

The Historical Setting of the *Gospel of Judas*  
and its Presentation to the Wider Public  
With an Appendix on its Dependence on the Canonical Gospels

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Riemer Roukema<sup>1</sup>

When in April 2006 the *Gospel of Judas* was presented to the world in a provisional Coptic text and a first translation into English on the website of the National Geographic Society, the first comments on this apocryphon were highly ambiguous. On the one hand scholars immediately recognized it as a Gnostic text comparable to the writings found in Nag Hammadi, and considered that this might well be the *Gospel of Judas* referred to by Irenaeus. More specifically, its connection with Sethian texts was soon established, and for these reasons the newly found document was dated to the early or mid second century. On the other hand, however, it was also suggested that this document contained historically reliable traditions on Judas's alleged treason and Jesus' death, and that through this Gospel our views of these historical persons would have to be radically modified. This suggestion was spread by journalists who were no specialists in early Christianity, but their articles were inspired by scholars who were more acquainted with the historical setting of this document.<sup>2</sup> Some publications signed by scholars were also highly suggestive.

It is striking, however, that after 2006 scholars refrain from emphasizing the view that this Gospel might inform us about the historical Judas and Jesus. Yet the initial impression left to the wide audience is that the *Gospel of Judas* gives a description of Judas's relationship with Jesus that might be more valuable and more accurate than the records of the canonical Gospels. In the present paper I wish to record the initial presentation of the *Gospel of Judas* and to comment on the hermeneutical presupposition that emerges from some currents of information concerning this Gospel.

[p. 8] Initial Comments on the *Gospel of Judas*

Of course, we may be grateful that the National Geographic Society was willing to support the publication of the *Gospel of Judas*, for leading universities could not agree to publish an ancient text brought out of Egypt illegally.<sup>3</sup> But our recognition of the important role of the National Geographic Society does not preclude that one might feel uneasy about some aspects of its Press Release on April 6, 2006. Its second paragraph held: "The Gospel of Judas gives a different view of the relationship between Jesus and Judas, offering new insights into the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Unlike the accounts in the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in which Judas is portrayed as a reviled traitor, the newly discovered gospel portrays Judas as acting at Jesus' request when he hands Jesus over to the authorities."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Riemer Roukema is professor of New Testament at the Protestant Theological University, location Kampen (Oudestraat/Koornmarkt; the Netherlands). He read this paper at the conference on the *Gospel of Judas* in Houston, Texas, 13-16 March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In the footnotes it will appear that after all some scholars do not agree with the way they were quoted by journalists. But even in those cases they may have been misquoted, their presumed statements served to present the *Gospel of Judas* to the world.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2006), 177-178.

<sup>4</sup> "Ancient Text Titled 'Gospel of Judas' is Authenticated, Translated", <http://press.nationalgeographic.com/pressroom/index>, 6 April, 2006.

One might observe that in this Gospel, strictly speaking, Jesus does not request Judas to hand him over, but rather announces that Judas will sacrifice him (“For you will sacrifice the man who bears me”, *Gos. Jud.* 56.19-20).<sup>5</sup>

But a more important point is that in this paragraph it is said that the *Gospel of Judas* offers new insights into the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Thus, this phrase suggests that this Gospel might give access to the inner motivation of the historical Judas. It does not say here, e.g., that it offers new insights into the way in which some second-century Christians interpreted Judas’s final act toward Jesus. To be sure, in one of the final paragraphs of the Press Release Professors Elaine Pagels, Marvin Meyer, and Craig Evans correctly comment on the *Gospel of Judas* in terms of the diversity of early Christianity, but Evans’s final observation reads that “This gospel may even help us better understand things hinted at in the New Testament Gospels themselves.”

