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## Kiss and Make Up

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### READING JUDAS

The Gospel of Judas  
and the Shaping of Christianity.

By Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King.

198 pp. Viking. \$24.95.

As anyone who has read Gregory Maguire's "'Wicked'" or seen the subsequent Broadway show can attest, the Wicked Witch of the West was framed. Elphaba, as Maguire calls her, wasn't really wicked at all. She was a good girl set up by the powers that be (in this case, the Wizard) for, among other things, the green color of her skin. So it goes with the recently unveiled Gospel of Judas, which posits a theory as impertinent as Maguire's about the wickedest character in Christendom.

In the New Testament, Judas Iscariot is a Satan-possessed traitor who turns Jesus in for 30 pieces of silver; the other disciples are the heroic founders of the church. In the topsy-turvy Gospel of Judas, branded heretical in A.D. 180 by the church father Irenaeus, the disciples play the goats and Judas the hero. The other disciples, who go by the ganglandish name "'the 12,'" are murderers and fools. Judas is Jesus' closest confidante, the one man who truly understands "'the mysteries which are beyond the world and the things which will occur at the end.'"

Since the fourth-century Coptic version of this second-century Greek text was released last April by the National Geographic Society, a variety of books have appeared promising to decode it. In "'Judas and the Gospel of Jesus,'" N. T. Wright offered the conservative critique, insisting that the man in question was a villain after all, and that the early Christians chose well when they decided to put their faith in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In "'The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot,'" Bart Ehrman tells the cloak-and-dagger story of the papyrus codex from its discovery by an Egyptian farmer in the 1970s through the vagaries of the antiquities market, including a stop in a freezer along the way.

"'Reading Judas,'" a collaborative effort by the Princeton professor Elaine Pagels, best known for her book "'The Gnostic Gospels,'" and the Harvard professor Karen L. King, the author of "'The Gospel of Mary of Magdala,'" focuses exclusively on the meaning of this last-shall-be-first text. It includes a co-written essay on this gospel's key themes, followed by an English translation and an extensive commentary by King.

One of the genuine puzzles of early Christianity, and of much subsequent Christian history, concerns who is to blame for Jesus' death. The Gospels make it plain that it was God's plan, and that Jesus carried out this divine plan in order to save human beings from the wages of sin. And yet Judas and the Jews (to whom the word "'Judas'" is etymologically linked) are blamed for setting this divine plan in motion. As Pagels and King note, there is something amiss here.

How can Judas be branded evil for carrying out God's plan? Is his infamous kiss, depicted on the dust jacket of 'Reading Judas,' really a betrayal if God had the crucifixion in mind from before Jesus' birth?

Pagels and King do an excellent job explaining why, according to the author of this renegade gospel, mainstream Christianity has gotten it so wrong for so long. Along the way they introduce us to, among other things, a goddess named Barbelo (for some Gnostics, a divine mother figure who often symbolized heaven) and try to make sense of teachings that to most readers today will seem like nutty musings on numerology, cosmology, astrology and eschatology. On the perennial question of death and the afterlife, Pagels and King explain that whereas other early Christians affirmed the doctrine of bodily resurrection, the Christians to whom this gospel is addressed believed in the immortal spirit. Here the body is suspect. Jesus is not reborn in the flesh but simply appears. The eternal life he offers is lived in the spirit alone, and it is won more through Jesus' teachings than through his sacrifice on the cross.

Thomas Jefferson, in his own cut-and-paste version of the Gospels made in the White House in 1804, depicted Jesus not as a savior who died to pay for our sins but as a great moral teacher who lived to show us how to live ourselves. The Jefferson Bible, as this anti-supernatural Scripture is called, concludes abruptly, as Jesus is being laid in the tomb, without a hint of the Resurrection. The Gospel of Judas ends even more abruptly -- before Jesus begins his trek to Calvary. Like Jefferson's Bible, it scoffs at the notion that God would sacrifice his son to atone for the world's sins. It too depicts Jesus as a teacher rather than a savior, though its esoteric theology, laced with numerological musings on the '72 luminaries' and the 'five firmaments,' would have revolted Jefferson, who preferred to take his morality neat.

I prefer to take my religious history free from demands for contemporary relevance, so whenever someone in the historical-Jesus fraternity makes Jesus mutter moral maxims that might as easily have been uttered by President Bush or Oprah Winfrey, my anachronism antenna goes up. In this case, Pagels and King massage the multicultural sensibilities of their readers by opining that the Gospel of Judas represents a 'sharp, dissenting voice' against the 'single, static, universal system of beliefs' of official Christianity. Preaching to the 'spiritual but not religious' choir, they tell us that, like other noncanonical texts they have championed elsewhere, this gospel aims to 'encourage believers to seek God within themselves, with no mention of churches, much less of clergy.'

The most intriguing effort to enlist this ancient text in the contemporary culture wars comes in the authors' discussion of sacrifice and martyrdom. According to Pagels and King, the Gospel of Judas may well have been buried on behalf of a community that disagreed sharply with other Christians about how to make sense of Roman persecution of the faithful. Those who would come to seize control over the Christian movement and its core narrative understood the sacrifices of ancient Christians mimetically, as imitations of the sacrifices of their Christ. And leaders like Tertullian urged their followers not simply to endure martyrdom but to seek it out. The Gospel of Judas denounces this cult of the martyr as 'hideous folly' and calls for religion 'to renounce violence as God's will and purpose for humanity.' In the process it offers a prophetic 'no,' according to Pagels and King, to 'our world of polarized religious violence.'

Any critique of martyrdom will sound plausible in light of 9/11 and the riot of mass death visited upon Virginia Tech by a self-described 'martyr' who died, at least in his own mind, like Jesus. But the particular combination offered here -- the paean to diversity, the suspicion of organized religion, the denunciation of violence in the name of peace -- sounds too suspiciously close to contemporary multicultural pieties to be taken as ancient gospel.

Although Pagels and King attend with care to the ironies of a text that both attacks Christian martyrdom and sets Judas up as the first Christian martyr, they are less effective in dealing with the most disturbing feature of this gospel: Jesus' sarcastic laughter. In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus laughs no fewer

than four times. He laughs not with his disciples but at them -- for worshiping incorrectly and for misunderstanding his teachings. 'Teacher, why are you laughing at us?' Judas asks. Good question. Pagels and King devote scant attention to it, responding simply that this laughter is intended to spur Jesus' disciples on to 'higher spiritual vision.' To me, however, it just sounds mean-spirited, turning Jesus into the sort of person you wouldn't like, much less worship.

The Gospel of Judas will have its champions, not least Pagels and King, who laud its hero for inspiring a text that makes early Christianity look like contemporary American religion -- more pluralistic, more wild and more contested than most imagine. But this gospel is not long for the world, or at least the American corner of it. Most Americans will rightly prefer Luke's Jesus, whose heart breaks over the oppression of women and the poor, to a smart-aleck Jesus who guffaws at the stupidity of his listeners. America is supposed to be a happy place. Americans want their Jesus to channel Paula Abdul rather than Simon Cowell, Dorothy rather than the Wicked Witch of the West.