

# The Gospel of Judas

*Rewriting Early Christianity*

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# Introduction

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

The Gospel of Judas Iscariot

‘Greatest archaeological discovery of all time’  
threat to 2000 years of Christian teaching

(*Mail on Sunday*, 12 March 2006)

THE SO-CALLED ‘threat to 2000 years of Christian teaching’ which has attracted so much attention recently is the new take on the death of Jesus. Despite the rise of ‘fish’ badges on the backs of Christians’ cars, the most easily identifiable Christian symbol is probably still the cross, because it is Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection which have historically been the central theme of Christian teaching. As Saint Paul, one of the earliest Christians, put it: ‘May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .’ (Gal. 6: 14).

There are several sets of villains in the narrative of the death of Jesus in the four New Testament Gospels. Among the Jewish opponents of Jesus, there are the crowds who call for his execution, the chief priests (the Temple hierarchy), the scribes (a leading contingent of the Pharisees, usually in rivalry with the Temple authorities), and the Herodians, adherents of Herod and his family. According to one of the Gospel writers, Herod is

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himself involved in the trial process. On the Roman side, there are the soldiers who callously mock Jesus and administer his execution, and Pontius Pilate, who famously washes his hands of the whole business.

But as Jesus' death is presented in the Gospels, perhaps the worst offender is one of his own disciples—Judas Iscariot. He is the one who—despite being himself a follower of Jesus—approaches the Jewish authorities and offers to hand Jesus over to them for the slave's purchase price of thirty pieces of silver. He dies an ignominious death under the divine curse, and has taken his place in Christian history as the villain *par excellence*. In Dante's *Inferno*, for example, he merits being half eaten by Satan, 'His head within, his jerking legs outside.'<sup>1</sup>

This traditional picture of Judas undergoes serious surgery, however, in a newly discovered manuscript from Egypt containing the *Gospel of Judas*, finally released to the public a month after the *Mail on Sunday*'s portentous announcement. In this text, which survives in the ancient Egyptian language of Coptic, Judas, far from being an infamous villain, is actually Jesus' specially chosen disciple, and the recipient of a special revelation from Jesus. This secret knowledge is far superior to anything possessed by the other disciples—in fact, it is of a different character altogether.

The theology expressed in this secret knowledge revealed to Judas reflects the influence of a system of thought in antiquity now frequently called 'Gnosticism'. This has unfortunately been a word so over-used that some scholars have wanted it to be given a decent burial. But it need not be ditched quite yet, as long as it is clear what is meant by it. Here it is used to describe a set of beliefs, held by a variety of different movements, central to which are three main ideas: (1) the world

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was created not by the supreme God but by a second-rate deity who—since he is either weak or evil or both—forms a world which is from the outset fallen and corruptible; (2) it is therefore essential to escape from this earthly and bodily imprisonment and have one's divine self returned to its original home in heavenly luminosity; and (3) this salvation is achieved by attaining to special 'knowledge' (the Greek for which is *gnōsis*, hence Gnosticism)—insight which is revealed only to an elite few favoured by the supreme deity. This way of looking at God and the world was already known before the publication of the *Gospel of Judas*, principally from the discovery of a hoard of manuscripts in 1945–6 near Nag Hammadi in Egypt.

Before examining the *Gospel of Judas* proper, the first chapter of this book will cover the action-packed story of the discovery of the codex (the bound papyrus volume containing the *Gospel of Judas*), as well as giving an account of its reconstruction and recent publication. The next two chapters explore the earliest portrayals of Judas and his role in the death of Jesus, covering not only the New Testament but also the pictures of Judas in the second century CE. Chapter 4 will present a fresh translation of the Coptic text of the *Gospel of Judas*, interspersed with explanatory material covering the Gnostic context, the flow of thought in the book, as well as sections of the text which are difficult to understand (which is a good proportion of them, in fact). Although the work is newly discovered, we have known of the existence of a Gospel of Judas for centuries, and Chapter 5 will examine the sources from antiquity which refer to it. The last two chapters offer some comment on the date of the work, and of its significance for our knowledge of Jesus and early Christianity. Without spoiling the ending too much, the conclusion will be that the *Gospel of Judas* ultimately does not tell

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us anything about Jesus that we did not already know, although it is a fascinating window onto the world of second-century Gnosticism and its conflict with ‘mainstream’ Christianity.