Although it should never be excluded that texts from second-century Christianity may contain early traditions or help to disclose the intentions of earlier writings (e.g., the canonical Gospels), in the editing of the Press Release Evans’s final remark seems to serve as an *inclusio* confirming the suggestion of the second paragraph that the *Gospel of Judas* gives access to ancient traditions that were hitherto unknown. Professor Evans is quoted more extensively in the *New York Times* of the following day. According to the journalist he “conjectured that some of the dialogue between Jesus and Judas may have been spoken in private, and so did not make it into the New Testament Gospels, which are more likely to treat Jesus’ public statements.” Next, Evans is quoted in these words: “It is possible that the Gospel of Judas preserves an old memory that Jesus had actually instructed Judas in private, and the other disciples did not know about it.”<sup>6</sup> Immediately after Evans’s quotes, the *New York Times* also gives the <sup>[p. 9]</sup> reaction of other scholars. One of these is Ben Witherington III, who says that “The manuscript tells us nothing about the historical Jesus or the historical Judas.”<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the first Press Release in April 2006, Herbert Krosney published a fascinating book about the vicissitudes of the manuscript. Its foreword is authored by Professor Bart Ehrman, who writes, “For this is a gospel that tells the tale of Jesus from the viewpoint of Judas Iscariot himself, the one who allegedly betrayed him.”<sup>8</sup> Later on he writes, “It is an early gospel that provides an alternative understanding of Jesus, told from the point of view of his betrayer.”<sup>9</sup> These are correct, but also highly suggestive observations. It is true that this Gospel is told from the viewpoint of Judas Iscariot, but this does not imply that it provides its readers with the viewpoint of Judas *himself*. It is true that it is an early gospel, but the question is whether it is early enough to be somehow historically reliable.

Krosney’s book was one of two that were published by the National Geographic Society in 2006. The second one was edited by Professors Rudolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst,<sup>10</sup> and contained the first English translation of the *Gospel of Judas* and some elucidating essays. This volume has been sold all over the world and has been translated

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<sup>5</sup> I will usually quote the translation of the first critical edition published by Rudolphe Kasser et al., eds., *The Gospel of Judas: Together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic, 2007), 185-235.

<sup>6</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Document Is Genuine, but Is Its Story True?”, *New York Times*, 7 April, 2006. In the appendix to this paper I will come back to Professor Evans’s view of a possibly ancient tradition in the *Gospel of Judas*. It is remarkable that another journalist quoted Professor Evans in quite different terms. See Andrew Cockburn, “The Judas Gospel”, *National Geographic Magazine* 209, 9 (2006): 78-95, ““There is nothing in the Gospel of Judas,” he says, “that tells us anything we could consider historically reliable”” (91).

<sup>7</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Document Is Genuine, but Is Its Story True?”, *New York Times*, 7 April, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, “Foreword”, in Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2006), xx.

<sup>9</sup> Ehrman, “Foreword”, xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Rudolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2006).

into many languages. In this book Bart Ehrman published a chapter in which he confirmed the suggestion emerging from his statements just quoted. He writes about the *Gospel of Judas*, “It will open up new vistas for understanding Jesus and the religious movement he founded.”<sup>11</sup> This seems fairly promising. Dealing with the number of Gospel accounts in early Christianity, Ehrman admits that “The four in the New Testament are the oldest ones to survive.” He immediately adds, “But many others were written soon after these four”, and mentions the Gospels of Thomas, Philip, Mary, and Judas.<sup>12</sup> Later on he seems to agree with the opinion of most scholars that the *Gospel of Judas* should be dated to 140-160 C.E. or so.<sup>13</sup>

We should note that if the synoptic Gospels were written before the Gospel of John, which may be dated to the last decade of the first century C.E., and the *Gospel of Judas* was written between 140 and 160 C.E., a span of minimally 40 years, and possibly 50 to 70 years, separates the *Gospel of Judas* from the youngest of the canonical Gospels. This raises the question whether 40 years or more may be characterized as “soon.” Subsequently, Ehrman asks about the *Gospel of Judas*, “How does its overall religious perspective differ from the ‘orthodox’ views that came to be embraced by the majority of Christians? And why was it, and other books like it, eventually excluded from the canon of Christian scripture?”<sup>14</sup> The second sentence of this quotation suggests that originally the *Gospel of Judas* made a good chance to be included into the canon of Christian scripture. But this is not attested anywhere in early Christian literature, and in my view this has never been the intention of its author. It is not without reason that this Gospel is presented as “The *secret* discourse” (*Gos. Jud.* 33.1; italics mine). Further on, Ehrman writes about the debates of the different groups in early Christianity, “Every side laid claim to sacred books supporting its point of view; all insisted that these views came straight from Jesus, and through him from God. But only one side won. This was the side that decided which books should be considered Scripture, and that wrote Christian creeds that have come down to us today.”<sup>15</sup>

