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The Betrayal of Judas

Did a 'dream team' of biblical scholars mislead millions?

By THOMAS BARTLETT

Marvin Meyer was eating breakfast when his cellphone buzzed. Meyer, a professor of religious studies at Chapman University, has a mostly gray beard and an athletic build left over from his basketball days. His friends call him "the Velvet Hammer" for his mild demeanor. He's a nice guy.

The voice on the other end belonged to a representative of the National Geographic Society. They were working on a project and wanted his help.

"That's very interesting," he remembers saying. "What do you have in mind?"

"We can't tell you," was the reply.

That was not the answer he expected.

"Let me see if I understand this," Meyer said. "You'd like me to agree to do a project with you, but you won't tell me what that project is. Is that right?"

"Exactly."

He would have to sign a nondisclosure agreement first — which, in the end, he agreed to do. Not long afterward, Meyer found himself locked in an office in Washington, with a desk, a pile of dictionaries and lexicons, and one of the most sought-after religious texts in recent history, the Gospel of Judas. For a week he worked almost nonstop on the 26-page text, translating the Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language written with Greek letters, into English. As he translated, a startling portrait of Judas Iscariot emerged. This was not the reviled traitor who betrayed Jesus with a kiss. This was the trusted disciple, the close confidant, the friend. This was a revelation.

When the Gospel of Judas was unveiled at a news conference in April 2006, it made headlines around the world — with nearly all of those articles touting the new and improved Judas. "In Ancient Document, Judas, Minus the Betrayal," read the headline in *The New York Times*. The British paper *The Guardian* called it "a radical makeover for one of the worst reputations in history." A documentary that aired a few days later on National Geographic's cable channel also pushed the Judas-as-hero theme. The premiere attracted four million viewers, making it the second-highest-rated program in the channel's history, behind only a documentary on September 11.

But almost immediately, other scholars began to take issue with the interpretation of Meyer and the rest of the National Geographic team. They didn't see a good Judas at all. In fact, this Judas seemed more evil than ever. Those early voices of dissent have since grown into a chorus, some of whom argue that National Geographic's handling of the project amounts to scholarly malpractice. It's a perfect example, critics argue, of what can happen when commercial considerations are allowed to ride roughshod over careful research. What's more, the controversy has strained friendships in this small community of religion scholars — causing some on both sides of the argument to feel, in a word, betrayed.

The story of how the Gospel of Judas was found, and of the many years it spent languishing in the antiquities underground, has received almost as much attention as what the text actually says. Yet much of that story remains muddled, and considering that those who know the truth are either dead or not talking, it is likely to remain so.

The most popular theory is that the gospel was discovered by a farmer near the village of Qarara, in Middle Egypt, sometime in the 1970s. Whether that farmer innocently stumbled on a grave containing the manuscript or was in fact a treasure hunter in search of relics is not known. Robbing graves and selling their contents to the highest bidder is, to say the least, frowned upon by Egyptian authorities, so it's no surprise that the person who rescued the gospel might be reluctant to take credit.

The roughly 1,700-year-old codex, originally leatherbound, eventually made its way to Cairo, where it was purchased by an antiquities dealer. The dealer knew little about ancient manuscripts on papyrus — a material made from plant fiber — and couldn't read Coptic, but he assumed, correctly, that what he had acquired was valuable. In 1983 a handful of representatives from American institutions traveled, at the dealer's request, to Geneva to examine the codex and, if it was authentic, to purchase it.

One of those representatives was Stephen Emmel, a graduate student at Yale University who was studying in Rome. The visitors met with the dealer in a hotel room and were allowed to look at the text, albeit briefly. They were not permitted to take photographs or notes. The only report of the encounter came from Emmel, who managed to make a few surreptitious jottings when he excused himself to use the bathroom.