Although this book is not aimed primarily at scholars, research in the *Gospel of Judas* is so much in its infancy that any study, however modest, is bound to touch on aspects of the text which have not yet been explored. Chapter 3 here, for example, makes a new suggestion for how the *Gospel of Judas* may be related to Gnostic speculation (hitherto ignored) about Judas which was in the air at around the same time that this new Gospel was written. In addition, Chapters 5 and 6 offer contributions to the scholarly discussion about the date of the work, especially on the evidence that the *Gospel of Judas* is dependent upon one of the New Testament Gospels. These, along with the other observations scattered throughout the book, will I hope be given consideration in the scholarly discussion which will no doubt pile up in the future.<sup>2</sup>

The principal aim of this book, however, is to examine the central claims made both by the *Gospel of Judas* itself and by journalists and scholars on its behalf. Some, as per the *Mail on Sunday*, have presumed that simply by virtue of being an ancient document (which it undoubtedly is) the work threatens to give an account of Jesus and his betrayal by Judas more reliable than that of the New Testament. A recent documentary produced by *National Geographic* takes a similar line, to the effect that the *Gospel of Judas* may well be just as old as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. More commonly, however, the view is propounded that the *Gospel of Judas* joins the ranks of the four New Testament Gospels (as well as other early Christian Gospels) as a new addition to the tumultuous confusion—or, put differently, the fascinating diversity—of early Christianity

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and its portrayals of Jesus. A new school of thought has emerged and attracted a good deal of media attention which advances this case for a multiplicity of early Christianities, none of which should be prioritized over any other. After all, the story goes, it was only because one particular party was the victor in the early Christian power-struggle that what we now know as Christianity won the day. This new approach to Christian origins has been adopted both by some scholars and by popularizers such as Dan Brown, and now the fight is on to determine whether the *Gospel of Judas* supports this revisionist approach or not. Nor is the battle merely over the past. The aim of this book is to work out not only what the *Gospel of Judas* meant, but also whether it means anything for our understanding of the history of earliest Christianity and of Jesus today.

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EVEN IF we do not know everything we might like to about the *Gospel of Judas*, we are by no means completely in the dark. In its Coptic incarnation as we have it, the work found its final resting place in Middle Egypt, perhaps as the property of a single individual. But, beyond that, we do not have many other leads. It is almost certain that, like the vast majority of Gnostic works surviving in Coptic, it was originally written in Greek. However, Stephen Emmel has bemoaned the lack of evidence that we have from antiquity about the translators of Greek texts into Coptic.<sup>1</sup> As far as the *Gospel of Judas*'s Greek career is concerned, we saw in the previous chapter that there is at least a sporting chance that the 'Gospel of Judas' mentioned by Irenaeus is the same as ours, and so it may well have been the Cainites who made use of it.

But can we go back any further, and glean anything more about when it was originally written? More importantly, could there be anything in the conclusion Herb Krosney draws about these Cainites? 'If an entire sect believed that the great betrayal had in fact been ordered by Jesus and carried out by his favoured disciple, that interpretation could, after study, become as valid as the version told in the New Testament.'<sup>2</sup> Does the *Gospel of Judas*, then, have the

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potential to overthrow our traditional understandings of Judas and Jesus?

### DATING THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

Taking Codex Tchacos as our starting point, we have already noted in Chapter 1 that carbon dating has shown the manuscript to have come from the third or fourth century CE, specifically 280 CE,  $\pm 60$  years. So the dating of the manuscript provides us with a ‘terminus ante quem’, that is, a latest possible date for the *Gospel of Judas*’s composition. The date of around 280 CE is too late, however, because the original is certainly older than our Coptic translation. So we need to go back earlier than 280 CE to allow time for the work to gain sufficient kudos to warrant being translated from its Greek original.

So if some time around the mid-third century gives us a *latest* possible point in time for the composition of the original *Gospel of Judas*, what is the earliest? The last historical event described in it—Judas handing Jesus over—obviously means that the *Gospel of Judas* must have been written after the early 30s CE. But does the work display influence from any of the later literary records of the activities of Jesus and Judas?

