published by National Geographic

"The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot," by Herbert Krosney, published by National Geographic

"Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity," by Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton University, and Karen L. King, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard Divinity School, published by Viking