The papyrus was in relatively good condition considering its age, but it was extremely fragile, and even turning the pages was an ordeal. With the dealer in a rush, Emmel didn't have time to thoroughly evaluate the codex, though he did notice some dialogue between Jesus and Judas. Why was the dealer in

such a hurry? Was he worried that they would glean all they needed from a lengthy examination and lose interest in making a purchase? Or was he nervous because the codex had been acquired through unsavory channels? Was he even the real owner?

Regardless, the assembled group determined that the codex was not a fake. When it came time to negotiate, however, it turned out that the would-be seller and the would-be buyers had very different prices in mind. Emmel, who was representing Southern Methodist University, had been authorized to spend up to \$50,000. The dealer wanted \$3-million. The sale didn't happen, and Emmel noted that the delicate manuscript, which was being kept in three cardboard boxes, was in danger of further deterioration if not preserved and stored properly.

Those fears turned out to be well founded. The codex was later placed in a safe-deposit box in Hicksville, N.Y., where it would remain for 16 years, without proper climate control. In addition, someone thought it would be smart to place the codex in a freezer for a time, which severely damaged the cell structure of the papyrus and caused the ink to bleed. What had survived for centuries in the desert was nearly destroyed in just a few years.

In 2000 the codex, which includes other texts, such as the Letter of Peter to Philip, was sold to a Swiss antiquities dealer, Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, for a six-figure sum, far below the dealer's original asking price. In the book *The Lost Gospel*, published by National Geographic, Herbert Krosney, a journalist, portrays Tchacos Nussberger as the selfless savior of the codex — though scholars close to the project tend to roll their eyes at such descriptions, seeing her motives as mostly financial. She tried to sell the manuscript at least twice, unsuccessfully. Then, in 2004, National Geographic bought the rights to translate and publish the gospel for a reported \$1-million. Under the terms of the deal, the society wouldn't own the manuscript, which — once it was restored — would be displayed in Cairo's Coptic Museum.

What National Geographic had bought access to was more like a puzzle than a book. As one scholar explains it, imagine that you have 10 pieces of paper with writing on both sides. Now take those 10 pages and tear them up into tiny pieces. Then get rid of, say, a third of those pieces. Take what's left, place it in a shoebox, and shake it. Now try to reconstruct the original 10 pages, keeping in mind that the fragile pieces must match on both sides. Much of that tedious work fell to Gregor Wurst, a professor of ecclesiastical history and patristics at the University of Augsburg, in Germany, who, with his large, round glasses and precise manner of speaking, seems like exactly the right person for the task.

Wurst was a member of what the documentary referred to as a "dream team" of biblical scholars. Another member was Bart Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and author of several best-selling books including, most recently, *God's Problem* (HarperOne, 2008), which questions how a loving God could permit human suffering. Ehrman is one of those rare scholars who has managed to parlay his expertise into mainstream success. He's good on TV.

Ehrman was among the first to be contacted by National Geographic. It was, as he recalls, an odd

conversation. He had to explain that, in order to translate the Coptic, the organization would need to hire a Coptologist, which he is not. That Coptologist would turn out to be Marvin Meyer, who was hired after someone from National Geographic heard him speak at a conference. Also brought on board was Elaine H. Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton University and the kind of academic celebrity who gets asked what's in her fridge by *The New York Times Magazine*.

It all happened in record time. In the cases of other newly discovered ancient texts, the process of translation and interpretation has dragged on for years. But it was only about eight months from the time Marvin Meyer was brought on that the gospel was announced to the public.

Before that big announcement, some members of the team were sent to a one-day media-training seminar in Manhattan to prepare them for the coming onslaught of attention. They would have to explain to reporters, repeatedly, that the Gospel of Judas was probably written in the second century, long after the actual Judas was dead. There is no scholarly debate over whether the conversations in the gospel actually took place. Everyone agrees that it's fiction, but it's fiction that reveals how a certain sect of Christians viewed the meaning of the crucifixion and the role of Jesus' disciples.

