

HIDDEN SECRETS OF THE LOST GOSPELS

NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS HELP DECIPHER THE GNOSTICS AND JUDAS.

Bob Smietana



At the end of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, the disciples come to Jesus and demand that he send Mary Magdalene away. The problem? She's a woman.

"Let Mary go out from our midst, for women are not worthy of life!" Simon Peter tells Jesus.

Not to worry, replies Jesus. "See, I will draw her so as to make her male so that she also may become a living

spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

So much for a new and more inclusive version of the gospel.

In recent years, the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas (currently on the *New York Times* bestsellers list) and other works by early Christian sects known as Gnostics have been championed by scholars and popularized in the *Da Vinci Code* as offering a legitimate alternative to the Christian faith found

in the New Testament. Scholars such as Elaine Pagels of Princeton and members of the Jesus Seminar argue that these alternative gospels offer a more inclusive view of the faith. That alternative view, they argue, was squelched by heresy-hunting "orthodox" bishops who imposed their exclusive and rigid views of Christianity on the church.

But do the Gnostic gospels offer a more inclusive version of Christianity? A closer look at them reveals a surprising answer.

Salvation by secret knowledge

The term *gnostic* comes from the Greek *gnosis*, which means “secret knowledge.” Unlike the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which focus on the public teaching and acts of Jesus, the Gnostic gospels focus on secret teachings supposedly given by Jesus to one or more of his disciples. For the Gnostics, salvation comes not by the death and resurrection of Jesus, but by obtaining this secret knowledge. The Gnostic gospels also remove Jesus from first-century Palestine and his Jewish context, transforming him from a rabbi to a Platonic philosopher.

Herbert Krosney, author of *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, said in an interview on National Public Radio that most of the action in this recently translated document takes place in a “nether world” removed from ordinary time and space. For Gnostics, the physical world was evil, created not by God but by a corrupt “demiurge.” Instead of a world filled with the glory of God, as the psalmist puts it, the world is an evil place devoid of the presence of God.

“In the Gnostic view, God is unknown, unknowable, and didn’t have anything to do with creation,” says Klyne Snodgrass, professor of New Testament studies at North Park Theological Seminary. In the Gnostic system of creation, a series of emanations or “aeons” go forth from God, usually in male-female pairs. (The number of those aeons can be more than 300, depending on which Gnostic text is used.)

“All this is distancing you from God,” says Snodgrass. “In the last outer edge aeon, the female broke off and brought forth another being—the Old Testament God. And that being is responsible for creation.”

When Judas first speaks to Jesus in the Gospel of Judas, he recognizes him as coming from one of the spiritual aeons outside of creation. “I know who you are and where you have come from,” Judas says. “You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you.”

According to Gnostics, some human beings, like Jesus, have “the divine spark”—they are spiritual beings trapped in human flesh. Salvation comes to those who know the world is evil and who flee to the spirit world upon their death. Those who don’t have the divine spark are out of luck.

“In many ways what you are looking at in the Gospel of Judas and other Gnostic gospels is an anti-gospel,” says Snodgrass. “This is not good news. You have something that is anti-creation, anti-world, anti-body, anti-incarnation, anti-universal—because only people with the spark of the divine get to be saved.”

Because Gnosticism vilifies the God of the Old Testament, a number of scholars believe it is “fundamentally anti-Semitic,” says Scot McKnight, professor of religion at North Park University.

“There is no respect whatsoever for the Jewish framing of creation, the goodness of the world, the presence of God in the world,” says McKnight. “We are not dealing just with Christ. Jews believe that God was at work in physical things and the God at work here is holy and pure. Gnosticism teaches that nothing in this world is good and pure. It’s all in some ethereal beyond. And that is contrary to everything we know about Jesus.”

In the Old Testament, especially the prophets, God shows concern for all people—not just a select few, adds McKnight. “Judaism fostered an equality of people, because of its themes of justice. Early Christianity consistently applied that in the church. Gnosticism is extremely elitist. Most people are not worthy of even hearing this [spiritual truth.]”

McKnight says the Gospel of Judas, like other Gnostic gospels, functions as an ancient version of *The Da Vinci Code*. “It’s a first-century *Da Vinci Code*,” he says. “It revises everything with a whole new thread. Everyone else is always wrong and Judas is the only one with the right story.”

Through four

The Gnostic gospels are often paired

with a theory, popularized by *The Da Vinci Code*, that a group of influential early church bishops conspired with the Roman Emperor Constantine to ban the Gnostic gospels from the Bible and to promote the view that Jesus was divine during the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

That view, while popular, is unhistorical, says Bart Ehrman, author of *Misquoting Jesus* and *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*. Ehrman, a Moody Bible Institute graduate who later became an agnostic, told Beliefnet.com *The Da Vinci Code*’s version of this part of church history is “absolutely false.”

“Most people thought Jesus was divine centuries before Constantine,”

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Ehrman said. “[I]t’s not true that Constantine decided which books to include in the New Testament; he had nothing to do with it. And the Council of Nicea didn’t have anything to do with which books to include in the New Testament.”