Ehrman also expounds this approach of early Christianity in his readable and informative book *Lost Christianities* and in his individual book on the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>16</sup> The latter publication displays the same ambiguity that we noted before. The *Gospel of Judas* is called there “one of the earliest surviving Gospels from outside the New Testament.” Yet, “It is not as ancient as the four Gospels that made it into the New Testament. (...) The *Gospel of Judas* was written at least 100 or, more likely, 125 years after Judas’s death, by someone who did not have independent access to historical records about the events he was narrating.”<sup>17</sup> These pertinent comments raise the question how we should reconcile them with the expectation that the *Gospel of Judas* “will open up new vistas for understanding Jesus.”<sup>18</sup> If it is true that the four canonical Gospels are older than the other Gospels that have turned up from the Egyptian desert,<sup>19</sup> one might also applaud the choice of Irenaeus and other bishops, since from the large

<sup>11</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas”, in *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos* (Rudolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, eds.; Washington DC: National Geographic, 2006), 77-120 (80).

<sup>12</sup> Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head”, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head”, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head”, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head”, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: University Press, 2003); *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 171-180.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, 171-172.

<sup>18</sup> Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on Its Head”, 80.

<sup>19</sup> In *Lost Christianities*, xi-xii, Ehrman correctly dates all non-canonical Gospels to the second century. Only for the *Secret Gospel of Mark* he mentions 58 C.E. as a possibility (beside 1758 and 1958 C.E.), but in the meantime it is clearer than ever that this writing is a modern forgery; see Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Baylor University Press: Waco TX, 2005); Peter Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of*

number of accounts of Jesus' life, death, and exaltation, they at least selected the oldest ones, which for that reason were likely to represent more faithfully the beliefs of Jesus' earliest disciples.

The suggestion that the *Gospel of Judas* is one of a far larger group of ancient Gospels, all of which are basically to be considered on the same footing, is also voiced by Professor Elaine Pagels. Together with Professor Karen King she gave an interesting interpretation of the dream in the *Gospel of Judas*, according to which Jesus' disciples had seen priests who slaughtered innocent people, even their own children and wives (*Gos. Jud.* 38.1-39.17). Jesus explains that these priests are his own disciples (*Gos. Jud.* 39.18-40.26). Pagels's and King's view that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* thus criticizes the leaders of the second-century church who encouraged the faithful to accept martyrdom in case of persecution by the Roman authorities is an important contribution to the interpretation of this text, which deserves serious consideration.<sup>20</sup> But in [p. 11] Krosney's book Elaine Pagels is said to believe "that it [i.e., the *Gospel of Judas*] was meant to have been read in conjunction with other Gospels". "You could take the Gospel of Mark, which is widely the favorite of Christians, and read it with the Gospel of Thomas or with the Gospel of Judas. You could read one as the text read publicly and the other as the text that is read as advanced-level teaching. So it's not that these are necessarily opposites; you don't have to choose Mark or the Gospel of Thomas or Judas. They would probably have been read together by the people who were interested in all of them."<sup>21</sup>

It may be indeed that the group that read the *Gospel of Judas* also read other Gospels like the Gospel of Mark and the *Gospel of Thomas*, for it seems clear that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* was acquainted at least with the synoptic tradition. For that reason the *Gospel of Judas* summarizes quite briefly what Jesus had done in his ministry, and starts at the end of it, in the last week before Passover (*Gos. Jud.* 33.1-14). We can deduce from this rather abrupt beginning that according to the author his readers knew the other stories.<sup>22</sup> But if it is true that there were some Christians who read both the Gospel of Mark as a public text and the *Gospel of Judas* as advanced-level teaching, it would still be unjustified to suggest that in the second century this was a rather common practice because at that time Christians did not yet have a generally accepted canon of Christian scriptures. If educated 'proto-orthodox' Christians of the second century, who knew one or some of the synoptic Gospels, heard the *Gospel of Judas*, they could have recognized immediately that it was based on a very different theology, opposed to the traditions they knew and confessed to be trustworthy. We know Eusebius's story about the *Gospel of Peter* read in Rhossos near Antioch and initially approved by bishop Serapion,<sup>23</sup> but it would be unjustified to suggest that in the second century Christians generally were rather naïve and could not distinguish between the different groups and the different views on Jesus that had emerged. Justin Martyr, e.g., is quite able to enumerate several groups he disagrees with.<sup>24</sup>

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*Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (Yale University Press: New Haven CT, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (London: Allen Books, 2007), 43-75. This interpretation was first given by Louis Painchaud, "À propos de la (re)découverte de l'Évangile de Judas", *Laval théologique et philosophique* 62 (2006): 553-568 (566-567).

