

Paul almighty: A novel portrayal of an infamous figure

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

The long-lost apocryphal Gospel of Judas, published with Easter season media fanfare, begins: “The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot.”

Jesus says to this infamous figure, portrayed very differently in New Testament Gospels, “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom.” Jesus assures Judas, “You have been told everything.” Moreover, “You will exceed all of them,” Jesus says. “For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me,” a reference to Jesus’ flesh covering his spiritual self. The text ends with Judas turning over Jesus for some money to the authorities.

No one has claimed that the 26-page text reveals the Judas of history. A Vatican official in February called it “a product of religious fantasy,” and Pope Benedict XVI in a recent audience termed Judas the “betrayal apostle.”

Nevertheless, academic experts at a Washington, D.C., news conference April 6 stressed the text’s value for understanding the diversity of beliefs early in the Christian era—in this case, that of gnostic sectarians.

Some scholars on the translation project said that the history of private teachings from Jesus goes back to the first century. “The end of the Gospel of John says many more things are not written in this book,” said Elaine Pagels of Princeton University.

Scholars indicated that the Gospel of Judas could spur new study of how the Judas story expanded in apocryphal and canonical gospels. The apostle Paul says that Jesus was betrayed—literally, “handed over”—but did not say by whom or to whom.

“The New Testament Gospels never say why Judas betrayed Jesus,” said Craig A. Evans, who teaches New Testament at Acadia University’s divinity college in Nova Scotia. Though the Gospels of Luke and John say the devil entered Judas before his misdeed, Evans said he believes that “the New Testament writers really didn’t know

much about Judas.”

The project to fund the translation for books, articles and a TV documentary by the National Geographic Society in cooperation with the text’s Swiss owner was first reported December 27 in the Century. Officials said recently that it took five years to reassemble nearly 1,000 papyrus fragments because of the text’s deterioration during the 16 years it was stored in a Long Island safe-deposit box.

The Coptic-language text had been shopped around in vain for years in North America and Europe after its discovery in the 1970s near El Minya, Egypt. Scholars given limited access to the gospel had recognized it as similar to texts in the large cache of gnostic and Christian sectarian writings found in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

The Gospel of Judas was first described by a heresy-fighting bishop, Irenaeus of Lyon, France, around AD 180. Irenaeus called it “a fictitious history” that said that Judas, “knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal.”

Radiocarbon tests and writing analysis date the text to AD 300. Scholars say it was translated from a Greek version written in the mid-second century. The author is unknown except that the text, as reported earlier, shows signs of having been produced by a gnostic sect called Cainites who admired nefarious biblical figures such as Cain for carrying out God’s will.

Gnostic writings share a central tenet that “salvation comes through knowledge,” said Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina, a member of the nine-person advisory panel assembled by National Geographic.

Two other members of the panel, Pagels and Marvin Meyer of Chapman University, noted that the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary—texts found in Egypt a century earlier—both portray their namesakes as recipients of private, esoteric teaching by Jesus. “There are hints in the New Testament Gospels that there is more to the story” than what they tell, added Meyer.

Mark, the oldest Gospel, says Jesus selected his three leading disciples to accompany him to the mountaintop where he was transfigured, then later told that threesome, plus Andrew, of horrendous events coming in the last days. Jesus told a larger group of followers in Mark that they had been given the secret of the kingdom

of God, though that secret is not spelled out later in the Gospel.

The Acts of the Apostles says the resurrected Jesus appeared to the apostles for 40 days, “speaking about the kingdom of God.” Scholar James M. Robinson once suggested that Acts limits that time to 40 days because of the proliferation of claims about having received revelations from the risen Jesus. A contrasting account cited by Robinson appears in the Secret Book of James, a Nag Hammadi text that depicts Jesus as still teaching Peter and James 550 days after he rose from the dead.

In an ENI report from London, Graham Stanton of the University of Cambridge suggests that the Judas text “will undoubtedly encourage some fresh conspiracy theories” relating to Christian origins because of the high media interest in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

In Jackson, Tennessee, Greg Thornbury, dean of Baptist-related Union University’s school of Christian studies, noted to Baptist Press that Pagels pointed out that the people who wrote and circulated gnostic gospels “did not think they were heretics.” Thornbury asked in turn, “When do heretics admit that what they believe is, in fact, heresy?”

Another project adviser, Donald Senior, president of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, agreed that the Gospel of Judas testifies to “the diversity and vitality of early Christianity.” Yet, he added, it has “little claim” to historical reliability. “I could be wrong,” said Senior, smiling, “and if I am, I hope Judas will forgive me.”