In the Gospel of Judas, the character of Judas is more prominent than he is in the New Testament. He and Jesus discuss theological matters, like the meaning of baptism and whether the human spirit dies. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the text is Jesus himself, who is often laughing, playful, and aggressive and who seems to enjoy mocking his disciples. For those familiar with the Jesus taught in Sunday school, that may come as a jolt.

One of the questions the National Geographic team was asked most frequently was "Is it the real thing?" — which, of course, depends on what you mean by "real" and "thing." The manuscript is real in the sense that it's not a fake. And it does appear to be the Gospel of Judas referred to in the writings of one early church father. But it is not a journalistic account of conversations between Jesus and his disciples, nor could it have been written by the historical Judas. That message didn't always come through: Some of the news reports read as if the gospel came straight from Judas' pen.

The announcement was timed so that the documentary, a book containing the translation and critical essays, an accompanying Web site, and an exhibit at National Geographic's headquarters would all be unveiled more or less simultaneously. By keeping the translation under wraps, National Geographic had cornered the market on Judas, and now it intended to take full advantage of its position.

In all of its materials, the view of Judas as good guy was front and center. In an online video clip, Meyer calls the text's Judas the "most insightful and the most loyal of all the disciples." In Ehrman's essay, Judas is "Jesus' closest friend, the one who understood Jesus better than anyone else, who turned Jesus over to the authorities because Jesus *wanted* him to do so." The teaser on the documentary's DVD case asks, "What if this account turned Jesus' betrayal on its head, and in it the villain became a hero?" The discovery of an ancient document titled "The Gospel of Judas" is exciting enough. But the twist of a good Judas — well, that's a great story.

Reporters ate it up. Word of the discovery made the front pages of newspapers around the world. "Ancient Text Says Jesus Asked Judas to Hand Him to the Romans" was *The Arizona Republic's* headline. *USA Today* said the gospel "recasts" Judas. The *Austin American-Statesman* put it this way: "Ancient Judas as 'good guy,' not Jesus' betrayer." More than seven million viewers tuned in to see the documentary (counting the first couple of reruns), and 300,000 copies of the book containing the translation and the critical essays are now in print. The barrage of media coverage, aided by the good-Judas spin, seemed to have the desired effect.

Book publishers were anxious to get in on the action, too. While scholars involved in the project signed contracts agreeing not to publish their own books for six months, three of them — Meyer, Pagels, and Ehrman — came out with Judas tomes once the embargo was lifted. Publishers figured that the public's appetite for Judas information had not yet been sated, and they were right: Pagels's book, which she wrote with Karen L. King, a professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard Divinity School, became a *New York Times* best seller. By commercial standards, the release of the Gospel of Judas had been a huge success.

One of the seven million people who watched the National Geographic documentary was April D. DeConick. Admittedly, DeConick, a professor of biblical studies at Rice University, was not your average viewer. As a Coptologist, she had long been aware of the existence of the Gospel of Judas and was friends with several of those who had worked on the so-called dream team. It's fair to say she watched the documentary with special interest.

As soon as the show ended, she went to her computer and downloaded the English translation from the National Geographic Web site. Almost immediately she began to have concerns. From her reading, even in translation, it seemed obvious that Judas was not turning in Jesus as a friendly gesture, but rather sacrificing him to a demon god named Saklas. This alone would suggest, strongly, that Judas was not acting with Jesus' best interests in mind — which would undercut the thesis of the National Geographic team. She turned to her husband, Wade, and said: "Oh no. Something is really wrong."

She started the next day on her own translation of the Coptic transcription, also posted on the National Geographic Web site. That's when she came across what she considered a major, almost unbelievable error. It had to do with the translation of the word "daimon," which Jesus uses to address Judas. The National Geographic team translates this as "spirit," an unusual choice and inconsistent with translations of other early Christian texts, where it is usually rendered as "demon." In this passage, however, Jesus' calling Judas a demon would completely alter the meaning. "O 13th spirit, why do you try so hard?" becomes "O 13th demon, why do you try so hard?" A gentle inquiry turns into a vicious rebuke.