<sup>21</sup> Krosney, *The Lost Gospel*, 278-279. In the conference Professor Pagels protested that one should only refer to her own publications, not to a journalist who quotes her words out of context. However, the gist of this quotation corresponds with, e.g., Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), xxiii.

<sup>22</sup> See Tobias Nicklas, "Das Judasevangelium – Dimensionen der Bedeutung eines Textfunds", *Biblische Notizen* Neue Folge 130 (2006): 79-103 (87-88). I will come back to this point in the appendix to this paper.

<sup>23</sup> Eusebius, *Church History* 6.12.2-6.

<sup>24</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 35.6.

Moreover, according to Herbert Krosney Professor Pagels suggests that the many Gospels “were loved probably by monks, who are likely to have copied them and treasured them and kept them in the monastery library, because they were for people who were going into a deeper level of spiritual discipline and understanding.”<sup>25</sup> But who then were these monks? The *Gospel of Thomas* sometimes refers to those who were considered *monachos*,<sup>26</sup> from which the word ‘monk’ is derived, and there may indeed have been such ‘monks,’ solitary Christians who were somehow affiliated with [p. 12] the ‘proto-orthodox’ tradition and read the *Gospel of Thomas* and other non-canonical gospels.<sup>27</sup> But if these monks were somehow affiliated with the ‘proto-orthodox’ tradition, are there any concrete indications that they also appreciated the *Gospel of Judas*, with its overtly dualistic and mythological theology? Frederik Wisse suggested “that many Gnostics joined the Christian anchoritic and early cenobitic movements,” and “that orthodoxy could not be taken for granted among the monks” of the fourth-century Pachomian monastery in the neighbourhood of Nag Hammadi.<sup>28</sup> Even if this held true for this monastery,<sup>29</sup> this does not mean that in the first centuries C.E. monks generally appreciated the *Gospel of Judas* among other gospels, but that the divergence and opposition between ‘orthodox’ and ‘Gnostic’ Christians also occurred there.

It is not so strange that Herbert Krosney concludes from Professor Pagels’s quote that “the Gospel of Judas is neither a reply to, nor a denial of, the four canonical gospels. It does not refute. It does not attempt to shatter belief or destroy the meaning of what was written elsewhere.”<sup>30</sup> To be sure, Krosney does not pretend that these are Professor Pagels’s words, but this is how he interpreted what she reportedly said. To every reader of the *Gospel of Judas* it should be clear, however, that in this Gospel Jesus mockingly laughs at his disciples and their beliefs and religious practices, and that except for Judas they are not receptive to Jesus’ alleged teaching. It is more appropriate, therefore, to conclude that the *Gospel of Judas* is a reply to, or even a denial of, the plain meaning of the ‘canonical’ Gospels, and that it attempts to ridicule traditional belief in the God of the Jews and the ‘proto-orthodox’ Christians. It is equally rash that Krosney concludes from his journalistic investigations that, “If an entire sect believed that the great betrayal had in fact been ordered by Jesus and carried out by his favored disciple, that interpretation could, after study, become as valid as the version told in the New Testament.”<sup>31</sup>

We noted already that Krosney’s book was published by the National Geographic Society. Another aspect of the presentation of the *Gospel of Judas* to a wider audience comes to light in the documentary shown on the National Geographic Channel on April 9, 2006, which has subsequently been made available as a DVD.<sup>32</sup> This documentary contains dramatizations of Jesus’ last conversations with his disciples in the versions of the canonical Gospels and the *Gospel of Judas*. As a matter of fact, in this way the divergences between these Gospels are clearly exposed, which is undoubtedly instructive for the audience for which the documentary was destined. One aspect of the DVD, however, deserves particular notice. For in his conversations with his disciples Jesus speaks Aramaic. It is no wonder that the actor

<sup>25</sup> Krosney, *The Lost Gospel*, 279. In a personal reaction during the conference Professor Pagels did not deny that these were her words, but she said that they had been recontextualized. Cf., however, Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 144-145.

