

Judas and Da Vinci

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In this report I touch on two timely (and controversial) issues Keren and I are being asked about—things you are reading or seeing in the news.

The Gospel of Judas.

The media are abuzz about the release of an ancient Coptic codex discovered in Egypt, called the “Gospel of Judas.” Of course they always are stirred when something or someone claiming authority portends to fundamentally alter or discredit Christianity. In this instance the buzz was intensified enormously because of the clout of the National Geographic magazine and its top-notch publicity machine. The Geographic sponsored research into this “Gospel” and turned it into a prime-time television special that was trumpeted by every newspaper and media outlet in the land.

So is there anything really new or particularly credible about the Gospel of Judas? In a word, No. Or to put it more colorfully, in the words of one biblical scholar, “It’s mere G’nostic G’nonsense!”

First, this text was composed at least two centuries after the life and times of the Messiah, and no serious biblical scholar believes it has any connection to the historical Jesus. Its popularity is in reverse proportion to its credibility. The Gospel of Judas is irresistibly inviting, however, to those who favor theological revisionism and are cynical about the claims of biblical faith. In such a climate, sensationalism prevails over serious scholarship.

Second, this ancient document is akin to similar documents found nearby in Egypt decades ago, such as the Gospel of Thomas, that reflect the aberrant philosophical cancer called Gnosticism that attempted to attach itself to early Christianity. Not only does Gnosticism twist and misconstrue the life and teaching of Yeshua, it literally challenges the identity and character of the God of Israel and turns the biblical worldview on its head.

In this latest publication of a Gnostic gospel (there are four now), Judas is the only disciple spiritually aware enough to truly understand Jesus' secret teachings; and so the Master instructs Judas to betray him so that Jesus' spirit can be set free from the imprisonment of his material—i.e., evil—body. This is wholly consistent with Gnosticism's radical dualism between spirit and matter.

The created universe according to Gnostic lore is intrinsically evil, manufactured by a demiurge, Yahweh, who imposes His onerous Law upon people to solidify His control over the world. The biblical Creator then is not the Most High God, who is pure Spirit (and therefore would never be tainted by interaction with materiality). So with Christ, who only "took on the appearance of a man," but in truth was pure Spirit—coming to liberate the spirits of men entrapped in the material universe and enslaved under Yahweh's demonic umbrage.

In the inverted world of Gnostic values God becomes a demon and biblical villains become spiritual heroes—such as Cain, Korah and the residents of Sodom. Even Satan is a "good guy" because he rebelled against the evil demiurge Yahweh. As a liberator, he offered Adam and Eve esoteric "knowledge" (*gnosis*)—which is the real source of our salvation, the "truth that sets us free." Gnostics celebrate Eve for her audacious challenge to Yahweh's strictures—boldly going where no man would dare to go by eating of the *Tree of Gnosis*.

In view of this mindset, it is not surprising that an ancient Gnostic text seeks to reverse the biblical depiction of Judas and portray him as spiritually adept, as one who “derived his being from above.” Nor is it all that surprising—albeit alarming—that Gnostic sentiments are in vogue again today. Radical feminists are attracted to a worldview that argues for sexual liberation. (The patriarchal Church Fathers labeled Gnosticism a heresy, they claim, in order to keep women oppressed!) In pop culture, Dan Brown’s monumental bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*, draws on Gnostic themes that typically subvert objective truth. (More on this below.)

Though the Gnostics garbed their revelations in biblical language and apostolic authority, the early Church Fathers rightly and roundly rejected their outlandish claims. In their defense of the faith, they upheld the biblical witness that the earth was created good (*tov*) by a benevolent and merciful God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—who is in fact the one, true and only God Most High. Against the Gnostics, the early church affirmed the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth, as fully man and yet God was fully in this man. His atoning death and resurrection removes our real (as opposed to illusory) separation from our Maker and effects access and intimacy with the transcendent and holy God.

Gnosticism is inherently antinomian (anti-Law)—a notion that appeals to the individualized, libertarian age in which we live. You can be spiritual (as an internal realization) apart from objective reality and unrelated to your body and your deeds. Everything is relative to your inner identity—the “god within”—thereby disposing you toward distrust of tradition and dismissal of any Divine authority that holds you accountable for your life.

Clearly the Gospel of Thomas is “another gospel” that is contrary to biblical faith and objective reality, and (ironically) betrays the real Jesus. It truly is “G’nostic G’nonsense”!