Then there's the number 13. The Gospel of Judas is thought to have been written by a sect of Gnostics known as Sethians, for whom the number 13 would indicate a realm ruled by the demon Ialdabaoth. Calling someone a demon from the 13th realm would not be a compliment. In another passage, the National Geographic translation says that Judas "would ascend to the holy generation." But DeConick says it's clear from the transcription that a negative has been left out and that Judas will not ascend to the

holy generation (this error has been corrected in the second edition). DeConick also objected to a phrase that says Judas has been "set apart for the holy generation." She argues it should be translated "set apart from the holy generation" — again, the opposite meaning. In the later critical edition, the National Geographic translators offer both as legitimate possibilities.

These discoveries filled her with dread. "I was like, this is bad, and these are my friends," she says. It's worth noting that it didn't take DeConick months of painstaking research to reach her conclusions. Within minutes, she thought something was wrong. Within a day, she was convinced that significant mistakes had been made. Why, if it was so obvious to her, had these other scholars missed it? Why had they seen a good Judas where, according to DeConick, none exists?

Maybe because they were looking for him. The first reference to the Gospel of Judas was made by St. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, in *Against Heresies*, written around 180. Irenaeus was not a fan of the Gospel of Judas, which he deemed a heretical text (though it's not known whether he actually read the gospel or had only heard rumors about it). Until the Coptic manuscript surfaced in the 1970s, Irenaeus' mention of the gospel was the only known reference. Irenaeus wrote that the gospel portrayed Judas as "knowing the truth as no others did." It was an intriguing statement and suggestive of a more positive Judas.

DeConick thinks the translators were overly influenced by Irenaeus and read the gospel with his interpretation in mind. If you come to the gospel free of preconceptions, she argues, then it's clear that Judas is evil and cursed, not holy and chosen. DeConick lays out this argument at length in *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (Continuum, 2007). The book was written for a general audience, but it has driven the conversation among biblical scholars in recent months.

This year DeConick held a conference on the Gospel of Judas at Rice. Many of the marquee names in biblical scholarship were there, including Meyer and Pagels. It was a cordial event, no thrown books or postlecture fistfights. Still, it was hard to miss the tension. When Meyer spoke, DeConick could be seen shaking her head and whispering to a colleague. One scholar referred to Meyer's defense of the original translation as "desperate" — causing him to laugh good-naturedly, if a bit defensively, too.

At one point, Pagels grabbed the microphone to say that she did not wish to be associated with Ehrman's positive take on Judas. She also, strangely, distanced herself from the book she had written with King. The word that the National Geographic team translated as "spirit" King translated as "god" — a choice Pagels said she now regretted. Even so, Pagels, like Meyer, pushed for a middle ground between a good Judas and a bad Judas, saying that interpretations that "eliminate the positive and emphasize the negative are no more adequate to interpreting the text as a whole." Pagels did not make herself available for an interview with *The Chronicle*, despite multiple requests over several weeks.

King did agree to talk about the book. She, too, regrets that translation. "'God' was pushing it far over the top," she says. But there were no particularly good options, and leaving that word untranslated (the option Pagels says she now prefers) presents its own problems, especially in a book intended for a

general reader. As for whether the National Geographic team's interpretation led other scholars astray, King is unwilling to point fingers. "Did they get it wrong? I don't know," she says. "There's probably no one who agrees completely with Bart Ehrman's or Marvin Meyer's essays," she says, but she adds that's not unusual with early interpretations of new texts.

The fiercest criticism of the National Geographic team came in the form of a *New York Times* opinion essay by DeConick, published in December. It is, like the professor herself, plain-spoken and blunt. She writes that "a more careful reading" makes it clear that Judas is no hero, implying, none too subtly, that the National Geographic team was not careful. She accuses its members of making "serious mistakes" and wonders aloud whether they are guilty of intentional mistranslation. "Were they genuine errors, or was something more deliberate going on?" she writes. "This is the question of the hour, and I do not have a satisfactory answer."

