

Religion News Service

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## 10 Minutes With ... Karen King

BYLINE: By KEVIN ECKSTROM

The Gospel of Judas caused quite a splash when it was published last year: Would it explain why he betrayed Jesus? Was this the "other side" of the story people had waited for? Would Judas be vindicated?

As it turns out, not quite.

Now, just in time for Easter, Princeton's Elaine Pagels and Karen King of Harvard Divinity School are trying to put the fourth-century manuscript in perspective in their new book, "Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity."

King talked about the Gospel of Judas written in Greek, translated into Coptic and hidden in Egypt until it was found in the 1970s and why it tells us more about early Christianity than about history's most infamous turncoat.

(Soon after he betrayed Jesus, Judas died, although accounts differ on the nature of his death. He was replaced as the 12th apostle by Matthias, according to the Book of Acts.)

Q: This was written probably a century after Judas would have died. So if he didn't write it, who did?

A: We don't know. We just know it was a Christian writer who was very angry with other Christians who were encouraging their fellow believers to die as martyrs ... and bringing sacrifice (of martyrs) to the center of Christian life and worship.

Q: So how did Judas' name get attached to it?

A: The author wants to make the point that the bishops in the second century, who claimed their authority from the 12 apostles, are wrong (in their support of martyrdom). So if they all got it wrong, who's left? Maybe Judas got it right.

Q: You write that this book teaches us more about debates within the early Christian community than about Judas himself. What do we learn?

A: We learn nothing new about Judas. We learn a lot new about the debates in the community over martyrdom.

Q: This is not a warm and fuzzy gospel. You describe its "strident, mocking tone and slanderous accusations." Where does that come from?

A: The Roman persecution was tearing the early Christian community apart, and this (author) was very, very angry. Whenever Jesus laughs in the Gospel of Judas, the reader should ask what are the wrong views that he's correcting.

Q: And what are those wrong views?

A: Several things. The author is arguing that the 12 disciples are worshipping fallen angels who desired the death and suffering of Jesus and his followers. This gospel says the true God and father of Jesus doesn't desire blood and sacrifice.

It also argues there is no physical resurrection of the dead. The argument is the physical body dies, but the spirit-filled soul goes to live with God forever. By promising martyrs that they'll have a physical resurrection, the Gospel of Judas is saying, that's a lie.

Q: All this talk about dying for God sounds a lot like the debate going on within Islam about holy martyrdom.

A: The most important lesson there is the way in which ... people who are arguing against giving yourself over to violence, who were arguing against martyrdom, were silenced.

The great history of the church called the blood of the martyrs the seeds of the church. The voices who said no to that, who said this is not what God wants, they were silenced until we found the Gospel of Judas.

What we're seeing now is those Muslims who want to criticize the suicide bombings are much in the same way being silenced, being told they're not real Muslims. We need to make space to hear the voices who are arguing against violence.

Q: Let's go back to the Judas we all know, and the most obvious question you ask in the book, which is, "Why would a troubled disciple betray his master, Jesus?"

A: This text is saying that he did hand Jesus over, but the handing him over was not a betrayal, but a revelation that death cannot kill the soul, that the Resurrection of Jesus is a spiritual resurrection.

Q: What do we know about the relationship between Jesus and Judas?

A: All we know is the very bare-bones picture, that someone inside the Jesus movement someone close to Jesus betrayed him. As the gospel got told over and over again, they were trying to answer this question, how could anyone betray him? They kept coming up with different answers greed, disappointment, and finally they came up with this notion that he was following God in doing the right thing. But it's all speculation.

Q: Matthew's Gospel says Judas hanged himself out of guilt; Acts said he was disemboweled in a field. Does it make a difference why or how Judas died?

A: The Gospel of Judas says the 12 disciples stoned Judas to death, so they make him a victim of the disciples, the first Christian martyr.

Q: Many people have called these "other" Gospels the ones that didn't make it into the Bible full of heresy. Is the Gospel of Judas heretical?

A: If you're asking as a historian, we'd say the gospel gives us a better, broader picture, of the history of Christianity.

If you're asking if this should have authority (as Scripture), or if it's heretical, you have to judge it against the tenets of orthodox Christianity. In that case, it's clearly heretical because it denies a physical resurrection.

Q: There are several parts in this gospel where the text is either missing or unintelligible. Do you ever wonder if maybe the really important stuff somehow got left out?

A: We're dying to know what that is. When it was found, the gospel was in almost perfect condition. They couldn't find a buyer so they put it in a safety deposit box for 17 years, where it literally fell into thousands of pieces. The pity is that if it had been immediately put into the hands of professional conservators, then we would have it all.