

**The Gospels of Judas, Mary, and Thomas:
The Rehabilitation of Marginalized Disciples in Early Christian
Literature**

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Doubting Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Judas Iscariot: the very names of these disciples conjure up images in Christian tradition of bad faith, questionable morality, and wicked betrayal. In the New Testament gospels, to be sure, all the disciples have moments of doubt and uncertainty, and Peter himself denies vehemently and profanely that he knows Jesus on the eve of the crucifixion. Yet within the New Testament and early church history, Thomas, Mary, and Judas are shunned and ostracized in particular ways and for particular reasons. In the Gospel of John, Thomas is doubting Thomas, the stubborn disciple who will not believe until he touches the wounds of the crucified and raised Jesus. According to the Gospel of Luke chapter 8, Mary Magdalene has to be cleansed by Jesus of demon possession (she is a woman, it is suggested, with psychological or social problems), and in the late sixth century Pope Gregory the Great equated her (wrongly) with the unnamed prostitute of Luke 7, so that thereafter Mary Magdalene is thought to be a repentant whore—repentant, but a whore nonetheless. It is no wonder that she cannot break into the circle of the Twelve in most of Christian tradition. And Judas Iscariot remains one of the most vilified of all the characters in human history. Didn't he turn his friend, perhaps his best friend, over to the Roman authorities

to be crucified? Didn't he do so with a kiss—the Judas kiss? Is there anything more heinous and reprehensible than that?

Hence, Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Judas Iscariot have commonly been marginalized as followers of Jesus—at least until recent times. In the past century or so, several early Christian gospels have been discovered in the sands of Egypt, and these newly recovered texts have begun to shed important new light on the early church and the roles of disciples of Jesus in early Christian communities. According to these gospels, Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Judas Iscariot may be viewed in a much more positive way than traditionally has been the case. Thomas may be understood as the guarantor of the sayings of Jesus, Mary may be a beloved disciple, and Judas may have been the one who knew Jesus best and followed him with the greatest loyalty.

The Gospels of Thomas, Mary, and Judas have all come to the attention of scholars and other interested readers in the past few years, and since their discovery they have suggested exciting new possibilities for how we may choose to read and interpret the history of the Christian movement, from the earliest days until the present.

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Around the end of 1945, the texts known as the Nag Hammadi library were discovered, not at the city of Nag Hammadi itself, but near the base of a majestic cliff, the Jabal al-Tarif, which flanks the Nile River a few kilometers from Nag Hammadi. Among the texts in the Nag Hammadi library was a Coptic translation of the Gospel of Thomas, an early Christian gospel known from a few citations in the church fathers and, as it turns out, Greek papyrus fragments

uncovered in an ancient rubbish heap at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. The villages closest to the Jabal al-Tarif bear the names Hamra Dum, al-Busa, al-Dabba (the site of the Monastery of the Angel, Deir al-Malak), al-Qasr (the site of the Pachomian monastery at Chenoboskion), and Faw Qibli (the site of the Pachomian monastery at Pbow). Five years after the discovery, the French scholar Jean Doresse explored the region and tried to find out the circumstances of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library. He published his story in his book, *The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Texts*. According to Doresse, he spoke with some people from the area, and they directed him to the southern part of an ancient cemetery. They reported that peasants from Hamra Dum and al-Dabba, searching for natural fertilizer (manure), found somewhere near this locale a large jar filled with papyri bound in the form of books. Doresse writes,

The vase was broken and nothing remains of it; the manuscripts were taken to Cairo and no one knows what then became of them. As to the exact location of the find, opinion differed by some few dozen yards; but everyone was sure that it was just about here. And from the ground itself we shall learn nothing more; it yields nothing but broken bones, fragments of cloth without interest, and some potsherds.

He concludes,

We have never been able to discover exactly where the Coptic Manichaean manuscripts came from, nor the Pistis Sophia, nor the Bruce Codex. So it was well worth the trouble to find out, in a pagan cemetery a few miles from Chenoboskion, the exact site of one of the most voluminous finds of ancient literature; thus to be a little better able to place

this library in the frame of history to which it belongs; and to support, with concordant details, the hypotheses that have been made about its antiquity.