Instead of being imposed from above, Snodgrass and McKnight pointed out that the New Testament canon emerged by consensus out of the life and practice of the church.

“The implication that there was a race going on between competing Gospels and that eventually in the third or fourth century the canonical gospels won out is totally erroneous,” says Snodgrass. “The earliest evidence we have is that there were four gospels in the race and the others really aren’t in the race in any widespread way.”

Around AD 175, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were compiled by Tatian into the Diatessaron (Greek for “through four”), which weaved the four gospels into a single account of Jesus’s life. The Diatessaron was popular for “the next 800 years,” says Snodgrass. “You had four canon-

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cal gospels and nothing else has that kind of authority.”

McKnight says that the credibility given to *The Da Vinci Code* shows how little many Christians—especially Protestants—know about church history. “Protestants basically believe in the Constantinian fall of the church,” says McKnight. In other words, after the Roman emperor Constantine became involved in the affairs of the church, the church fell into a long period of decline and only emerged from that decline during the Reformation.

“This is part of the problem with the Western church,” McKnight says. “It is history blind when it comes to how the church came into existence. We need to do a better job in teaching the basics of church history.”

Books like *The Da Vinci Code* or the Gospel of Judas also tap into modern skepticism about the contemporary church. “People are cynical about the church,” says McKnight, “and are ready to pounce on an explanation of Christianity that demonstrates that it has been inherently corrupt from the beginning.”

A living tradition

Along with a better understanding of church history, Snodgrass and McKnight point out the need for a better understanding of how the New Testament came into being. The accounts told in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were already in development during Jesus’s lifetime. That’s because his style of teaching—using parables and sayings, like “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” or “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye”—was designed for his disciples to remember and pass on.

“What Jesus is doing with the disciples is formal instruction to propagate the faith,” says Snodgrass. “One of the things that we forget is that Jesus sends out a group of seventy disciples to proclaim the message. He didn’t send them out without a message. They are taking Jesus’s message out.”

When the authors of the canon-

cal Gospels began writing, they had an established oral tradition to draw upon. “It’s not like Jesus died and then twenty years later somebody was sitting around trying to think, ‘Now what did Jesus say?’” says Snodgrass. “So you have Luke saying at the beginning of his Gospel, ‘Hey, I have done my research. Here are all my sources—eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.’ There is a solid early living tradition, being propagated, shared, and embraced as the basis of worship.”

Snodgrass points out that one reason for a delay between Jesus’s death

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and the appearance of the first Gospels is that the message was being spread through preaching and was being translated from Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek and other languages.

Some early Christians preferred to hear the oral tradition—the “living, abiding voice” as some called it—rather than the written accounts of the Gospels. “Papias says in the second century that he would prefer to listen to the oral tradition rather than the written tradition,” says McKnight. “It’s alive; there is a freshness to it.”

The earliest Christian writings—the letters of Paul—stand in stark contrast to the Gnostic gospels. In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus asks Judas to betray him because he is weary of being trapped in a human body and longs to escape into the spiritual world. He tells Judas that he will surpass all the other disciples, “for you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” Gnostics, writing in the second and third century, saw Jesus’s crucifixion as a means for him to experience salvation of his own spirit and release from the prison of the body.

For Christians, Snodgrass says, “the focus has always been on death and resurrection—from the earliest days. Paul says, I gave to you what I have

also received—he’s using traditional language—and the focus is on the fact that Jesus died for us and he was raised for us. That is not in any way to diminish the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, which is quite different than the focus on death and resurrection in the message of the church, but you can’t have a focus on death and resurrection until it occurs.”

Some modern New Testament scholars, such as those of the Jesus Seminar, have drawn a clear line between the historical Jesus and Jesus the resurrected Christ. They argue that after the crucifixion, the church reinvented Jesus—changing him from a itinerant first-century Palestinian rabbi to a miracle working, divine figure who conquered death through his resurrection. If that’s the case, the theory goes, the New Testament version of Jesus is no more valid than the Gnostic view.

But in the New Testament gospels, the stories of Jesus reflect the language, culture, geography, politics, and worldview of first-century Palestine. The Gnostic gospels, on the other hand, remove Jesus from that historical context.

“If you read something like the Gospel of Judas or any of these other Gnostic gospels, they do not breathe first-century Palestinian air,” says Snodgrass. McKnight adds that while the Gnostic gospels do provide details about the Gnostic sects in the second century, there is “nothing of value [in them] about either the Christian faith or for the origins of the church.”

In fact, the best way to respond to claims that the Gnostic gospels are authentic alternatives may be to read them. (An online version is available at www.nationalgeographic.com/lost-gospel.)

“The impression has been left that gospels like the Gospel of Judas are a voice that needs to be heard,” Snodgrass says. “You go back and read these things and there is not much there that is the least bit attractive or informative. I can’t imagine anyone reading either of these gospels and coming out and saying, ‘I am going to live my life by it’—it’s not going to happen.” □