<sup>26</sup> *Gospel of Thomas* 16; 49; 75; also in *Dialogue of the Saviour* (Nag Hammadi Codex III, 5) 120.26; 121.18.

<sup>27</sup> To be sure, the term ‘non-canonical’ is anachronistic in this context.

<sup>28</sup> Frederik Wisse, “Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt”, in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (ed. Barbara Aland et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 431-440 (433, 437).

<sup>29</sup> But see the critical review of the ‘monastic hypothesis’ by Alastair H. B. Logan, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 18-29.

<sup>30</sup> Krosney, *The Lost Gospel*, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Krosney, *The Lost Gospel*, 275.

<sup>32</sup> D.23028, written by John Bredar and James Barrat: “The Gospel of Judas” (National Geographic, 2006).

speaks this language slowly and emphatically, for it must have been quite an effort to learn all those phrases in a language that was completely unknown to him. On the one hand, the suggestion emerging from this peculiar feature of the documentary is that these were the authentic words of Jesus; on the other hand, one may wonder who can understand, except for Semitists and philologically educated historians and theologians, that the foreign language spoken by Jesus and his disciples is Aramaic.

Although in my view we may give at least some credit to the relative historical reliability of Jesus' conversations and sayings at his last supper as we find them in the canonical Gospels, which might be a justification of a retranslation into Aramaic, this seems totally unjustified as far as the *Gospel of Judas* is concerned. We saw that according to the report of the *New York Times* Craig Evans suggested that "some of the dialogue between Jesus and Judas may have been spoken in private, and so did not make it into the New Testament Gospels, which are more likely to treat Jesus' public statements",<sup>33</sup> but as yet this remains to be proven and is to be considered highly unlikely. Moreover, the retranslation of the *Gospel of Judas* into Aramaic was based on the first provisional translation into English, a translation that could not be impeccable at that time. My main point is, however, that the dramatization of Jesus' conversations with his disciples and with Judas in particular in Aramaic suggests their authenticity. My contention is that one should rather consider these conversations a radical rewriting and reinterpretation of the canonical traditions. I shall come back to this point in the appendix.

In this documentary we also hear Professors Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels referring to the many Gospels that circulated in early Christianity and the selection process in which the *Gospel of Judas* did not make it. The voice-over confirms that "the Church leaders rejected the *Gospel of Judas* along with about thirty Gnostic texts and kept them out of the New Testament," but it is not explained for which reasons some Gospels made it and others did not. This suggests that the choice of only four canonical Gospels was a rather arbitrary one.

In my own country – the Netherlands – Professor Johannes (Hans) van Oort was present in the media very prominently to comment on the publication of the *Gospel of Judas*. *Trouw*, a Dutch newspaper founded by Protestant resistance fighters in the second World War, interviewed him on April 6, 2006, and published an article of his on April 7, 2006. Of course, Professor Van Oort is not responsible for the headline of the front-page article on April 6, which reads, "Judas is no traitor in his own Gospel." For superficial readers this suggests that now we have the historical Judas's own Gospel. Van Oort himself is far more careful, but the ambiguity that we noted above also appears in his words. He is cautious about the question whether this Gospel says something about the historical Judas, and writes that this is a complicated matter that needs further debate. He says that the Christians who produced this Gospel turned many things upside down, and that the *Gospel of Judas* is a unique addition to our knowledge of an important movement in early Christianity. But he also maintains that part of the traditions of the *Gospel of Judas* may stem from the earliest church in Jerusalem. He then refers to the Jewish-Christian tradition to consider Jesus as the name of God, YHWH, which, in his view, also occurs in the Gospel of Judas (cf. *Gos. Jud.* 35.19-21).<sup>34</sup>

[p. 14] In September 2006 Van Oort published a Dutch translation of the *Gospel of Judas*, with an extensive introduction and comments. There he defends the thesis that the *Gospel of Judas* contains three sayings of Jesus that are possibly authentic. In his view, these sayings are: "[And] they have planted trees without fruit, in my name, in a shameful manner"

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<sup>33</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "Document Is Genuine, but Is Its Story True?", *New York Times*, 7 April, 2006. For Evans's own clarification of this supposition see the appendix to this paper.