James M. Robinson has offered another version of the story of the discovery. For a number of years, Robinson conducted interviews with people from the towns and villages in the Nag Hammadi area, in particular Muhammad Ali of the al-Samman clan, a resident of al-Qasr, and from the interviews he pieced together a fascinating account of how the Nag Hammadi codices were uncovered. Where possible, Robinson attempted to confirm dates and events from official records. As Robinson has reconstructed the story, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library took place in about December of 1945, when several Egyptian fellahin, including Muhammad Ali, his brothers Khalifah Ali and Abu al-Magd, and others, were riding their camels to the Jabal al-Tarif in order to gather sabakh, a natural fertilizer that typically accumulates around there. They hobbled their camels at the foot of the Jabal, the account continues, and began to dig around a large boulder on the talus, or slope of debris, that has formed against the cliff face. As they were digging, they unexpectedly came upon a large storage jar buried by the boulder, with a bowl sealed on the mouth of the jar as a lid. Apparently the youngest of the brothers, Abu al-Magd, initially uncovered the jar, but Muhammad Ali, as the oldest of the brothers, took control of the operation. In his account of what transpired, Muhammad Ali has suggested to Robinson that he paused before removing the lid or breaking open the jar, out of fear that the jar might contain a jinni, or spirit, that could cause trouble if released from the jar. It seems that Muhammad Ali also recalled stories of hidden treasures buried in Egypt, and his love of gold overcame his fear of jinn. He smashed the jar with his mattock, and indeed something golden in color and glistening in the sunlight—

fragments of papyrus, we might conclude—flew out of the jar and disappeared into the air.

And when he looked into the broken jar to see what remained, he found only a collection of old books—the codices of the Nag Hammadi library.

Robinson's version of the story is carefully documented, and it includes colorful anecdotes and detailed accounts of events. For instance, Robinson reminisces about how he persuaded Muhammad Ali to return to the site of the discovery, so close to Hamra Dum, where a family caught up in acts of vengeance with the family of Muhammad Ali lived. Robinson recalls,

I had to go to Hamra Dum myself, find the son of Ahmad Isma'il, the man Muhammad Ali had butchered, and get his assurance that, since he had long since shot up a funeral cortège of Muhammad Ali's family, wounding Muhammad Ali and killing a number of his clan, he considered the score settled. Hence, he would not feel honor-bound to attack Muhammad Ali if he returned to the foot of the cliff. I took this good news back to Muhammad Ali, who opened his shirt, showed me the scar on his chest, bragged that he had been shot but not killed, yet emphasized that if he ever laid eyes on the son of Ahmad Isma'il again, he would kill him on the spot. As a result of this display of a braggadocio's fearlessness, he could be persuaded to go to the cliff, camouflaged in my clothes, in a government jeep, with me sitting on the "bullets" side facing the village and him on the safer cliff side, at dusk in Ramadan, when all Muslims are at home eating their fill after fasting throughout the daylight hours.

The precise circumstances of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library are still debated among scholars, and the debate is likely to continue into the future. However the codices of the Nag Hammadi library may have been uncovered on that eventful day in or around 1945, the discoverers could not have imagined the impact these texts, especially the Gospel of Thomas, would have on our understanding of early Christianity and the world of antiquity and late antiquity.

The Gospel of Thomas is a sayings gospel. There is very little narrative in the Gospel of Thomas, and although Jesus does not do much in the Gospel of Thomas, he says a great deal (the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas are numbered, conventionally, at 114 sayings). Unlike the ways in which Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament gospels, Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas performs no physical miracles, reveals no fulfillment of prophecy, announces no apocalyptic kingdom of God about to disrupt the world order, dies for no one's sins, and does not rise physically from the dead on the third day. He lives, to be sure, but he lives through his words and sayings, and as the Gospel of Thomas says in the first saying, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death." Jesus does not pull rank in the Gospel of Thomas; he is, as Stephen Patterson has put it, just Jesus. Few Christological titles are applied to Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas, and if he is said to be a child of humanity (or Son of Man) and a living one, these same titles and epithets are applied to other people of knowledge and insight.

In short, the Gospel of Thomas does not proclaim a gospel of the cross, like the New Testament gospels, but rather a gospel of wisdom, and if it recalls any early Christian text, it calls to mind the synoptic sayings gospel Q. The Gospel of Thomas,

however, offers a more mystical—even Gnosticizing—presentation of sayings of Jesus, and in the Gospel of Thomas the sayings are said to be hidden or secret sayings. The gospel opens, in its prologue, “These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded,” and so Judas Thomas the Twin, perhaps thought to be the twin brother of Jesus, is the one who writes everything down. Far from being the doubting Thomas of the Gospel of John, the Thomas of the Gospel of Thomas, of all people, knows the mind of his brother. The reader or hearer of the gospel is invited to interact with these sayings of Jesus, to seek and find and uncover the meaning through the hiddenness of the text—to find the interpretation, the *hermeneia*, as saying 1 puts it. Saying 2 outlines the process whereby one comes to wisdom and knowledge: Jesus says, “Let one who seeks not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel and will reign over all.” In other words, according to the Gospel of Thomas, the encounter with the hidden sayings of Jesus brings true salvation in the reign of God.

Gospel of Thomas saying 3 offers insight into precisely where the kingdom or reign of God is. Jesus tells a little joke and says, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and you are poverty.” The kingdom of God, Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas, is not simply in heaven or in Hades. It is without and within, and it is achieved through true knowledge of self, the self that is within.

