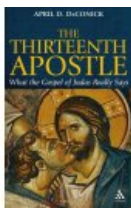


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Revising the Revisionists — New Controversy over “The Gospel of Judas”

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Just last year, the National Geographic Society announced the discovery of a third-century Gnostic text called “The Gospel of Judas.” The Society timed its announcement to support the commercial success and maximize the media impact of a book and television program dedicated to the text.

There was a great deal of misrepresentation about the discovery in the press, with some academics suggesting that the text had been suppressed by the church because of its supposedly explosive contents. Others went so far as to argue that the “Gospel of Judas” would require a comprehensive revision of the Christian faith.

That was nonsense, of course, but it was the kind of nonsense that garners a great deal of media attention.

The most controversial aspect of this text, at least as claimed by the National Geographic Society and its associates, was the claim that it denied that Judas had betrayed Jesus and instead presented him as a hero.

Now, it is these claims about the text that must be revised. Writing in *The New York Times*, Professor April D. DeConick argues that the official story last year was based in serious flaws in translation — an inexcusable mistake. In her words:

Amid much publicity last year, the National Geographic Society announced that a lost 3rd-century religious text had been found, the Gospel of Judas Iscariot. The shocker: Judas didn't betray Jesus. Instead, Jesus asked Judas, his most trusted and beloved disciple, to hand him over to be killed. Judas's reward? Ascent to heaven and exaltation above the other disciples.

It was a great story. Unfortunately, after re-translating the society's transcription of the Coptic text, I have found that the actual meaning is vastly different. While National Geographic's translation supported the provocative interpretation of Judas as a hero, a more careful reading makes clear that Judas is not only no hero, he is a demon.

Well, so much for the headlines of last year. DeConick's new book, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*, deals with these charges at length. The evidence she presents should embarrass those who made such audacious claims just a year ago.

More from her article in *The New York Times*:

Several of the translation choices made by the society's scholars fall well outside the commonly accepted practices in the field. For example, in one instance the National Geographic transcription refers to Judas as a “daimon,” which the society's experts have translated as “spirit.” Actually, the universally accepted word for “spirit” is “pneuma ” — in Gnostic literature “daimon” is always taken to mean “demon.”

Likewise, Judas is not set apart “for” the holy generation, as the National Geographic translation says, he is separated “from” it. He does not receive the mysteries of the kingdom because “it is possible for him to go there.” He

receives them because Jesus tells him that he can't go there, and Jesus doesn't want Judas to betray him out of ignorance. Jesus wants him informed, so that the demonic Judas can suffer all that he deserves.

Perhaps the most egregious mistake I found was a single alteration made to the original Coptic. According to the National Geographic translation, Judas's ascent to the holy generation would be cursed. But it's clear from the transcription that the scholars altered the Coptic original, which eliminated a negative from the original sentence. In fact, the original states that Judas will "not ascend to the holy generation." To its credit, National Geographic has acknowledged this mistake, albeit far too late to change the public misconception.

In the end, even after DeConick's research it will be clear that "The Gospel of Judas" is a Gnostic text that is opposed to Christian orthodoxy. As DeConick remarked, "Whoever wrote the Gospel of Judas was a harsh critic of mainstream Christianity and its rituals." But the fact that Judas is actually presented as a demon — not as a heroic figure — is no small matter.

One additional issue cannot be dodged. Why did the National Geographic Society allow this? DeConick congratulates the Society on finding and preserving the document, but then makes her case:

. . . I think the big problem is that National Geographic wanted an exclusive. So it required its scholars to sign nondisclosure statements, to not discuss the text with other experts before publication. The best scholarship is done when life-sized photos of each page of a new manuscript are published before a translation, allowing experts worldwide to share information as they independently work through the text.

This controversy should serve as a sober reminder that media reports about supposed discoveries may not be at all what is claimed. Indeed, the bigger the claim of a blockbuster discovery, the more care and oversight is required. The impression of this story left in the public mind is based in a series of mistranslations. Most people will never know the real story.

Gregory Tomlin of *Baptist Press* provided a good analysis of this story on November 6 [see [here](#).]