<sup>34</sup> Hans van Oort, "Judas was de ware discipel", *Trouw*, 7 April, 2006; also in Lodewijk Dros, "De kus die Jezus bevrijdde", *Trouw*, 6 April, 2006.

(*Gos. Jud.* 39.15-17), “A baker cannot feed all creation under [heaven]” (*Gos. Jud.* 41.25-42.1), and “It is impossible to sow seed on [rock] and harvest its fruit” (*Gos. Jud.* 43.26-44.2).<sup>35</sup> According to a newspaper interview Van Oort said that he would almost stake his head on the authenticity of these sayings. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a conclusion from this quote the headline reads, “Three quotations of Jesus in the recently discovered Gospel of Judas”<sup>36</sup> – by which the journalist apparently suggested that the *Gospel of Judas* contains three *authentic* quotations of Jesus. It is noteworthy that if Van Oort’s hypothesis is correct – which remains to be proven<sup>37</sup> – the consequence would be that all other sayings of Jesus in this Gospel are not authentic. In his book Van Oort confirms his supposition that the *Gospel of Judas* may contain traditions that go back to the earliest Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem. He corroborates his view that in this Gospel Jesus is associated with ‘the Name,’ i.e., YHWH.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, he attaches much importance to the fact that Jesus is called ‘a prophet’ (*Gos. Jud.* 58.18), which he considers one of these very ancient traditions.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand he is inclined to think that the description of Judas handing over Jesus to the authorities goes back to ‘authentic material.’ But on the other hand he acknowledges that the image of Judas in this Gospel is inspired by Gnostic views in protest against other traditions.<sup>40</sup>

Which hermeneutical presupposition?

This survey of the initial presentation of the *Gospel of Judas* to the wider public leads us to the following conclusions. Although scholars who have been interviewed by journalists or have soon written essays or books on it all agreed that the *Gospel of Judas* should be dated somewhere to the second century C.E., some of them also hinted at the possibility that it might have been inspired by older traditions more trustworthy than the accounts of the canonical Gospels. In this way, the initial presentation of the *Gospel of Judas* to a wider public was highly suggestive and ambiguous. It is noteworthy, however, that the hints at these allegedly ancient and trustworthy traditions have not been substantiated in the recent years. Furthermore, it was suggested that the reasons why only four Gospels made it into the New Testament canon were rather arbitrary, and that it would be conceivable that even the *Gospel of Judas* might have been accepted as part of the collection of authoritative Christian scriptures. The initial impression left to the wider audience is that thanks to the *Gospel of Judas* we now have a <sup>[p. 15]</sup> better insight into Judas’s relationship with Jesus and his final act toward his master. This popular impression is inspired by the suggestive comments made by scholars – comments that were reinforced and amplified by journalists who were less sensitive to the scholars’ suggestive, subtle formulations and caveats.

In my judgment, the hermeneutical presupposition behind the presentation of the *Gospel of Judas* is a strong suspicion of the beliefs of traditional Christianity.<sup>41</sup> For this reason the

<sup>35</sup> J. van Oort, *Het Evangelie van Judas* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2006), 49-52.

<sup>36</sup> Lodewijk Dros, “Drie citaten van Jezus in pas ontdekt Judasevangelie”, *Trouw*, 5 September, 2006. Van Oort is quoted in these words, “Voor deze drie steek ik bijna mijn hand in het vuur.” In a personal conversation during the conference, however, Van Oort denied that these were his very words, but referred to journalistic presentation.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Nicklas, “Das Judasevangelium”, 89-91, who is not convinced by the hypothesis.

<sup>38</sup> J. van Oort, *Het Evangelie van Judas*, 59-63.

<sup>39</sup> Van Oort, *Het Evangelie van Judas*, 63-66, where he does not refer to Matt 21:46. See the appendix for my treatment of these texts.