Some have judged that the reference to Judas being replaced by another disciple after his death means that the *Gospel of Judas* certainly knew the account of this in the book of Acts.<sup>3</sup> But it is possible that the author merely knew the traditional version of events in which Matthias took Judas’s place. Probably clearer, on the other hand, are the indications that the *Gospel of Judas* is dependent upon the New Testament Gospels for some of its

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phraseology, and most of the evidence for this comes at the very beginning and the very end of our Coptic text, the places where there is some overlap with the traditional story. One significant influence on the *Gospel of Judas*, as we will see, is the Gospel of Matthew.

### The Influence of the Gospel of Matthew

Very near the end of the *Gospel of Judas*, the strongest evidence of influence comes in the two sentences about Jesus' opponents wanting to capture him but being too afraid: these statements are very closely paralleled in Matthew. Not only do Matthew and the *Gospel of Judas* have much in common in the way they describe this incident, but the *Gospel of Judas* also reproduces some of the ways in which Matthew has modified his source, the version in Mark.

|                                       |  |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Mark 12: 12                           | Matt. 21: 46                                     | <i>Gospel of Judas</i> , p. 58   |
| (i) And                               | And  | Some of the scribes  |
| (ii) they were seeking to arrest him, | seeking to arrest him,                           | were there looking out so that they might arrest him in the house of prayer. |
| (iii) but they feared the crowd       | they feared the crowds,                          | For they feared the people,  |
| (iv)                                  | because they held him (some MSS: 'as') a prophet | because they all held him as a prophet.                                      |

It is generally accepted by scholars that Mark was written first, and was also a source for Matthew's Gospel. What these parallel columns above show, then, is a gradual development from

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Mark, to Matthew, to the *Gospel of Judas*. In sections (i) and (ii) Matthew sticks very closely to Mark's original version, and the *Gospel of Judas* adapts the language, without changing much of the sense. In (iii) Mark has 'crowd', which becomes in Matthew 'crowds', plural, and finally something different—'the people'—in *Judas*. Finally, and most importantly, Matthew's last clause ('because they held . . .') is a late addition into the way the story is told, and this later explanation from Matthew then finds its way into our Coptic Gospel. By far the best explanation for these differences—the last in particular—is that Mark influenced Matthew, then Matthew influenced the *Gospel of Judas*.

A number of minor indications also point to the *Gospel of Judas*'s indebtedness to Matthew. On the first page, one very small point is the spelling of Judas's second name, 'Iscariot'. In Mark, the name is consistently spelled *Iskarioth*, whereas in Matthew and John the spelling is *Iskariotēs*, which is what we have in the *Gospel of Judas* (p. 33 [restored], p. 35).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Matthew and Mark have in common the plot against Jesus coming together two days before Passover; this fits with the prologue to the *Gospel of Judas* in which the revelations of Jesus to Judas take place in the week running up to the *third* day before. (This, as we saw in Chapter 4, could mean two days before in the conventional English sense, or it could be that the day after Judas has been told of his mission he then fulfils it.) Additionally, the idiom for celebrating the Passover here (literally, 'doing Passover') is most closely paralleled in the New Testament Gospels in Matthew 26: 18.<sup>5</sup> Another possible indication, still on the first page, comes in the summary of Jesus' public ministry; here the author refers to 'some walking in the way of righteousness', which perhaps draws on Matthew's reference to the 'way of righteousness'—he is the only

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evangelist and New Testament author to use the phrase (Matt. 21: 32).

In the central sections of the *Gospel of Judas*, there are only some small points of overlap. To take one example:

Truly, I say to you, no one has arisen, among those born of women, greater than John the Baptist. But the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matt. 11: 11)

Truly [I] say to you, [no-]one born [of] this aeon will see that [generation]. No army of star-angels will rule over that generation. Nor will anyone born of mortal man be able to accompany it. (*Gospel of Judas*, p. 37)

Although the subject matter here is different, we have a stylistic similarity, in which two stock phrases occur together: the introductory ‘Truly, I say to you . . .’ formula, combined with the ‘no one born of . . .’ motif. On a similar note, Matthew alone among the evangelists follows up the ‘Truly, I say to you . . .’ formula with another: ‘Again I say to you . . .’:

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you request, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. (Matt. 18: 18–19)

Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.

Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (Matt. 19: 23–4)

Truly, I say to you, all the priests who were standing at that altar call upon my name.