Saying 108 of the Gospel of Thomas completes this mystical thought of the reign of God within with reference to one's relationship with Jesus. In this saying Jesus declares, "Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person." Finally, according to the Gospel of Thomas, one becomes Christ and Christ becomes that person, and in this way what is hidden is revealed. Or, as the Gospel of Philip, the text that follows the Gospel of Thomas in Codex II of the Nag Hammadi library, puts it, don't just become a Christian; become Christ—Christ within.

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The Gospel of Mary was discovered in 1896 when a German scholar, Carl Reinhardt, bought the Berlin Gnostic Codex from a dealer from Akhmim, in central Egypt. As with the Gospel of Thomas, Greek fragments of the Gospel of Mary were also found in the ancient rubbish heap at Oxyrhynchus. The dealer claimed that what is now known as the Berlin codex had been discovered with feathers covering it in a recessed place in a wall; Carl Schmidt, the first editor of the codex, suspected that it may have come from a cemetery near Akhmim. Carl Schmidt published the last text of the codex—the Act of Peter—in 1903, and he was prepared to publish this entire papyrus book in 1912, but curses fit for the legendary stories of Egyptian magic began to afflict the lives of those working on the codex. A water pipe burst at the print shop in Leipzig and destroyed the pages being prepared for publication. World War I broke out and delayed the publication of the book. Carl Schmidt died. World War II further hindered the book's appearance. The Nag Hammadi library was discovered in 1945 and distracted scholars

from work on the Berlin codex. At last, in 1955, Walter C. Till, who assumed editorial responsibility for the Berlin codex after the death of Carl Schmidt, was able to see the first three texts of the codex—the Gospel of Mary, the Secret Book of John, and the Wisdom of Jesus Christ—through the press.

The Gospel of Mary unfortunately has been treated rather poorly by vermin and the forces of corruption in nature, and six pages are missing at the beginning of the text and four pages in the middle. In the first extant portion of the gospel, we come upon Jesus discussing, in terms that are similar to Stoic concepts, the way in which the nature of every person is restored and resolved. Jesus observes that the basic human problem in life is not the result of sin but rather of metaphysics: it is getting mixed up in what is not essentially good in the world. Jesus says, “There is no such thing as sin, but you create sin when you mingle as in adultery, and this is called sin. For this reason the good came among you, to those of every nature, in order to restore every nature to its root.” Jesus goes on to summarize his word of proclamation: “Peace be with you. Receive my peace. Be careful that no one leads you astray by saying, ‘Look here,’ or ‘Look there.’ The child of humanity (or Son of Man) is within you. Follow that. Those who seek it will find it. Go and preach the good news of the kingdom. Do not lay down any rules other than what I have given you, and do not establish law, as the lawgiver did, or you will be bound by it.” The most remarkable statement in this remarkable passage must be the comment about the child of humanity or Son of Man. It is no apocalyptic figure or other external human being; the child of humanity is the inner person, the true being of a human being. That inner person is what people should follow.

This same thought is reiterated in what Mary—Mary Magdalene—has to say shortly after this in the Gospel of Mary. In the gospel Mary Magdalene takes her place as a disciple of

Jesus, in what seems to be the inner circle of disciples. In the Gospel of Mary there is no inner circle of twelve people, all specified as young men, around Jesus. Mary Magdalene, and perhaps other women, are a part of that group of disciples. According to the text, when Jesus leaves, other disciples—including the young men—are weeping, and it is Mary who tries to comfort them. She stands up, greets them, and says to them, “Do not weep or grieve or be in doubt, for his grace will be with you and will protect you. Rather, let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us truly human.”

Jesus will be with us, Mary proclaims, for he has humanized us by making us truly human within. As in the Gospel of Thomas, the message of salvation in the Gospel of Mary is one of a mystical realization of true being within.

Peter asks Mary to say more about the master, and Mary recalls a conversation with Jesus about a vision she once had. When she asked Jesus about the way in which a person sees a vision, she says, he indicated to her that a person has a vision not through the soul, as an emotional experience, nor through the spirit, as a spiritual experience, but rather through the mind, as an intellectual experience. In other words, a person thinks a vision. After four missing pages, Mary is in the middle of the account of her vision of the soul’s ascent beyond the cosmic powers. Her account is reminiscent of stories of the ascent of the soul from this world of mortality to the realms above, but in this case the story has an ethical quality. The soul in its ascent is liberated from the powers of darkness, desire, ignorance, and wrath, so that the soul can exclaim,

What binds me is slain; what surrounds me is destroyed; my desire is gone;
ignorance is dead. In a world I was freed through another world, and in an image I

was freed through a heavenly image. The fetter of forgetfulness is temporary.
From now on I shall rest, through the course of the time of the age, in silence.