The Da Vinci Conundrum.

The highly anticipated movie version of the runaway best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, has opened to tepid reviews but terrific sales, accompanied by consternation and sporadic protests by Christian groups, especially from the Roman Catholic Church (which is vilified in the movie and the book). Dan Brown's work is one of the best selling novels of all time and surely a pop phenomenon of gargantuan proportions.

So far, more than 60 million (yes, *million*) copies of *The Da Vinci Code* have sold, and the pace is not abating. By all accounts Brown has written a briskly paced thriller, whose suspense and mystery compel the reader to hang on for a fantastical journey unveiling a deeply hidden and fiercely protected "secret" of the early church and its (not-so-celibate) founder, Jesus of Nazareth.

As one reader put it, "[It] was the worst book I ever loved." As a suspense novel, apparently *The Da Vinci Code* is compelling reading. The evidence is clear, however: as a chronicle purportedly based on historical fact, unveiling an authentic mystery, this work is an abomination.

Scarcely a single significant "fact" in this block-buster of a thriller is reliable. These errors are exhaustively documented in a plethora of rebuttals by serious scholars and popular Christian authors. (E.g., a quick search of christianbooks.com turned up more than ten recent titles challenging Brown's twisted version of history.)

One author alone found sixteen factual errors in just three paragraphs (on p. 234)! The errors are so numerous and egregious that it requires an *opus magnum* just to document them. Just one telling example: The "Priory of Sion" (no relation to the Pryors in Zion!) is crucial to the book's storyline. Brown calls it "a real organization ... founded in 1099" (of which Leonardo Da Vinci allegedly was a secret member). Scholars long ago proved other-

wise, and even the popular TV news journal, *Sixty Minutes*, recently debunked the claim. The medieval organization, with its list of notable members, was in fact a fabrication of an eccentric conman in the 1950s. It's a hoax!

When it comes to the theological principles underlying the novel's storyline, again the *Code* doesn't have a clue. It is a mishmash of errant views, misrepresented history, and mean-spirited accusations. It confuses Arianism and Gnosticism, and spawns a conspiratorial agenda for the Church leaders of the 4th century Nicean Council that is patently and demonstrably false. Again the errors are too numerous and egregious to elaborate here (but are easily found in the books noted above).

One example, however, is worth mentioning, especially in view of my comments above regarding the *Gospel of Judas*. Jack Poirier, a Ph.D. candidate at Jewish Theological Seminary and associate of Jerusalem School scholars, has written an insightful critique of Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. You can read "*Historical Howlers, Funny and Otherwise: Dan Brown's Backward Understanding of Gnosticism*" at www.jerusalemerspective.com.

The Code's author claims that Gnostic writings were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls—not so! More importantly, as Poirier shows: "(1) Brown represents the Gnostic gospels as portraying a more human (less divine) Jesus; and (2) Brown represents Gnosticism in general as a pro-feminine (or pro-feminist) movement—indeed as a faithful repository of the 'sacred feminine.'"

Both of these assumptions—widely held in intellectual circles today—are fundamentally in error, as abundantly documented by Poirier. Gnosticism is unalterably Docetic, denying the authentic humanity of Christ. And the Gnostic allure for the feminists' mindset is curious indeed. It is true, on the one hand, that Gnostic tradition extols some women as spiritual heroines and visionaries—like Eve, and in this case, Mary Magdalene. (Supposedly, the Magdalene, as the first witness to the resurrection, received secret

revelation from the Lord, which she subsequently transmitted to the apostles and disciples.)

On the other hand, Gnosticism at its theological root fundamentally disparages the authentic feminine. Consider this telling example from the most celebrated Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Thomas*:

Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of the life." Jesus said, "Behold, I shall lead her in order that I may make her male, that she too may become a living spirit which resembles you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

So is there any good news in all this muddled mystical and mysterious mishmash? Yes, curiously enough, there is. Dan Brown actually has done the church a favor. He has caused Christians to seriously study church history! They are reading books, asking questions, and even conducting courses in congregations informing the public about the development of the early church and setting the record straight as to the numerous errant claims and assumptions in *The Da Vinci Code*.

In other words, for many evangelical Christians the controversy has been redeemed as a teaching moment. And so ... the Kingdom advances! *Barukh Shem K'vod Malkhuto!*

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