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Again I say to you, my name has been written on [this house] for the generations of stars by the generations of men. (*Gospel of Judas*, p. 39)

So, again, a distinctive feature of Matthew's material has crept into the *Gospel of Judas*.

The last two pages have a few more indications. In the 'transfiguration' of Judas near the end of the document, Judas enters a 'cloud of light' (codex, p. 57). It is noticeable that of the three roughly parallel accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the New Testament, Matthew is the only one to mention that the cloud at Jesus' transfiguration is a 'luminous cloud', or, in a few manuscripts, a 'cloud of light' (Matt. 17: 5).

What survives of the last page begins with: 'And their chief priests were indignant...' (codex, p. 58). The only parallel to this in the New Testament Gospels is again in Matthew: 'But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant...' (Matt. 21: 15).

Finally, the question which the scribes ask Judas in the last few lines of the *Gospel of Judas* is very similar to one interpretation of the cryptic question (or command) of Jesus in Matthew 26:

Jesus said to him, '*Friend, why are you here?*' (Or: 'Friend, do what you came to do.') Then they came up and took Jesus and arrested him. (Matt. 26: 50)

And they advanced to Judas and they said to him, '*Why are you here? You are the disciple of Jesus.*' (*Gospel of Judas*, p. 58)

Most of these examples are only small indications, and some may be mere coincidence.<sup>6</sup> But, since there are a good number

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of them, when taken together they do suggest the influence of the Gospel of Matthew. Particularly illuminating is Matthew's editorial note about the anxiety of the Jewish leaders finding its way into the *Gospel of Judas*.

To many scholars, this will hardly be surprising. In 1950, Édouard Massaux concluded his monumental study of the influence of Matthew: 'Until the end of the second century, the first gospel remained the gospel par excellence. People looked to Mt. for the teaching which conditioned Christian behavior, so that the Gospel of Mt. became the norm for Christian life.'<sup>7</sup> More recently, Christopher Tuckett has noted the same tendency in the Gnostic literature from Nag Hammadi: 'Of all the synoptic allusions noted here, by far the greatest number show affinities with Matthew's Gospel.'<sup>8</sup>

But this is by no means to suggest that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* sat pen in hand with a copy of Matthew's Gospel in front of him. The point is rather that the popularity of Matthew in the second century and beyond meant that most writers would have heard (or, in a minority of cases, read) the Gospel stories in their Matthean forms. So they would have most readily reproduced them in a way which reflected Matthew's phraseology.

Most scholars date Matthew's Gospel to around 80 CE. So, at the opposite end from our latest possible date (sometime before 280 CE), we have c.80 CE as a *terminus a quo*. But then we have to account for the fact that 80 CE is too early for the *Gospel of Judas*, since we would need to allow time for Matthew's Gospel to circulate and begin to have an importance sufficient for it to begin influencing other works. There are still other factors which make a date before 100 CE virtually impossible.

## The Portrayal of the 'Church' in the Gospel of Judas

The vision of the temple on pages 38–40 of the manuscript also offers some important clues as to when the *Gospel of Judas* was written. This is because of the kind of Church structure and practice which is presupposed there: in this vision 'priests' are conducting the service and 'sacrificing' at the 'altar'. Although the Church in the New Testament period was not without its officials (overseers, deacons, etc.), the picture in this temple vision does seem to represent a later, post-New Testament development. In fact, Christian leaders were not called priests until a considerable time later, but the Apostolic Fathers at the end of the first and into the second century did think in terms of the eucharist being a sacrifice at an altar:

For it will not be a small sin if we cast aside from the episcopacy those who have 'offered the gifts' blamelessly and in holiness (1 Clement 44.4: c.95–96 CE)

Therefore, be eager to take part in the one eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for the oneness of his blood. There is one altar, just as there is one bishop ... (Ignatius, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 4: c.114 CE)

On the Lord's Day, when you gather together, break bread and give thanks, confessing your sins so that your sacrifice will be pure ... (*Didache*, 14: c.110 CE)

This means that this episode in the *Gospel of Judas* is very unlikely to go back to Jesus and the disciples: these first references to eucharistic sacrifice in the Apostolic Fathers represent the beginning of a theological tendency which is seen in fairly full bloom in the *Gospel of Judas's* temple vision, where we have all the components in place: priests, temple, altar, and

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sacrifices. Hence, rather than going back to the first century, it is much more likely to be part of our author's polemic against the emerging Church establishment in the second.

