
In the introduction (1–22) Meyer expresses his fascination with the three heroes of the book: Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Judas Iscariot. Each has fallen prey to criticism, slander, vilification, Judas most of all, yet gospels have been attributed to each and all of them and/or gospels have been written about them, sure evidence that already in early times they were not universally disrespected and vilified.

The chapter on Thomas (23–60) starts with a brief introduction to the figure of Thomas in the New Testament and an introduction to the Gospel of Thomas, followed by an
English translation (Meyer’s own) of the Coptic text, some Oxyrhynchus papyri (654–655, 1), and a Thomas-fragment from Hippolytus of Rome. Notes have been added to clarify the translation and explain exegetical issues. The traditional (New Testament) picture of Thomas (“doubting Thomas”) is replaced in this gospel by one that portrays him as a recipient of divine revelation from the living Jesus and a transmitter of wisdom sayings.

The second figure to be redeemed (or rehabilitated) is Mary Magdalene, the intimate friend of Jesus who from an early point in history was confused with the sinner who anointed Jesus’s feet (Luke 7:36–50), with disastrous results. In the introduction to the Gospel of Mary (61–76) Meyer sketches Mary’s role in the New Testament and her contested position in early Christian history. The translation of this short text is followed by extensive notes to clarify the text and comments on the translation.

Understandably, Judas Iscariot (77–106) receives the most attention. Meyer has extensively published on Judas, on both the gospel and the historical figure. Meyer’s translation of the Gospel of Judas is reproduced from his The Gospel of Judas: On a Night with Judas Iscariot (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011) and contains a brief review of the figure of Judas in the New Testament and early Christian sources, a brief description of the content of the gospel, an English translation, and notes.

As to the translational choices of Meyer, it is interesting to see how he proceeds in the light of recent debates. First, at Gos. Jud. 44 line 21 Meyer defends “spirit” as “the most neutral translation” of Judas’s address as daimon (as in the first English translation of the National Geographic team), over against the Critical Edition (“daimon”) and April DeConick (“demon, evil spirit”) (see the extended n. 118 on p. 104). In context, however, Judas is called “a thirteenth daimon” in comparison with the twelve apostolic demons who represent apostolic Christianity, which in the context of the Gospel of Judas is surely not a neutral designation. Second, Meyer acknowledges the superiority of the translation “You have separated me from that generation” (46 lines 17–18; so DeConick and the Critical Edition) to “for that generation” (90 + n. 69; against the National Geographic team, Elaine Pagels, and Karen King). Third, as to Gos. Jud. 46 lines 6–7, different from DeConick, who takes it as an exclamation (“At no time may my seed control the archons!”), Meyer opts for an interrogative sentence, “Could it be that my seed is subject to the rulers?” (90), and in note 66 gives “surely my seed does not subdue the rulers!” as an alternative translation (100). Fourth, Meyer follows the reconstruction of 46–47 of DeConick and the Critical Edition, “You will not ascend to the holy [generation]” (46 line 25–47 line 1, emphasis added), with a note on alternative attempts to make sense of the text, including the emendation “you will ascend.” Fifth, Meyer suggests that the puzzling “you will exceed all of them” (Gos. Jud. 56 lines 17–18) may be taken to mean “you will
exceed all of them in evil” (as in DeConick’s translation: “You will do worse than all of them”). Sixth, Meyer (94) follows the Critical Edition in the translation “Your star has passed by” (DeConick “Your star has ascended”).

Three more observations are in order: first, Gos. Jud. 36 (“Someone else will take your place, so that the twelve [disciples] will again be complete with their god”) seems to confirm Judas’s knowledge of the election of Matthias, hence his knowledge of the Acts of the Apostles (97 n. 21).

Second, at Gos. Jud. 57 the text has been expanded with additional fragments (17): “[I am telling you] the truth, your last … and … come to be … the ministers of the aeon have…, and the kings have become weak, and the generations of the angels have grieved, and those who are evil….”

Third, Meyer thinks that Judas’s betrayal never took place (83). However, as a number of scholars argue, the invention of a betrayal by a Judas figure creates more problems than that it solves, and there are many alternative explanations (I, for one, still interpret the strange silence about Judas and his act in the earliest layers of Christianity in terms of a [Freudian] repression of collective memory; see my Judas and the Choice of Matthias, WUNT 187 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004], 47–48). At any rate, to an uninformed audience it is a bit unfair just to posit that Judas’s betrayal is a literary fiction.

In the epilogue of the book (107–28) Meyer comes up with his own (fictive) version of “a Gospel of the Redeemed—Draft Chapters in a Gospel of Wisdom, with Restored Disciples,” a gospel in which Thomas, Mary, and Judas are rehabilitated and taken up in the tradition as recipients and transmitters of divine wisdom. I must admit that I have mixed feelings about this final chapter: I fully recognize the need to rewrite early Christian history from neglected perspectives, and I also applaud the use of fiction and imagination as useful tools to find truth. Still, this mixture of fact and fiction can hardly be said to be based on solid historical-critical scholarship (which may be precisely the point, of course). Even when its sole aim is to popularize scholarly knowledge, one expects a more cautious and balanced treatment of the fragmentary nature of the source material available. To conclude on the basis of a few texts stemming from a specific region and/or an isolated community that the entire history of early Christianity needs to be rewritten may be more than the scant evidence allows. I am still not convinced that the radical reinterpretation of the Judas figure at this early stage of history is warranted—and even when it is, whether it is enough to draw rigorous historical inferences about the historical Judas. We simply cannot tell.
The book closes with a long bibliography (129–43), containing quite technical titles for a general audience and a twelve-page index of ancient texts (145–16). In the end, I must admit that I fully share Philip L. Tite’s critique of Meyer’s Judas book reviewed in RBL September 2009. The book now under consideration makes fascinating reading but does not add much new insight, regrettably so.