Peter and Andrew like none of what Mary has to say, and as he does in other texts, Peter plays the gender card. He admits that Jesus loved Mary more than any other woman, but he questions whether a woman, Mary, can be taken seriously as an authority on Jesus and his message. Peter protests here in the Gospel of Mary, “Did he really speak with a woman in private, without our knowledge? Should we all turn and listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?”

Peter has his doubts on the basis of Mary’s gender, but Mary does not respond with the same preoccupation with gender, and Levi points out that Peter is just a hothead. “Surely the savior knows her well,” Levi continues. “That is why he has loved her more than us.” Levi then invites all the disciples of Jesus to put on the perfect person and go out to preach, without establishing any additional rules or laws. And, the Gospel of Mary concludes, that is what they did.

Mary Magdalene is the beloved disciple in the Gospel of Mary. She is the one closest to Jesus among the disciples, and she is the one who understands the mind and the message of Jesus.

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The Gospel of Judas was discovered in the 1970s, in Middle Egypt, in the region of al-Minya, although the precise circumstances of the discovery remain unknown. The Gospel of Judas is one text among others in an ancient codex now called Codex Tchacos, and according to Herbert Krosney, who has pieced together much of the story of the ancient gospel and the bound book, Codex Tchacos was found by local fellahin, or farmers, in a cave that was located at the Jabal Qarara and had been used for a Coptic burial. The cave contained, among other things, Roman glassware in baskets or papyrus or straw wrappings. Krosney writes, in *The Lost Gospel*, “The burial cave was located not far from the village of Qarara in what is known as Middle Egypt. The fellahin stumbled upon the cave hidden down in the rocks. Climbing down to it, they found the skeleton of a wealthy man in a shroud. Other human remains, probably members of the dead man’s family, were with him in the cave. His precious books were beside him, encased in a white limestone box.”

What happened to the Gospel of Judas and Codex Tchacos thereafter is not a pretty matter. The gospel and the codex apparently were displayed, stolen, and recovered, and eventually the codex was taken to Europe, where it was shown to scholars for possible purchase. The purchase price proved to be beyond the financial reach of any of the parties viewing the texts, and the owner left without a sale. Later the Gospel of Judas and the other texts turned up in America, and for sixteen years the papyrus was locked away in a safe deposit box in Hicksville, New York, on Long Island. A safe deposit box is not the ideal place to store fragile papyrus. In the humidity of Long Island, with nothing resembling a climatized environment, the papyrus began to disintegrate. A potential buyer from the United States obtained the texts for a time, and in a misguided

effort to separate the papyrus pages, he put the papyrus in a freezer, thereby causing additional damage. He also had problems with cash flow, so that he was forced to surrender some of his claims to ownership of the texts. In short, on account of the greed and ineptitude of people, the lost Gospel of Judas was in danger of being lost once again.

By the time the Maecenas Foundation and the National Geographic Society were able to secure the codex for conservation and scholarly examination, the papyrus was in wretched shape. In 2001 the prominent papyrologist Rodolphe Kasser of Switzerland saw the codex, and he says he let out a cry of shock and surprise. What was once a papyrus book was now a mass of fragments thrown into a box. He began to work with another expert, Florence Darbre, at conserving the papyrus and placing fragments together, and after years of painstaking work, nothing short of a papyrological miracle occurred. The box of a thousand fragments became a book once again, with a legible Coptic copy of the Gospel of Judas. The work of placing papyrus fragments is based on features of papyrus sheets, which are made with strips of the papyrus reed that are placed at right angles—horizontal and vertical strips—to form sheets of ancient paper. The individual fibers of papyrus may have anomalies, for example, darker strands or unusual characteristics, that can be traced from one fragment to another and may allow separate fragments to be connected with each other. These factors, along with observations on the profile of the edges of fragments and the sequence of letters and words on the fragments, contribute to the work of assembling fragments. The entire operation may be compared to working on a jigsaw puzzle, except that in this case about 20-25 per cent of the pieces are missing and the edges of the pieces are rough and uneven. Nonetheless, fragment may be connected to fragment, until pages and texts may be restored.

When the large and small papyrus fragments of the Gospel of Judas and the other texts in the codex were assembled, the result was a codex. Codex Tchacos is one of the earliest examples of a bound book, and this codex should add a great deal to our knowledge of the history of bookbinding. Many of the procedures employed in the construction of an ancient book like Codex Tchacos continue to be used, more or less, to the present day. In the ancient world, papyrus sheets were cut to size and folded in half, in a series of sheets, to form quires, and the quires were bound into leather covers from sheep or goats. In order to transform the resultant softback into a hardback book, scrap papyrus from the wastebasket—letters, receipts, and the like—was pasted into the cover of the codex. This scrap papyrus, called cartonnage, from the cover of Codex Tchacos, may well provide dates and indications of places, and such data would help to provide accurate information about the production of Codex Tchacos.