It takes a lot to upset Marvin Meyer. But over lunch, months after the publication of DeConick's essay, his displeasure is palpable. While she didn't name names, those in the field knew it was a direct swipe at him; the translation was officially a consensus translation, but Meyer had taken the lead. What bothers him most is the suggestion that there was "something more deliberate going on" — in other words, that they had falsified the text, creating a positive Judas for commercial gain. "I did not feel that I and we had been treated fairly," Meyer says, measuring his words. "I would not do that to one of my colleagues, with that kind of language."

When asked if she regretted that characterization, DeConick doesn't hesitate. "No, not at all," she says. "I don't know why it's a problem to pose the question." It's a problem, Meyer holds, because she didn't make the accusation privately, or on a blog posting, or in some obscure journal, but in the pages of *The New York Times*. Again, DeConick makes no apology. "They sold 250 million copies of their book or whatever," she says. "I think this is what was needed to get the job done."

Both DeConick and Meyer, though, took pains, when being interviewed for this article, to play down any animosity. Meyer emphasized the harmony of the recent Rice conference, and DeConick talked about the "healing" that had taken place. Yet beneath the claims of collegiality, there is some genuine ill feeling. For instance, when asked why DeConick would publicly question his ethics, Meyer accuses her of professional envy. "She felt some real passion because she was one of those people who had been excluded," he says. DeConick says that's not true — and besides, she wouldn't have been willing to sign a nondisclosure agreement. "He's maintaining his position even though he's aware of the problems, which I find troubling," she says.

The criticism of National Geographic's handling of the project has come not only from scholars on the outside, but also from members of the dream team.

The loudest and most frequent complaint has been about its secrecy. The members of the team weren't allowed to reveal what they were working on, much less to share information with fellow scholars. In 1991 the Society of Biblical Literature passed a resolution that said all scholars should be allowed access

to a newly found manuscript or, barring that, a facsimile. If that resolution had been followed, critics argue, then the more egregious errors would never have made it to press or been broadcast to millions.

But that simply wasn't possible given the nature of the project, according to Terry D. Garcia, executive vice president for mission programs at National Geographic. Garcia greenlighted the Judas deal and made the announcement at the news conference when it was released to the world. He was involved at every step, even personally carrying fragments of the manuscript back from Switzerland to the United States to undergo radiocarbon dating. He says the organization was mostly concerned that the Gospel of Judas "is what it purports to be." As for the much-criticized nondisclosure agreements, Garcia says they are a routine precaution. "The last thing we wanted were multiple voices talking about bits and pieces of this project," he says. "All that would do was fan speculation and create unsubstantiated claims that might impede the research."

He notes that National Geographic sunk a lot of money into the Gospel of Judas (he wouldn't say how much, though he confirmed it was in the low seven figures). That money was used in part to pay for the transcription, translation, and preservation of the manuscript. It was a significant investment of resources and time. Most important, according to Garcia, it put National Geographic's reputation on the line. He dismisses criticism of the project as inevitable and called the assertions in DeConick's opinion piece "the height of irresponsibility."

But even Meyer himself criticizes the way National Geographic operated. While he says he's grateful for all the society has done to preserve the manuscript, working within its system has been frustrating. "We have at times gnashed our teeth to work with them," he says, employing a vivid biblical image. "We have found things to be highly irregular in terms of how we do things in scholarship."

For example, in the documentary, there is a scene in which Meyer is standing in a burial cave in Egypt, explaining the likely story of how the codex was found. The director, according to Meyer, wanted him to say that that very cave was the cave where the codex was found. But, of course, no one knows that, and there are a lot of burial caves in Egypt. In the end, Meyer says on camera that it was probably found in a cave like the one he's standing in. The pressure to sacrifice truth for drama, he says, was constant.