### Gnostic Features in the Gospel of Judas

The theological ideas in the *Gospel of Judas*, as almost all scholars involved in the discussion so far have noted, place it in the second century at the earliest. The 'aeon of Barbelo', and characters such as 'Autogenes', 'Saklas', and 'Yaldabaoth' all crop up for the first time in the second century—in Irenaeus and the Gnostic literature that probably dates back to that period. The names 'Adamas' (related to 'Adam', but also derived, according to Irenaeus, from the Greek word for 'unconquerable') and 'Zoë' (Greek for 'life') point to a Greek-speaking environment, whereas Jesus almost certainly taught in Aramaic. And the heavy influence of Plato (his idea of individuals having companion-stars, for example) on the creation mythology in the revelation to Judas points to a Greek-thinking author.

As a result of all these factors, some time between 140 and 220 CE is a reasonable estimate of when the original Greek text of the *Gospel of Judas* was composed and in the first half of this eighty-year span if our *Gospel of Judas* is the same as that of Irenaeus.

### Additions in the Coptic Version?

A final factor which complicates the historical picture further is the presence of a possible Coptic pun in our text. Judas's

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confession of Jesus, in which he acknowledges Jesus as having come from the aeon of Barbelo, ends with the statement that ‘the one who sent (*taouo*) you is the one whose name I am not worthy to speak (*taouo*)’ (codex, p. 35). This is apparently a play on the two meanings of this same verb *taouo*. As we have said, it is highly likely that the *Gospel of Judas* as we have it was translated into Coptic from Greek, but the pun here would almost certainly not go back to a Greek original since neither of the most common words for ‘send’ in Greek can also mean ‘say’ (or vice versa). So probably this is the result of later additions to the Coptic version of the work: it is much less likely that the translator would incorporate a pun in the normal course of translation, meaning that this sentence and perhaps some of the surrounding context as well does not go back to the Greek original. Additionally, this may well mean that there is editing elsewhere as well: it is always difficult, when we have only a single manuscript not even in the original language of the work in question, to know how close a text is to its first edition. So we need to be cautious about assuming that everything in our text here goes back to the Greek original.

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DATE

One result of the *Gospel of Judas* coming from the mid-second century is that at the time of its composition all the eyewitnesses of the events involving Jesus and Judas were long dead. Although it is far too simplistic to say that the accuracy of historical documents is in direct proportion to how near they are in time to the events, useful testimony must ultimately go back to contemporaneous people and artefacts. (Perhaps one

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should also add animals, as in the cases of the horse in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Have His Carcase*, the dog in Agatha Christie's *Dumb Witness*, and of course Conan Doyle's famous 'dog in the night-time'.) But with the *Gospel of Judas* we have no way of knowing whether the author had any direct contact with sources—animal, vegetable, or mineral—which go back to the time of the real Judas and the real Jesus.

On the other hand, the overwhelming consensus is that the four New Testament Gospels were written within roughly sixty years of Jesus' death. It is important to recognize that in these first two generations after the ministry of Jesus disciples who had known him—who had been participants in, and witnesses to, the drama of his life, death, and resurrection—were still alive.<sup>9</sup> A number of the characters in the Gospel narratives, disciples such as Peter, or those healed by Jesus, or his family members, would have gone on to play an active role in the early Church. They would have contributed their accounts of Jesus to the pool of material drawn upon by the Gospel writers. To take an example in connection with a specific incident, the man who carried Jesus' cross for him is named 'Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus' (Mark 15: 21). As scholars often note, Mark almost certainly mentions this detail because he expected some of his readers to know these sons, who were—no doubt—proud narrators of their father's deed.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Mark's account of the crucifixion refers to 'women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the less and Joses, and Salome' (Mark 15: 40); again, as scholars frequently comment, this suggests that they provided eyewitness testimony for the account.<sup>11</sup> The author of Luke's Gospel talks explicitly about his sources when he writes about making use of the testimony of the 'eyewitnesses and

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servants of the word' having been passed down to him (Luke 1: 2).

