

FINDING MY RELIGION

Religious scholar Elaine Pagels on how the newly discovered Gospel of Judas sheds new light on the dawn of Christianity

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Monday, April 2, 2007

He's been despised for 20 centuries -- Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus Christ for 30 pieces of silver.

But in April 2006 the National Geographic Society revealed the contents of the Gospel of Judas, a manuscript that had been [misplaced](#) for nearly 1,700 years. It casts Judas as Jesus' beloved friend, the man whom Jesus chose to ensure the biblical prophecies concerning his death would be fulfilled.

The Gospel of Judas may be, as it's been described by some biblical scholars, the most significant archeological find in decades, but it's certainly not easy reading. Luckily, we now have a guide to the often convoluted text, "Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity" (Viking, March 2007) by Elaine Pagels, a religion professor at Princeton University and author of the "Gnostic Gospels" (2004), and translator Karen King.

"Reading Judas" allows modern readers to decode the message in the Gospel of Judas, which presents a provocative view of how Jesus' followers tried to make sense of his death. It also raises questions about whether the resurrection was a physical or a spiritual one -- and why that matters in regard to both faith and hard truth.

I spoke to Pagels by phone last week about her take on the Gospel of Judas, how it offers a window into the dirty politics and lively debate that shaped the Christian religion in its earliest days before 325 AD -- when the Council of Nicaea brought together several hundred quarreling religious leaders who eventually settled on a single creed for all Christians to follow -- and what that might mean to people in the 21st century.

You've been a religious scholar for more than 40 years. Did reading the Gospel of Judas change your view of Christianity?

Yes, certainly. All of these recently discovered texts show that the early history of Christianity is much more engaging and diverse than I'd ever imagined.

Just to give you one example: They show that the teaching about Jesus dying for your sins -- because God cannot forgive sins without sacrificing his only Son -- is not the only way to be a Christian.

It isn't? I had thought that idea was central to Christianity.

That's what many Christian leaders claim. But the Gospel of Judas challenges that view and suggests that the fundamental message of Jesus is that we come from God, created in God's image; when we die and leave the visible world, we step into the infinite world of God, into the divine light, and we go into that glorious light with God. How that happens it doesn't say, any more than Paul does when he talks about resurrection. But it's a conviction that's fundamental to this Gospel. And it's a very different way to look at Christianity.

This Gospel also presents a very different view of Judas himself, casting him as Jesus' collaborator rather than his betrayer.

Right. But if you look at the Gospel of John, there is an account that says the night before Jesus died that he not only knew what Judas was doing but told him to do it. Jesus turns to Judas and says, "What you have to do, do quickly." And Judas goes out to set in motion the events that will lead to the crucifixion. So some people have concluded, if this had to happen and Jesus knew it had to happen and accepted this sort of terrible death, then isn't Judas in a way facilitating what had to happen in the divine scheme of things? That's been a question asked since the first century.

And what answers have people come up with?

The suggestion in the Gospel of Judas is that Judas alone knew the truth of Jesus and was entrusted with a mission to hand him over to the people who arrested him. It's interesting that in this book the Greek word that was elsewhere translated into English as "betrayal" is actually a more neutral word that means "to hand over." The point is that Judas indeed did hand Jesus over to the people who arrested him, but he did so because Jesus had not only asked him but required him to do it.

How much do we know about the person who wrote this Gospel?

We don't know much. Whoever wrote it is probably an anonymous Christian in the second century who takes issue with the following three things: 1) that Jesus died as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, 2) that God wants and needs this sacrifice in order to forgive sin and 3) that we should act out that sacrifice in the Eucharist or the Mass or the Lord's Supper as the central act of Christian worship. This particular Christian is taking issue with this whole paradigm that is very familiar to us from the second century of Christianity.

How does he view God?

His view is that God is a loving God, a loving Father, not a bloodthirsty kind of God that desires human sacrifice. Nor does he want his followers to die for him, as some church fathers say. What we also find here is that questions about the Gospels and disputes between Christians are not new. They are really the way that Christianity has always been.

Given all those disputes, how do you discern what is spiritually true?

That's the hardest question in the history of Christianity. That's why orthodoxy was invented, to say: "Let me give you a shortcut. Go to the bishop. Go to the priests, and they will tell you."

They will sort it all out for you, you mean?

Yes. That's what religious authority is all about. I'm working on a book right now on the Book of Revelation and other books of revelation in which that is the chief question that dominates the awareness of Christians between the first and second centuries. There are many, many books of revelation and the question is, Which ones are true and genuine, and which ones are frauds - and how do you tell the difference? There is no easy answer. I think that's the deepest question there is in theology right now.

Remember that in the early centuries, the Bible wasn't a set canon. In fact, the earliest canon list we have available is from the fourth century. For 300 years there was a lot of fluidity about which texts are the most important, which Gospels are true. You have Christianity flourishing and thriving for 300 years before you have the Nicene Creed and before you have a canon.

It's ironic, because some people would say that without a set creed you have no truth, no way to preserve the religion over time.

Certainly that was the view of Constantine, who convened the council that formulated the Nicene Creed. He felt that this kind of diversity of Christian groups was very problematic, particularly if your concern was to unify the empire. It was for that reason that the creed was formulated. But there were Christians long before the creed.

What has been the response to the Gospel of Judas?

It's been enormously interesting. We haven't had a new Gospel like this for 50 years, and certainly not one with material this strange and fascinating. And it raises important issues. One of them is about how we understand the death of Jesus, whether it was something that God actually required before he would forgive sins. The author of the Gospel of Judas thinks that's a very brutal view of God.