Yet we do have a general idea of when Codex Tchacos was assembled, and we are confident that the codex is an authentic ancient manuscript. There may be no papyrus that has been as thoroughly tested as the papyrus of Codex Tchacos. It has been subjected to Carbon 14 dating tests, and while Florence Darbre admits that it nearly broke her heart to destroy even tiny portions of the codex in order to test its antiquity, the Carbon 14 tests have yielded results that date the codex to 280 C.E., plus or minus 60 years. Further, an ink test—called a TEM or transmission electron microscopy test—confirms the same range of dates for the ink, and the paleography, or handwriting style, and the religious and philosophical contents of the codex place it comfortably in the period at the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth.

Codex Tchacos is a codex copied out near the opening of the fourth century, with several texts, including the Gospel of Judas, preserved in Coptic or late Egyptian translation. As currently known, there are some 66 pages in the codex. The Gospel of Judas, like the other texts in the collection, was almost certainly composed in Greek sometime before the late third or early fourth century—probably quite a bit before—and subsequently translated into Coptic and copied onto the pages of the codex. The other texts in Codex Tchacos are: a copy of the Letter of Peter to Philip, also known from the Nag Hammadi library, which was discovered in the 1940s in Egypt; a text entitled James, a copy of a document referred to as the First Revelation of James and also known from the Nag Hammadi library; and after the Gospel of Judas, a fragmentary text, previously unknown, provisionally entitled the Book of Allogenes, or the Stranger, in which Jesus is depicted as a stranger in this world. There may have been additional texts in the codex, and Gregor Wurst, who collaborated on the publication of the Gospel of Judas and Codex Tchacos, has discovered a fragment with what appears to be a page number—108—that could extend the length of the codex far beyond 66 pages. Further, fragments with references to Hermes Trismegistus, the hero of Hermetic spirituality, have been identified by Jean-Pierre Mahé, so that Codex Tchacos may well have included a Hermetic text—perhaps a Coptic translation of Corpus Hermeticum XIII. But then where is the rest of Codex Tchacos? Has it disintegrated into dust? Or is it in the hands of collectors and others somewhere in the world?

Doubtless the most significant text in Codex Tchacos is the Gospel of Judas. The Gospel of Judas, so named in the manuscript itself, gives a presentation of the good news of Jesus with a mystical, Gnostic emphasis. The term “Gnostic” comes from the Greek

word *gnōsis*, which means knowledge—specifically mystical knowledge and spiritual insight. According to the Gospel of Judas and other Gnostic gospels, the true mystery of human life is that we have a spark of the divine within us, a bit of the spirit of God in our hearts, but so often we do not know it because of ignorance and distractions in our lives. Salvation for Gnostics, then, means knowing ourselves, coming to a knowledge of our inner selves as the divine within, so that we may experience bliss. Obviously this sort of spirituality has much in common with forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions that have spread throughout the world, and such Gnostic spirituality is very close to what we read in the Gospels of Thomas and Mary.

Hence, the Gospel of Judas, like the Gospels of Thomas and Mary, proclaims a way of salvation through wisdom, knowledge, and enlightenment. The gospel highlights the figure of Judas Iscariot, who is acclaimed in the Gospel of Judas as the disciple closest to Jesus who understands Jesus completely and does all that Jesus asks of him. The gospel includes features that reflect Jewish and Greco-Roman—and particularly Platonic—themes, and in the end, Jesus approaches his death, with his friend Judas, in a way that recalls Socrates in the *Phaedo*. For Jesus, as for Socrates, death is not to be faced with fear but is to be anticipated with joy, as the soul or inner person is to be freed from the body of flesh.

The Gospel of Judas opens with an announcement of the revelatory encounters Jesus is said to have had with the disciples and especially Judas near the end of his life: “The secret revelatory discourse in which Jesus spoke with Judas Iscariot in the course of a week, three days before his passion.” After this opening of the gospel, Jesus approaches his disciples as they are gathered for a holy meal, and he laughs. Jesus laughs a great deal

in the Gospel of Judas, particularly, it seems, because of the foibles and absurdities of human life. Here the disciples protest against his laughter, but Jesus says that he is not laughing at them at all but at the way they take their religious rituals (in this instance, the holy meal) so seriously, as if their God demands such observance. Jesus invites the disciples to stand before him and face him, but none of them can do it, except Judas, who stands before Jesus but averts his eyes in modesty. Then Judas offers his confession of who Jesus is—the true confession, according to the Gospel of Judas. He says to Jesus, “I know who you are and from what place you have come. You have come from the immortal realm of Barbelo, and I am not worthy to pronounce the name of the one who has sent you.” To state that Jesus is from the immortal realm of Barbelo is to profess that Jesus comes from the divine and is a child of God, and the name Barbelo, most likely derived from the Hebrew language, means something very much like “God in Four”—that is, God as known through the tetragrammaton, the holy name of God in Jewish tradition, YHWH (Yahweh).

