

The Gospel of Judas, or, Is Philology a Science?

The announcement of the rediscovered *Gospel of Judas* at a press conference in Washington on 6 April 2006 created a worldwide sensation. Here was an ancient Christian ‘gospel’ portraying Judas as Jesus’ intimate friend and superior to the other disciples. Or at least that was the claim made at the press conference and in the book published at the same time (Kasser, Meyer and Wurst 2006). In the intervening year, however, some scholars have questioned this interpretation. The publication of this document and the subsequent debate are prime examples of how knowledge is produced and tested in the philological-historical disciplines.



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The work of reconstruction

The Gospel of Judas is one of several texts inscribed in a 4th century Coptic papyrus codex, i.e. a manuscript in the format of a book rather than a scroll.

The codex was in a deplorable state when scholars obtained access to it in July 2001, after it had been incompetently handled by manuscript dealers

and others over the years, following its discovery in the late 1970s.

Painstaking work was done in Geneva, piecing together each broken page and determining the sequence of the pages. Such work is based partly on the physical properties of the fragments (fibre patterns and shapes of the fragments) and partly on the linguistic and interpretive understanding of how the text itself hangs together. The logic of this procedure is not unlike laying a puzzle, only in this case, a number of the pieces are missing.

The physical reconstruction of the manuscript forms the basis for the subsequent operations of transcribing the text, translating it, interpreting its meaning and, finally, assessing its historical significance. These are not, however, tasks that can be carried out in isolation from one another. The translation of individual phrases on the one hand and the interpretation of the ‘plot’ and the ideas contained in the text on the other are obviously to a large extent interdependent. Even the identification of each letter and the correct placement of the fragments are affected by issues relating to the interpretation of the essential message of the document. This inevitable ‘hermeneutical circle’ does not imply, however, that theories about the overall sense of the text absolutely govern the interpretation of the individual data. The ‘softer’ operation of forming a general theory of the meaning of the text is constantly challenged by the fact that the ‘harder’ data of the physical properties of the manuscript and the grammatical and lexical rules of the Coptic language, as well as by the demand that the overall interpretation itself must be reasonably consistent. Hence, there are ways in which the interpretation of a text can be tested empirically.

What is the *Gospel of Judas* about?

Scholars already knew that a *Gospel of Judas* had existed, since the title is mentioned by Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons in his work against heretics written in around 180–190 A.D. The text that has now become available is thus the sensational recovery of a writing believed to have been lost for good. Briefly, the ‘gospel’ is a revelation dialogue, where Jesus speaks with his disciples and teaches them religious truths. The teaching is of a ‘Gnostic’ nature, reflecting an understanding of Christianity that was condemned as heretical in antiquity, but which has become much better known again recently because of discoveries such as the Nag Hammadi documents. Gnostic Christians considered the material world to be evil as it had been created by malicious or ignorant powers. They believed that Jesus was to teach humankind about the unknown true God beyond this world and to redeem the divine spirit trapped in human bodies. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus tells the disciples that they do not worship the true God, and that they are slaves under the powers that reside in the stars, from whence they rule the world.

It is a peculiarity of the *Gospel of Judas* that all the disciples are condemned as ignorant and apparently beyond redemption. Instead, the document speaks about a ‘holy immortal race’ that will be saved, but we never meet that group of people in the text. Judas, however, is less ignorant than the other disciples, and Jesus gives him special instruction about how the world came to be created, among other things. The gospel ends with Jesus predicting that Judas will ‘sacrifice’ him, or, as he puts it, “the man that carries me”. Then Judas hands Jesus over to the Jewish leaders.

The claims

The team responsible for the first edition, translation and analysis of the *Gospel of Judas* (Kasser, Meyer and Wurst 2006) made a series of claims about the document. In this gospel, they say, Judas alone of the disciples receives the knowledge necessary for salvation. Moreover, Jesus instructed Judas to hand him over to be ‘sacrificed,’ and this act is a service to Jesus since it delivers him from his imprisonment in a material body. Finally, this shows that some early Christians had a positive view of Judas and his act of ‘betrayal.’

Testing the claims

The claims made by the first editors take the shape of a hypothesis about the general meaning of the document. It is a hypothesis that can be tested and, since the publication of the text, several scholars have indeed challenged it. This is because several crucial passages do not seem to be consistent with the editors’ assumptions. The following is an alternative translation of one passage in particular (pp. 46–57):

Editors' translation

Judas said, 'Master, **could it be that my seed is** under the control of the rulers?'

Jesus answered and said to him, 'Come, that I [.], but that you will grieve much when you see the kingdom and all its generation.'

When he heard this, Judas said to him, '**What good is it that I have received it? For you have set me apart for that generation.**'

Jesus answered and said, 'You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. **In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].**

Alternative translation

Judas said, 'Master, **may my seed never be** under the control of the rulers!'

Jesus answered and said to him, 'Come, and I'll [.], but that you will grieve much when you see the kingdom and all its generation.'

When he heard this, Judas said to him, '**What good have I then received if you have cut me off from that generation?**'

Jesus answered and said, 'You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations, and you will come to rule over them **in the last days. They will < . . . > you and you shall not ascend to the holy [generation].**'

The alternative translation is based on the fact that the Coptic expression the editors have translated as 'set apart for' is translated as 'set apart from' everywhere else in Coptic literature. Thus, rather than promising Judas membership in the holy generation, Jesus has in fact told him that he will not be joining the saintly race. This interpretation is also borne out by the last phrase: although some of the letters are imperfectly preserved, the text must be restored differently from what the editors have done in order to respect normal Coptic syntax.

In fact, Judas is destined to become 'the thirteenth.' Other Gnostic texts that display the same kind of cosmology as the one outlined in the *Gospel of Judas* indicate that the earth is surrounded by thirteen spheres, where the topmost is occupied by the world-ruler himself. That is apparently where Judas will go, to sit next to the evil lord of the cosmos. For that reason, the text also calls Judas the 'thirteenth *daimon*,' where *daimon* is surely to be translated as 'demon' and not as 'spirit', as the editors do. Judas is thus an evil character – not Jesus' 'bosom friend'. If Jesus foretells his act of betrayal, it is simply because he knows in advance what will happen, and not because he is asking Judas to perform the act.

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Space constraints do not permit a discussion of several other passages which, correctly interpreted, confirm these conclusions. The main point here, however, is to demonstrate that the most common criteria for what constitutes 'science,' such as falsifiability, corroborability, empirical testability, etc., also apply to work in the historical-philological fields of knowledge. The procedure of formulating hypotheses and testing them empirically also operates with the interpretation of texts, and, by extension, with the reconstruction of historical processes, which is always based on textual interpretation. It is not the case, as is sometimes asserted, that theory – in this case an interpretive framework – simply shapes the

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data. Data have a resilience of their own. Fortunately, they can overturn a proposed theory. In philology, such data take the form of the physical properties of manuscripts, linguistic rules and textual and ideological coherence.

It is easily understandable that faced with a text entitled ‘The Gospel of Judas,’ where Judas is accorded a privileged role, scholars’ first impression should be that Judas was the hero in this case, in a blatant reversal of his traditional image in orthodox Christianity. The media exposure and the commercial potential of a ‘sensational discovery’ apparently also served to generate prejudice towards a certain general interpretation of the document. Against this background, it is reassuring to conclude that scholarship nonetheless seems to possess an intrinsic self-regulatory ability, allowing truth to prevail over sensation in the long run.

References

- Kasser, Rodolphe, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst. *The Gospel of Judas*. Washington, D.C., National Geographic Society, 2006.
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/?fs=www9.nationalgeographic.com>