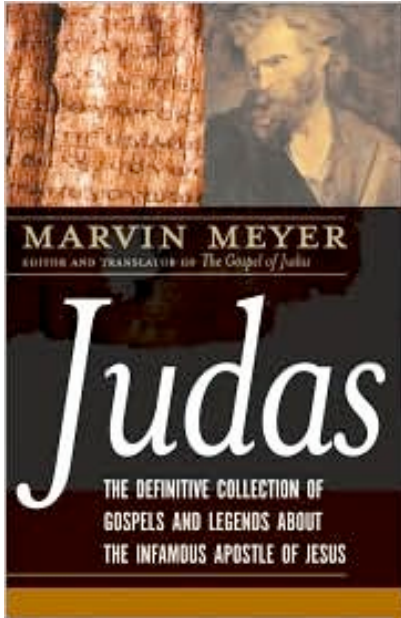


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**Meyer, Marvin**

***Judas: The Definitive Collection of Gospels and Legends about the Infamous Apostle of Jesus***

San Francisco, Calif.: Harper One, 2007. Pp. 181.  
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Philip L. Tite  
Willamette University  
Salem, Oregon

With the publication of the preliminary English translation of the Gospel of Judas by the National Geographic Society in 2006, followed by the critical edition of Codex Tchacos in 2007 (both *The Gospel of Judas, Critical Edition: Together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos* [National Geographic] and *Codex Tchacos: Texte und Analyse* [de Gruyter]), we have witnessed a flurry of publications on this new text. Indeed, during one of several sessions on the Gospel of Judas at the 2007 SBL Annual Meeting, ten from over a dozen books were showcased with an overflowing audience in attendance. Two major conferences (in Paris and Houston) along with a growing number of refereed articles further attest to the strong interest that this new Gospel has generated. With such voluminous scholarly output within such a short time (perhaps too short a time?), one must ask what sets Meyer's *Judas* apart, especially given his significant role in the publication of this Gospel? Meyer's contribution lies in the broader context of early Christian texts into which he places this Gospel.

Whereas many works on the Gospel of Judas largely focus on the Gospel itself or on the controversy surrounding this Gospel's potential impact on the historical relationship between Jesus and Judas, Meyer attempts to use this Gospel as a bouncing board for reassessing diverse early Christian portraits of Judas. Meyer brings together a series of

“Judas” texts for his reader to re-perceive the figure of Judas. He begins, in the introduction and chapter 1, by noting the increasing vilification of Judas from the first to second centuries, a negative portrayal that has been until recently the standard “common-sense” view of the disciple who “betrayed” Jesus. Building on William Klassen’s work on *paradidonai* (“to hand over” rather than “betray”), Meyer argues that the Gospel of Judas presents Judas as “the best friend and most faithful disciple of Jesus who was vilified and marginalized in much of the Christian tradition” (13). In chapter 2, for instance, Paul is presented as never referring to Judas by name or mentioning a betrayer, even though he recognized the twelve disciples (1 Cor 15:3–5). Rather, Jesus is “handed over” either by God or by Jesus himself (1 Cor 11:23–24; Gal 2:19–20; Rom 8:31–32). In the Markan, Matthean, Lukan (including Acts), and Johannine treatments of Judas, there is an increasingly derogatory characterization of Judas. It is the success of such characterization that is the foundation of the misconception of who Judas was, a misconception that is only now, with access to the Gospel of Judas, being called into question.

Chapters 2–4 supply examples of early Christian texts that offer either more positive or less certain understandings of Judas. In each chapter, we are given a brief introduction to the text as well as an English translation. Meyer begins with the Gospel of Judas in chapter 2, a Gospel that he identifies as fitting an early Sethian period with a Jewish mystical or gnostic source underlying the revelatory material. (Such secondary or light Christianization of a non-Christian source is not uncommon in the treatment of, especially, Sethian texts.) In addressing some of the key points of debate over this Gospel, Meyer calls into question the antimartyrdom reading of the Gospel of Judas’s sacrificial language (posited by Karen King and Elaine Pagels) and counters an alternative reading of Judas (set forth by April DeConick, Louis Painchaud, and John Turner) where Judas is “demonized” rather than “rehabilitated” in this Gospel. Building on Ismo Dunderberg’s work, Meyer reaffirms his “positive disciple” reading of Judas.