In addition to this positive role of these eyewitnesses they would also probably have had the negative function of keeping in check tendencies to invent new traditions about Jesus. In Chapter 3 we saw how in the *second* century CE there is much more of a free-for-all as far as describing the events surrounding the life of Jesus is concerned: in Papias, for example, the legend develops in which Judas becomes an ogre of superhuman size and subhuman personal hygiene.

The line between the first and second centuries is of course completely arbitrary, the product of a decision to construct the calendar as it is. But there is a real difference between the period in which the four canonical Gospels were written (which finishes at roughly the end of the first century) and the time when the *Gospel of Judas* was composed. The former was populated by those who had been contemporaries of Jesus and Judas, the latter was not.

### A Multitude of Gospels of Jesus?

Following on from this it is necessary to correct the very misleading impressions created by some authors to the effect that there were numerous Gospels in earliest Christianity all of which are in the same historical boat. These Gospels all claim to represent accurately the teachings of Jesus, the story goes, but one party in the early Church managed to impose its picture of Jesus on us because it won the political struggle and suppressed all the competition. Bart Ehrman puts the case eloquently, if unconvincingly:

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There were lots of gospels. The four in the New Testament are anonymous writings—only in the second century did they come to be called by the names of Jesus’ disciples (Matthew and John) and of two companions of the apostles (Mark the companion of Peter; and Luke the companion of Paul). Other gospels appeared that also claimed to be written by apostles. In addition to our newly discovered Gospel of Judas, we have gospels allegedly written by Philip and by Peter, two different gospels by Jesus’ brother Judas Thomas, one by Mary Magdalene, and so on.

All of these gospels (and epistles, apocalypses, etc.) were connected with apostles, they all claimed to represent the true teachings of Jesus, and they were all revered—by one Christian group or another—as sacred scripture. As time went on, more and more started to appear. Given the enormous debates that were being waged over the proper interpretation of the religion, how were people to know which books to accept?

In brief, one of the competing groups in Christianity succeeded in overwhelming all the others. This group gained more converts than its opponents and managed to relegate all its competitors to the margins. This group decided what the Church’s organizational structure would be. It decided which creeds Christians would recite. And it decided which books would be accepted as Scripture. This was the group to which Irenaeus belonged, as did other figures well known to scholars of second- and third-century Christianity, such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian. This group became ‘orthodox,’ and once it had sealed its victory over all of its opponents, it rewrote the history of the engagement—claiming that it had always been the majority opinion of Christianity, that its views had always been the views of the apostolic Churches and of the apostles, that its creeds were rooted directly in the teachings of Jesus. The books that it accepted as Scripture proved the point, for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell the story as the proto-orthodox had grown accustomed to hearing it.<sup>12</sup>

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So Ehrman's points here boil down to: (1) that there were a considerable number of Gospels sloshing around in the melting pot of earliest Christianity; (2) that the choice of the four New Testament Gospels boils down simply to the political triumph of the section of Christianity which championed them; and (3) that what this group did was ultimately to distort historical reality ('it rewrote the history'). So, far from actually being those who kept alive the true portrayal of Jesus, their work actually consisted in covering up what really happened.

But this story as it is spun by Ehrman runs into the difficulty that the four Gospels in the New Testament—as he himself admits—are the earliest portraits of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> So there appears to be some inconsistency in his view that the *earliest* documents in the case are the product of a *rewriting of history*. What is this history that pre-dates the four New Testament Gospels? The answer is, we do not have one, and we have no evidence either that the Church Fathers had one which they were so desperately trying to cover up.

### Diversity Before Harmony?

A view which quite often goes hand-in-hand with that of Ehrman is the version of events put forward by Elaine Pagels, in her best-selling *The Gnostic Gospels*. As she puts it, there is no unified Church in the beginning which then subsequently develops all sorts of heresies and splinter groups; in fact, she maintains, it is the other way around:

Contemporary Christianity, diverse and complex as we find it, actually may show more unanimity than the Christian churches of the first and second centuries. For nearly all Christians since that time, Catholics,

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Protestants, or Orthodox, have shared three basic premises. First, they accept the canon of the New Testament; second, they confess the apostolic creed; and third, they affirm specific forms of church institution. But every one of these—the canon of Scripture, the creed, and the institutional structure—emerged in its present form only toward the end of the second century. Before that time, as Irenaeus and others attest, numerous gospels circulated among various Christian groups, ranging from those of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Truth*, as well as many other secret teachings, myths, and poems attributed to Jesus or his disciples. Some of these apparently, were discovered at Nag Hammadi; many others are lost to us. Those who identified themselves as Christians entertained many—and radically differing—religious beliefs and practices. And the communities scattered throughout the known world organized themselves in ways that differed widely from one group to another.