In the scenes that follow in the Gospel of Judas, Jesus appears several times to speak with the disciples and at times privately with Judas. Much of the conversation between Jesus and his disciples addresses, in one way or another, the various groups of human beings and religious folks that may be distinguished, and Jesus stresses that a particular group of people is especially blessed. This group is said to derive from the realms above, and the group is described in the Gospel of Judas as the generation of Seth—or, more concisely, as “that generation,” linked to Seth. Here and in other Gnostic texts, the figure of Seth builds upon the tradition of Seth son of Adam and Eve, whose birth, according to Genesis, provided a new beginning for humankind following the

murder of Abel and the banishment of Cain. In certain Gnostic texts, such as the Gospel of Judas, the roles of Adam (or Adamas) and Seth are accentuated, and in good Platonic fashion they are depicted not only as earthly characters but also as heavenly figures, and the people of gnosis, the Gnostics, are considered to be the offspring of Seth. Such Gnostic texts are commonly described as Sethian texts by scholars, and the Gnostics who composed and read these texts are frequently referred to as Sethians, on account of the emphasis placed upon Seth and the generation of Seth within the texts. The Gospel of Judas is such a text with Sethian influence, and it may be judged, I suggest, to represent an early example of Sethian gnosis.

In the central portion of the Gospel of Judas, Jesus takes Judas aside and explains to him the fundamental issue in human life, as Gnostic mystics conceive of it: how does the light and spirit of God come from the transcendent realm of the divine into our hearts and lives? Jesus reveals this mystery to Judas by describing the descent or devolution of the divine light into this world below from the infinite realm of God above. Jesus begins by saying to Judas, “[Come], that I may teach you about the things that . . . no person will see. For there is a great and infinite realm, whose dimensions no angelic generation could see, [in] which there is the great invisible [Spirit], which no eye of angel has seen, no thought of the mind has grasped, nor was it called by a name.” In a manner reminiscent of Jewish mysticism—such as we see in Jewish Kabbalah, with its tree of life and its Sefirot, or channels of divine energy emanating from Ein Sof, the infinite God—Jesus tells Judas, and the readers of the Gospel of Judas, that from the transcendent world of the divine there flow forth first one who is self-conceived, and then angels, messengers, attendants, aeons, luminaries, heavens, firmaments, and even an ideal image of Adamas,

Adam the first man, down to this world. This world of ours, however, with its limitations, hardships, mortality, and darkness, comes from the creative work of lower angelic beings with names appropriate for their ignorant involvement in the material world: Nebro, meaning “rebel”; Yaldabaoth, meaning “child of chaos”; and Sakla, meaning “fool”—names from the Aramaic language. In the stark contrast between the light and knowledge of God and this world of darkness and ignorance lies the human dilemma for Jesus, Judas, and all of us: the light and spirit of God come down into our hearts, but we are still trapped within an imperfect world and bodies of flesh that prevent us from realizing our true divine destiny. We need liberation.

Near the conclusion of the Gospel of Judas, after Jesus has explained everything, he turns to Judas and says, “You will exceed all of them (probably the other disciples). For you will sacrifice the man who bears me.” In uttering these words, Jesus is announcing that Judas will turn him (or his body) over to the authorities to be crucified, and in this way, it is implied, Jesus will be freed of the body of flesh that hinders the true spiritual person within. Judas himself is transfigured, enters a cloud of light, and realizes his enlightened state—unless it is Jesus who is transfigured (as suggested by Professor Sasagu Arai; the text is somewhat ambiguous at this point)—and Judas proceeds to do what Jesus has indicated: he turns Jesus in to the authorities to be crucified. In so doing Judas shows that he is the best friend and most faithful disciple of Jesus in the Gospel of Judas. Judas Iscariot, a disciple of Jesus who was vilified and marginalized in much of Christian tradition, is rehabilitated and redeemed in the Gospel of Judas.

We can be assured that historians, theologians, and other scholars will be studying the Gospel of Judas for decades to come, in order to analyze its place in the history of

early Christianity. The present Coptic translation of the Gospel of Judas was prepared, as we have noted, around 300 C.E., but the original Gospel of Judas must have been composed in Greek in the middle part of the second century, only a few decades after the New Testament gospels were written. With its mystical message and its sympathetic portrayal of Judas Iscariot, the Gospel of Judas will help scholars rewrite much of the history of the church during the early period.