Using the Gospel of Judas as his inspiration for reassessing Judas, Meyer takes a fresh look at the Dialogue of the Savior (ch. 3) and the Concept of Our Great Power (ch. 4). Although Judas is not mentioned by name in Concept of Our Great Power, there is a clear “Judas” passage near the end of page 41 of the tractate, where “one of his followers ... handed him over to the ruler of the underworld” (94). According to Meyer, this follower (= Judas) does no wrongdoing, even though he is acting on behalf of the cosmic powers that oppose Jesus. Those familiar with Meyer’s work on the Dialogue of the Savior, however, will be more surprised by the inclusion of that text. This book signals a shift in Meyer’s reading of this text, offering an intriguing alternative to the identification of Judas as Judas Thomas in the Dialogue of the Savior, that is, to see Judas as Judas Iscariot. Meyer is careful to keep this as merely a suggestion, leaving the identification open (see this qualification on p. 70). By adding the Dialogue of the Savior to his set of “Judas”

texts, we may have one more instance of a positive view of Judas (as recipient of divine teaching, being placed on par with Mary Magdalene and Matthew (or Matthias)).

Whereas the Gospel of Judas, the Dialogue of the Savior, and the Concept of Our Great Power are used to illustrate/establish a tradition of a positive view of Judas, in chapters 5 and 6 Meyer turns his attention to texts that represent the opposite perception. Beginning with the “Round Dance of the Cross” hymn from the Acts of John, which Meyer reads as having possible Valentinian influence, the stock elements of “Judas the betrayer” are elucidated. Specifically, the unnamed traitor (= Judas) presents both a disparaging portrait of Judas and an anti-Jewish subtext to the Judas characterization. It is this close link between Judas and Judaism, as Meyer discusses in his introduction, that has been a building block in Christian anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic attitudes throughout history; perhaps, I would add, it is the concern over this very link that has encouraged the recovery of a “positive” Judas in recent scholarship. Chapter 6 moves beyond the New Testament and the Acts of John to a wide selection of texts ranging from the second to sixteenth century that portray Judas in diabolical fashion. While Meyer cautions his reader that these texts are not a comprehensive collection, this chapter does an excellent job in representing some fascinating texts that exemplify the strong negative treatment of the Judas figure: Arabic Infancy Gospel; Papias, *Expositions*; Acts of Pilate; Sedulius, *Paschal Hymn*; Gospel of Bartholomew; Acts of Andrew and Paul; Gospel of Barnabas; Book of Resurrection of Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle; Golden Legend; and, in the introductory comments, Qur’an, Surah 4, which seems to be influenced by the Christian tradition that does not vilify Judas (112) and would have warranted a full analysis as part of the previous chapter.

Chapter 7 brings the book to a close with a sweeping discussion of “traitors before Judas.” Building on Dennis MacDonald’s Homeric reading of early Christian texts, albeit with qualification, Meyer explores Jewish and Greek examples of betrayal stories that may have been the inspiration for the vilifying tales of Judas in early Christian tradition. Jewish betrayal stories are illustrated by Gen 37:2–36 and Ps 41, whereas the Greek betrayal story given is that of Melanthius the Goatherd from the *Odyssey*. These examples suggest that Judas, or negative aspects of the Judas accounts, may have been fictional rather than historical.