He and other scholars were also displeased that it took so long — until this year — for high-resolution images of the codex to be made available to other scholars. For Coptologists, being able to see these images was crucial because it allowed them to decipher the actual ink traces, rather than relying on a transcription.

Other scholars, including a member of the team, fault Meyer, not National Geographic. Craig A. Evans, a professor of New Testament at Acadia Divinity College, in Nova Scotia, appears in the documentary and has written an essay for the second edition of the National Geographic book, to be published in June. He was selected, everyone acknowledges, in order to have an evangelical Christian voice on the team. The society was concerned from the beginning that the title alone — the Gospel of Judas — would offend Christians. Hiring a practicing Christian, the thinking went, might mitigate the fallout.

Evans and Meyer go way back. They both attended Claremont Graduate University and used to play pickup basketball together. It was Meyer who suggested that National Geographic contact him. But Evans sees "glaring mistakes" in the translation and puts the blame squarely on his old friend. "It isn't really National Geographic's fault if the lead editor and interpreter is a dominant personality, gets all excited, and interprets it in a certain way," he says. "I have a feeling that once the interpretation began moving that way, National Geographic got excited. They knew they had a bombshell."

Now, looking back on the documentary, Evans has regrets: "I wish Marv had done a better job so I didn't find myself mindlessly repeating a translation that turned out to be pretty faulty."

In the second edition of National Geographic's Judas book, Meyer tries out a new argument to counter those who have attacked his translation and interpretation. His defense centers on the meanings of "13th aeon," which refers to an eternal realm, and "daimon." A later Gnostic text, called Pistis Sofia, uses some of the same language, and the character of Sofia is neither wholly evil nor wholly good. He posits a connection between the character of Sofia and the character of Judas. Ehrman, in a footnote to his own essay, asserts that Meyer "has effectively refuted" the thesis of DeConick's book.

It's tough to find anyone else who agrees. In an essay presented at the Rice conference, John D. Turner, a professor of religious studies at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, insists that Meyer's use of a much later text to justify his interpretation of Judas "raises fundamental methodological questions." In an interview, he is less courtly. "That's a bunch of crap," he says, part of last-ditch attempt to salvage an utterly discredited view.

Meyer is unmoved by Turner's objections. "I see it as an appropriate challenge, to be sure," he says. "But for now this is my story, and I'm sticking to it."

Some of the sharpest digs have been reserved for Ehrman, who was the first member of the National Geographic team to publish a book on Judas. Publicly Ehrman has been the most vocal in embracing Judas as hero, and he has been pilloried for it. Scholar after scholar at the Rice conference took shots at him. Turner said he didn't read Ehrman's book because he "wouldn't expect to learn anything from it."

Ehrman thinks he has been unfairly caricatured as a cheerleader for the positive Judas theory. "People like April harp on whether Judas is a good guy or not," he says. "The bulk of my essay and my book deals with other aspects." He also defends National Geographic against those who say the society's decisions, like insisting on nondisclosure agreements, were purely mercenary. "This million dollars has to come from some place," Ehrman says. "If National Geographic gets scooped, are they going to do it out of the kindness of their hearts?"

While the publicity has died down, the process of piecing together and interpreting the Gospel of Judas continues. It's possible that scholars may soon have more fragments to work with: An Ohio antiquities dealer who briefly owned the codex claims to still have pages of the text, though what will happen to those pages — and whether they are, in fact, from the gospel — remains to be seen.

As for the good-Judas, bad-Judas controversy, Meyer is surprised by all the rancor. "I can't understand why people at times are so animated about this," he says. "I really expect that, in the end, neither the overly positive or the overly negative Judas would carry the day."

DeConick is not so sure. She thinks the impression created by the National Geographic's publicity machine will be almost impossible to erase. All most people will remember, she worries, is the good-guy spin. As for her colleagues, like Meyer, she says simply: "They messed up."

Then, concerned that she has been too harsh, DeConick tries to soften the blow. "I don't want you to print that they messed up," she says. "Say there were errors. There were serious errors."

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