You brought that up earlier, but we didn't really discuss it. Tell me more about that.

The author says: "If you say Christ died for your sins, that this is evidence of God's love, are you saying that God would not or could not forgive human sins without a bloody human sacrifice?" A friend of mine, who was a Christian missionary in an evangelical group, told me that she went to see Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ," and when she did, she was moved to weeping because it made her feel that God loved humankind that much. Now, somebody could ask, and I think the author of the Gospel of Judas would ask: "But what kind of God do you imagine? Is God not a loving Father? Doesn't God send Jesus to heal and save and deliver people from horrible death? Would he actually require Jesus to die before he would forgive sinful humanity their sins?"

How did that idea become central to Christian thought?

The fact was that Jesus was executed in a terrible way and his followers, in order to maintain their faith, said: "There has to be a meaning in it. What could it mean?" And because they were Jews, they immediately thought, "This must be some kind of offering, like the animals that are offered in the temple." So it's a natural kind of image to use because worship of that time was [intrinsically connected to] sacrifice. But the author of the Gospel of Judas is challenging that.

How so?

The Gospel of Judas suggests that Jesus intends his death to demonstrate what he taught Judas -- that he can face death with confidence and hope, knowing that we come from God, and so when we step out of the visible world, we go into God's presence. So it's a message about how to face one's own death with courage and hope.

Did the new viewpoint surprise you when you first started working with this material?

There was a kind of angry tone to the Gospel of Judas that startled us and distressed us. It was very surprising to read of Jesus laughing at the way his followers are following him. It's as though this author were saying: "If Jesus were here now, he would laugh at you. He would reject the way you worship. He would say: 'What kind of God do you have in mind? The God that I know is a loving Father. But you are not worshiping a loving Father if you worship this way.'"

We are heading into Easter. Do you think this material could change the way people observe this holiday?

It's a good question. I think the answer is yes. I think the question some people will ask is: "What do you mean by the resurrection? Does that mean that a body actually got out of the grave, which is what some of the most dramatic stories say, the ones that are wonderfully enshrined in Easter tradition?" But if you look in the New Testament, in say, Luke 23 and John 21, you see that both Luke and John tell different accounts of how Jesus appeared. In one account, he appeared in a vision and he disappeared before they touched him, and in another he appeared in absolutely physical form. He actually ate with them. They could touch him and they could feel the wounds.

So there are different kinds of stories even in the canonical Gospels. And what was important to the authors of Luke and John was not to decide between those stories -- the important thing is that we know in some sense that he is alive. That the resurrection happened. And that is affirmed. But one thing we can see in these other texts is that you don't have to take the resurrection literally to take it seriously. One can speak about Jesus alive after his death with conviction without necessarily meaning that his physical body got out of the grave.

Do you consider yourself a Christian?

Yes, I consider myself a Christian. I happen to go to an Episcopal church, but I love many of the forms of Christianity. And I could as easily be in another church or another religious tradition if I'd been brought up differently. Of course, that's what some people would call heresy. But the word "heresy" in Greek actually means "choice." And that's something that certain Christian leaders thought wasn't so good. They would say there is only one teaching. But the claim that if you don't believe the specific set of things we tell you -- whoever the "we" happens to be -- God will send you into eternal fire, strikes me as inconsistent with what I know about Christian tradition.

What do you think about the idea that the Bible is the absolute word of God?

There is a Protestant view that we have to take the Bible literally, even though we are talking about translations of translations and about language which from the beginning was not literal. Jesus spoke in parables. His teaching is not meant to be literal, in many cases, as compared to the ethical teaching about "Love one another." "Love God and your neighbor" -- that, I think, is very clear and straightforward.

Some people who aren't religious might say we're better off without these sacred texts because people have taken them literally and the result hasn't always been positive.

There is no question that Christianity, like other religious traditions, has [been] and can be very effective in promoting violence. My book on the origin of Satan was about the beginning of Christian anti-Semitism. When I worked on it, I was distressed to see how deeply, how powerfully Christianity can be turned to hate as well as to love. And it's not exclusive to Christianity. It's true for other religious traditions as well.

How has the religious climate changed in this country since you came out with the "Gnostic Gospels"? Are people responding to this sort of material differently now?

Yes. I think that many more people are questioning the sources of religious authority -- whether you are talking about a literal reading of the Bible or their minister or priest. It's not that one should disbelieve the clergy or the Bible. But I think the questions about authority and the

hunger for a sense of direct connection with God are more evident than they have been, partly because we are all aware of the diversity of religion and the diversity of claims within Christianity.

Where are you seeing this happening? In your church?

Among my students, in the news media, in things that I read and discussions with people all over the country and, in fact, all over the world. Don't you see something like that?

I do. But I also see the opposite happening. I see plenty of close-mindedness and unwillingness to entertain other points of view in the name of religion.

Exactly! That's right! And I think what's happening is that, you know, everybody in the world is more and more aware that each one of us is being sort of pressed up against other people who are different. And some people get curious and interested and find that intriguing. Others just want to build up stronger walls. So I think a more conservative and a more questioning perspective are happening simultaneously.

During his far-flung career in journalism, Bay Area writer and editor [David Ian Miller](#) has worked as a city hall reporter, personal finance writer, cable television executive and managing editor of a technology news site. His writing credits include Salon.com, Wired News and The New York Observer.

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