By situating the Gospel of Judas within a broader literary tradition, Meyer has certainly contributed to the ongoing analysis of the text, raising arguments in support of the rehabilitated Judas reading. Some of what he sets forth will not be new to scholars; in some cases, such as the survey of the New Testament portrayals of Judas, it is already well covered in other books on this Gospel (e.g., Simon Gathercole’s treatment of increasing vilification of Judas in the New Testament Gospels). For a general audience, however, this

collection of texts will be helpful in pushing beyond the canonical material, while simultaneously engaging the ongoing scholarly debates on this Gospel. With a more popular audience in view, this book is certainly reader friendly. Meyer is careful neither to talk past his audience nor to render discussions superficial. Indeed, both nonspecialists and scholars will benefit from this very readable work. This is a major strength in this book, one that tends to typify Meyer's scholarship: outstanding, insightful, yet readable and accessible. Thus, in one sense this book offers something new and useful to the growing scholarship on the Gospel of Judas.

However, this book also exemplifies the current difficulties facing students of early Christianity: the overenthusiastic optimism about the potential of this Gospel for revising our understanding of the first two centuries of church history (even to the near exclusion of attention to the other tractates in Codex Tchacos, a misbalance in attention that I hope will be corrected in future scholarship on this codex). Beyond the highly questionable identification of Judas in the Dialogue of the Savior (which is largely based on a shared "gnostic" thought worldview between this text and the Gospel of Judas [see 67]; as Meyer is fully aware, such a parallel evokes the problematic category of "Gnosticism" that has been called into question over the past decade), or the questionable demarcation of the historical from the literary portrayals of Judas (I see no reason to see these as exclusive options), there are more serious challenges facing this work. For the most part, these challenges indicate current scholarship on this Gospel rather than just Meyer's *Judas*.

Meyer claims that this Gospel "raises important issues for reflection and evaluation" (13), thereby tantalizing us to wonder at the potential significance of this new Gospel. Yet, when we look at the actual claims, there is very little that is new or revolutionary. For instance, he asserts that "the *Gospel of Judas* underscores the fact that the early church was a very diverse phenomenon, with different gospels, different understandings of the good news, and different ways of believing in Jesus and following him" (13). Yet we have already developed this new perspective over the last forty years or so, not only with the broad appreciation of the Nag Hammadi material but also with fresh models for appreciating canonical and noncanonical sources (Koester and Robinson's work in the 1960s comes readily to mind). Similarly, Meyer's claim that this new Gospel "raises the issue of the nature of orthodoxy and heresy in an especially vivid way" (14) overstates the importance of this Gospel and strikes me as reflecting both the controversy spawned around this Gospel in modern church circles and the excitement that this new discovery holds on the scholarly imagination. Challenges to "orthodoxy-heresy" as a historical framework (i.e., establishing "normative" and "deviant" Christianity) have been with us since the seminal work of Walter Bauer and has increasingly gained greater theoretical nuance. Indeed, I would argue that we need to discard this orthodoxy-heresy model and rather see Christianity during these formative centuries as a series of heterodox

movements competing for “orthodox” or normative status. While I agree that much work needs to be done to overcome the confessional and canonical bias in the field and that such a dynamic understanding of history is not common outside scholarly circles, I am not convinced that the Gospel of Judas has radically shifted our perception of early Christianity. Those wheels have already been in motion for years, fueling debates within the academy over other noncanonical texts (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas). Rather than seeing the Gospel of Judas as the crux for a paradigm shift in the field, I would welcome a more balanced approach to the study of this text, whereby it is placed effectively within its historical and cultural context along with other early Christian writings.

Meyer’s book adds to this process by moving us to look beyond the Gospel to various streams of interpreting or creating “Judas.” It is my hope that we will use Meyer, either in classrooms or in our research, as a beginning point for extending our understanding of the Gospel of Judas, thereby fully appreciating it along with other Sethian texts of the second and third centuries as part of the social forces at work within early Christianity that resulted in diverse and contending appropriations of the elusive Judas Iscariot.