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READING JUDAS

By Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King; 198 pages

All About The Gospel of Judas

A year ago, scholars got access to a bizarre document from about A.D. 150 called The Gospel of Judas. In it, Jesus promises Judas heaven for turning him in and maligns the rest of the Apostles for sacrificing their followers.

Princeton's Pagels and Harvard's King try to decipher the document. Why reward Judas? Because Jesus' death helps prove what the Gospel writer thought was Christ's real message: that his--and our--true essence is not flesh but immortal spirit. And the text bad-mouths other disciples as an indirect way of attacking 2nd century Christian bishops who encouraged believers to be martyrs.

The authors suggest the text was a polemic--and a losing one, since martyrdom became a pillar of the church. But its angry tone supports a favorite theme of Pagels': that not all early believers embraced doctrines now accepted as handed down directly from Jesus.

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