Yet by A.D. 200, the situation had changed . . .<sup>14</sup>

So Pagels lumps the first two centuries together, classifying them as extremely diverse, with the next 1,800 years being relatively homogeneous. This is a little surprising. Not only are Pagels's 'three basic premises' questionable (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant are certainly not in complete agreement on 'the canon of Scripture, the creed, and the institutional structure') but, according to the World Christian Database, there are currently over 9,000 denominations worldwide (the various Churches of John Coltrane constituting some of the most unusual new entries).<sup>15</sup> Against this background Pagels's claims about 'the Christian churches of the first and second centuries' are probably exaggerated as an assessment of the second century. But to trace this diversity back to the *first* century as well is dangerously misleading.

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As we have already noted, the four New Testament Gospels are the only examples which can be confidently dated to before 100 CE, and they share—particularly when judged by their own standards rather than by currently important criteria such as canons, creeds, and officials—their most important concerns in common.<sup>16</sup> All four evangelists centre on Jesus' coming as Messiah in fulfilment of Old Testament promises, on his death and resurrection, and on the salvation which he accomplishes. On these focal points, there is little diversity.

However, in the early second century (again, when the eye-witnesses are a thing of the past), we begin to see Gospels emerging which sit rather more loosely to some of these central tenets, and which develop their own interests. The *Gospel of Thomas*, a work dating probably to around 120–140 CE, still sees Jesus as a saviour and revealer, but not by virtue of his death and resurrection and not in fulfilment of the scriptures.

So, in the beginning, there is clearly—at least according to the documents which have survived—unanimity on those central concerns of the four New Testament Gospels and this is then followed *later* by an explosion of Gospels many of which show Jesus in a very different light. Of this second-century tendency the *Gospel of Judas* is a prime example.

## CONCLUSION

So even if we do not know why the *Gospel of Judas* was written, and how exactly it was used, the 'when' is more accessible. It is very probable that the book is influenced by the phraseology of the Gospel of Matthew, which would make the end of the first century CE the earliest possible date. But then the time-frame

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is pushed further forward by the presence of the rather developed picture of the early Church's eucharist, which is already assumed in the work to be a kind of sacrifice. And forcing it later still are Gnostic ideas and deities which we only know of from the mid-second century onwards. So the mid-late second century is probably a fairly safe bet, and is even safer if our *Gospel of Judas* is the same as that mentioned by Irenaeus. Either way, this dating of the work is roughly the consensus view in any case.

However, what is misleading is the implied claim, sometimes found in the recent spate of literature, that the *Gospel of Judas* might be useful for reconstructing who Jesus really was. It is an empirical fact that there was a multitude of 'Gospels' in the first two centuries CE: that much is undeniably true. But a multitude of Gospels all with equal claim to be accurate testimony about Jesus? That is quite a different matter. To quote one final excerpt about the *Gospel of Judas* which goes off the rails at this point:

This gospel has a completely different understanding of God, the world, Christ, salvation, human existence—not to mention of Judas himself—than came to be embodied in the Christian creeds and canon. It will open up new vistas for understanding Jesus and the religious movement he founded.<sup>17</sup>

But as far as 'understanding Jesus' is concerned, will it? Really? I would be interested to hear if scholars have a concrete proposal for a single thing which the *Gospel of Judas* actually tells us about the real Jesus which does not already derive from the canonical writings.

The four New Testament Gospels are the only sources which have any real claim to be able to tell us about the real Judas Iscariot. As we saw in Chapter 2, the events of the betrayal are

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narrated in a very similar way in all four accounts, and so the chances are slim indeed of a different version which pops up a century later getting to the truth behind these much older reports. The same goes for the presentations of Jesus. Far from opening up 'new vistas for understanding Jesus', it is in fact the *Gospel of Judas* which—to turn Bart Ehrman's words against him—attempts to rewrite history.