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The most faithful disciple?

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Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity. By Elaine Pagels and Karen King. Allen Lane, 198pp, £ 16.99. ISBN 0 713 99984 6

On April 6 last year, the National Geographic Society announced the publication of the Gospel of Judas (GJ). It had sponsored the restoration of the 26 pages of this 4th-century Coptic gospel by conservators in Switzerland. Since its discovery in the late 1970s, the manuscript had been hawked around the world's antiquities markets and had suffered increased damage. Only in 2001 was it acquired for consultation by scholars.

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University, known for her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, and Karen King, a Coptic scholar at Harvard University, have been investigating the context and significance of this document, which makes Judas a hero and the one whom Jesus hails as superior to his other disciples.

Their short book contains a serviceable English translation with commentary, but its heart is the four chapters that explore this alternative version of Christ's death compared with that found in the writings of church fathers. Pagels has stressed before our need to recognise that what emerged as the hierarchical and institutionalised form of Christianity was originally but one strand of the religious beliefs of those who claimed allegiance to Jesus.

Many Christians in the early centuries were influenced by the mystical and introspective religious systems now dubbed Gnosticism. Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons denounced such Christians as heretics; in 180, he refers to a Gospel of Judas being read by Cainites, a Gnostic sect. It once seemed that no copies of that text survived. Whether the recently discovered GJ is the same as that known to Irenaeus is open to question, but this Coptic manuscript, a translation of an earlier Greek text, itself perhaps of the 2nd century, suggests that the contents remained relevant to later Egyptian readers, despite - or perhaps because of - Constantine's recent institutionalisation of Christianity as the state religion and the establishment of a canon of Scriptures.

Pagels and King fix the writing of the GJ in times of persecution when the orthodox churches encouraged martyrdom because of their teaching that Christ's death was sacrificial and therefore worthy of emulating; such an interpretation was vehemently opposed by the GJ.

Almost half of the GJ is concerned with bizarre teachings and arcane cosmology. Such teachings in this and other fringe books show that early Christianity did not produce a unified body of doctrines. The sympathies of Pagels and King are not with the triumphant Church. They seek to find spiritual merit in these rejected writings. In the book, they also refer to lone voices in other comparable texts that were eclipsed by the "establishment", including alternative teachings on Christian leadership and women's roles.

This new text, like many apocryphal books, uses the *dramatis personae* of the biblical narrative not to correct its allegedly mistaken history or even to rehabilitate Judas but rather to put across Gnostic teachings. In the GJ, Judas is praised above "the 12 disciples" because he alone understands that to "betray" Jesus to death is to allow him to escape from his earthly, corrupt flesh and to inherit the spiritual realm, a state desired by Gnostics themselves.

Judas's role in the New Testament's accounts of Passion Week remains enigmatic. What was it he betrayed? What were his motives? Should he be described as a thief in the grasp of Satan whose suitably gory end is deserved? Or ought he to be seen as a necessary cog in a divine drama that enables Jesus to fulfil his destiny? Nothing in the GJ resolves those problems or gives a plausible historical account of what "really" happened.

Capitalising on the dilemmas in the New Testament narratives, the GJ offers its own interpretation of Jesus's death and Judas's role in that event.

Readers interested in the multifaceted aspects of early Christian writings may find this recovered tract worthy of attention. Pagels and King are helpful but provocative guides to its contents and possible meanings.

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