Already scholars are weighing in on the Gospel of Judas, and as is to be expected among scholars, there are differences of opinion. A revisionist interpretation has emerged, with some suggesting that the Judas Iscariot we meet in the Gospel of Judas is the same old evil Judas we have met elsewhere rather than a positive, perhaps even saintly, figure. To be sure, there are difficult and ambiguous phrases in the Coptic text, and the remaining lacunae, or gaps between fragments, add to the challenge of interpretation. Only a few weeks ago, in November, I published a book entitled *Judas: Gospels and Legends about the Infamous Apostle of Jesus*, and simultaneously my friend and colleague April DeConick published her book, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*, with a dramatically different interpretation of portions of the Gospel of Judas. Such an alternative interpretation initially came to light at a conference in Paris at the Sorbonne, and again at an academic gathering in Washington DC, where a few colleagues, including April DeConick, proposed that the Gospel of Judas means to portray Judas in a negative light as an evil figure who does an evil deed in betraying Jesus. Admittedly the passage about Judas exceeding all the rest is in a sentence of the text with lacunae, and the context of the quotation is not easy to determine. The alternative interpretation of this passage suggests that Jesus tells Judas he

will exceed all the rest, but in evil. Further, it is suggested that if Judas enters a cloud of light, it may be the cloud of the demiurge. Thus, in such an understanding of Judas and the Gospel of Judas, poor Judas turns out to be a tragic figure, perhaps even a demon, and the message of the Gospel of Judas is not really *evangelium*, “good news,” but *dysangelium*, “bad news.”

Such a tragic rereading of the Gospel of Judas is worthy of some consideration, but it may be difficult to sustain without considerable qualification. Time, and scholarly discussion, will tell. In order to buy into this reinterpretation of the figure of Judas in the Gospel of Judas, one may need to: 1) skip over the incipit, or opening of the text, with its announcement of the nature of the text and the relationship between Jesus and Judas in the text, and the title of the text, with its indication that the text announces good news; 2) ignore all the instances in the text in which Judas professes Jesus correctly, is taught the mysteries of the kingdom by Jesus, and is commended by Jesus; 3) impose passages from later Sethian texts upon what is most likely a very early text of Sethian Gnostic thought; and 4) employ fairly tendentious interpretations and restorations of passages in the text in order to argue against what seems to be the plain sense of the preserved text.

In November of last year, at the same Washington conference, another colleague, Ismo Dunderberg, offered a more nuanced interpretation of the concluding portion of the Gospel of Judas. In the gospel, after Jesus says to Judas, “You will sacrifice the man who bears me,” there are four lines that recall statements from the Psalms in the Jewish Scriptures, and these lines seem to indicate the strength of spirit that is necessary if Judas is going to be able to hand Jesus over to the authorities. Dunderberg observed that the lines could be taken in a negative sense, to be sure, but that in actuality the text may be

admitting that Judas must have emotional strength and boldness if he is to accomplish what Jesus declares he will do.

The final fate of Judas according to the Gospel of Judas remains somewhat uncertain, largely on account of missing text at the conclusion of the narrative. It seems most likely that Judas is enlightened and exalted, and that he becomes, for readers of the gospel, a Gnostic paradigm of discipleship and faithfulness to Jesus. It is theoretically possible, I would grant to colleagues who have intimated such a thought, that Judas may not attain ultimate bliss in the Gospel of Judas. Or he may be on his way to the thirteenth eternal realm, sometimes thought to be the light cloud of the demiurge, to dominate the powers of the world from there. Yet what is clear from the text is the positive role of the disciple Judas who, though opposed by the other disciples, understands who Jesus is, learns the mysteries of the kingdom from Jesus, and does what Jesus says he will do.

For scholars and all interested people, the Gospel of Judas raises important issues for reflection and evaluation. To begin with, the Gospel of Judas underscores the fact that the early church was a very diverse phenomenon, with different gospels, different understandings of the good news, and different ways of believing in Jesus and following him. Frequently it has been suggested, initially in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles and more definitively by the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, that the Christian church developed as a unified movement with a singular view of truth and orthodoxy and a common commitment to the eradication of falsehood and heresy. The Gospel of Judas, with its alternative presentation of Jesus and Judas, reminds us that the story of the church, from its earliest days, discloses a variety of manifestations of

Christian thought. From the beginning, the church has been characterized by diversity, and that rich heritage of diversity continues to the present day.

The Gospel of Judas raises the issue of the nature of orthodoxy and heresy in an especially vivid way. The Gospel of Judas was referred to by its title in the writings of the heresiologist Irenaeus of Lyon around 180 C.E., and he maintained that this gospel was a pernicious piece of heresy. The Gospel of Judas, in turn, throws accusations back in the face of the leaders and members of the emerging orthodox church. This argument about who is right and who is wrong—that is, who is orthodox and who is heretical—is not only about theology and doctrine. It is a dispute with rhetorical and political overtones, and the winner in the debate is determined by who has the most convincing arguments, the most powerful voices, and the most votes as decisions are made in the life of the church. So, from an historical perspective, we may conclude that when Irenaeus and friends, who represent the thought of the emerging orthodox church and consider themselves to be thoroughly orthodox, speak of what is orthodox and what is heretical among the options in the early church, they are not just identifying orthodoxy and heresy. They are creating the categories orthodoxy and heresy.

With its provocative picture of what appears to be a rehabilitated Judas Iscariot, no longer the traitor but now the friend of Jesus, the Gospel of Judas raises questions about the image of Judas Iscariot in the New Testament gospels. The positive place of Judas in the Gospel of Judas may remind us of the hints about the positive character of Judas in the New Testament gospels, in spite of their eventual demonization of him. In the New Testament gospels, Judas is chosen by Jesus to be a part of the inner circle of disciples—the Twelve, in anticipation of a new Israel, with its twelve tribes—and

according to the Gospel of John, Judas was entrusted with the care of the group's finances. If Judas is said to be the one dipping his bread into the sauce with Jesus at the last supper, does that mean he was understood to be sitting next to Jesus, perhaps as one of his closest friends? If Judas kissed Jesus in the garden, in a greeting between friends still practiced throughout the Middle East today, does that intimate that there were close ties between Judas and Jesus? What did Jesus have in mind when he told Judas to do what he had to do, and do it quickly?

Thus, the Gospel of Judas may provide the occasion for the reexamination of the figure of Judas Iscariot in the New Testament and other early Christian literature, with a fuller recognition of his positive character. Could this be the time for the much-maligned disciple to be restored at the side of Jesus once again, as a close disciple of Jesus?

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The discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Judas, along with a substantial number of other early Christian texts, provides an opportunity for a fresh look at the world of early Christianity. In these gospels divergent evaluations of the figures of disciples and interpretations of the gospel of Jesus are highlighted, and some of the maligned and marginalized disciples are rehabilitated.

Rehabilitation can mean healing. It can mean forgiveness, restitution, reunion.

If Thomas is rehabilitated, where may be the healing? Doubting Thomas, caricatured as something of an agnostic in the New Testament Gospel of John, can at times be used to oppose traditions of Thomas Christianity with a more mystical,

Gnosticizing emphasis, such as we find in the Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas, also from the Nag Hammadi library. The Gospel of Thomas proclaims a mystical message of good news—the good news of the wisdom and insight of the living Jesus. That this is a different formulation of the Christian gospel than the proclamation of the cross as found, variously, in Paul and the New Testament gospels is clear. May this acknowledgment of the Gospel of Thomas lead to an acceptance—even a celebration—of a diversity of gospels and understandings of Jesus in religious groups past and present, and an abandonment of the debates and battles about orthodoxy and heresy, truth and error, that may poison religious interactions? May it lead to a heightened awareness of the commonality and oneness of the religious quests of people in our day?

If Mary is rehabilitated, where may be the healing? The well-known image of Mary Magdalene as the whore-turned-follower-of-Jesus has inspired artists and literary figures, and the fictional tale of Mary is moving and poignant. The end result of this image of Mary, however, when combined with the image of the other main Mary in Christian tradition—the virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus—is the perpetuation of an old stereotype, that women are to be seen as either virgins or whores. That stereotype has not served humanity well, and the restoration of Mary Magdalene as the figure of an independent, insightful, and capable leader may provide an important way for us to address issues of discipleship and gender in our world, including the lingering gender inequities and institutionalized sexism we can identify in society and religion.

If Judas is rehabilitated, where may be the healing? The traditional negative interpretation of Judas, which becomes more emphatically harsh as the centuries pass in the history of the church, calls to mind the place of Judas in the history of anti-Semitism.

Eventually Judas Iscariot becomes a building block in the construction of the hateful system of anti-Semitism, and Judas himself becomes, in legend and artwork, a caricature of an evil Jewish person, who betrays his master for money. We all realize that hatred is not easily defeated, but it may well be the case that the Gospel of Judas provides the occasion for Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others to come together and reconsider Judas and his relationship to anti-Semitism, and thus to destroy one important element that has contributed to anti-Semitic attitudes. If the discussion of the Gospel of Judas can play such a role, it will make a great contribution to the betterment of our life together. That would constitute real healing.

The Gospels of Thomas, Mary, and Judas are now available to be read and studied by scholars around the world and by all of us. Lost gospels have been found, and now we may discover for ourselves how these extraordinary texts may illumine the history of religious traditions from the world of the past as well as the continuing quests for goodness and the divine in our own world.