<sup>40</sup> Van Oort, *Het Evangelie van Judas*, 80-83.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Rémi Gounelle, “L’Évangile de Judas ou comment devenir un bon gnostique”, in *Le mystère apocryphe: Introduction à une littérature méconnue* (2<sup>nd</sup>, rev. ed.; eds Jean-Daniel Kaestli and Daniel Marguerat; Essais Bibliques 26; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007), 49-71 (70); Jean-Daniel Kaestli, “L’Évangile de Judas: quelques réflexions à la suite du colloque de Paris”, *Adamantius* 13 (2007): 282-286 (284).

canonical Gospels are evaluated most critically – and from a historical perspective this is, in principle, fully legitimate. Too often this hermeneutical presupposition brings about a far less critical stance toward texts that do not represent traditional Christian beliefs. In principle it is fully legitimate indeed to suppose that these non-canonical texts may contain early traditions. But we also see that, as a reaction to traditional or ‘proto-orthodox’ Christianity, the diversity of the early Christian movement is stressed to such an extent that texts and traditions that evidently originated at a later date are treated on the same footing as the older ones.

The presupposition behind this view is the conception of a huge diversity within the Christian movement from its very beginning, and a strong reticence to distinguish between the historical reliability of older and younger texts.<sup>42</sup> It is true that we learn from the oldest documents of early Christianity, i.e., the undisputed epistles of Paul, that from the beginning there were many different views of Christ and his teaching.<sup>43</sup> But early ‘Jewish-Christian’ groups excepted, it is not at all clear to which extent the different ‘Gnostic’ views that emerged in the end of the first and in the second century are ramifications of the different teachers and groups that existed in the first decades of the Christian movement. As for the *Gospel of Judas*, this is to be investigated as critically and meticulously as the divergent canonical traditions, and should not have been welcomed as a sensational text in the sense that it sheds new light on Judas and Jesus. This sensational approach only nourishes the popular sentiment that the ‘proto-orthodox’ Church has intentionally hidden the truth and suppressed rival opinions by any means, and does not take account of the possibility that the ‘proto-orthodox’ Christians could appeal to very early traditions concerning Christ.<sup>44</sup> I would emphasize the hermeneutical responsibility that scholars have with respect to a balanced supply of information on early Christian texts.

[p. 16] Appendix: The *Gospel of Judas* and the canonical Gospels

As an appendix to this paper I add some observations on the relationship of the *Gospel of Judas* with the traditions that are known from the canonical Gospels.<sup>45</sup>

As I remarked above, it seems clear that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* was acquainted at least with the synoptic tradition, and supposed that his readers too knew its contents. The first words, “the secret discourse of the declaration that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot” (*Gos. Jud.* 33.1-3), implicitly refer to the publicly known words of Jesus which needed not be quoted in this context. Because the readers’ knowledge of the synoptic tradition was presupposed, it was not necessary to introduce Jesus and Judas Iscariot more explicitly, or to explain the context of the imminent celebration of Passover (*Gos. Jud.* 33.3-6). For the same reason Jesus’ “miracles and great wonders for the salvation of humanity” (*Gos. Jud.* 33.7-9) needed not be told in any detail. The calling of “the twelve disciples”

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Tom Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Understanding a Newly Discovered Ancient Text and Its Contemporary Significance* (London: SPCK, 2006), 27-70; Stanley E. Porter and Gordon L. Heath, *The Lost Gospel of Judas: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Grand Rapids MI, Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 96-114; Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas: Rewriting Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 132-149.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., 1 Cor 1:12; 11:18; 2 Cor 11:4-5; Gal 1:6-9; 2:4; 2:11-14; Phil 1:15-17; 3:2.

<sup>44</sup> For the origin of a high Christology in the first decades after Jesus’ life see, e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids MI, Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003); Riemer Roukema, *Jezus, de gnosis en het dogma* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2007); English translation *Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the notes in Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos*, 19-45; Porter and Heath, *The Lost Gospel of Judas*, 90-95; Peter Nagel, “Das Evangelium des Judas”, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98 (2007): 213-276.

(*Gos. Jud.* 33.13-15) is referred to without mentioning the name of any one of them. In the whole manuscript as we have it now, none of the disciples is mentioned by name except Judas.

When the disciples say to Jesus, “Master, you [---] are the son of our god” (*Gos. Jud.* 34.11-13), this refers to the well-known title of Jesus as the Son of God.<sup>46</sup> When Jesus is said to tell “the mysteries of the kingdom” (*Gos. Jud.* 35.25; 45.25-26) to Judas, this reminds the readers of the same expression in Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10.<sup>47</sup> Jesus’ announcement that Judas “will grieve a great deal” (*Gos. Jud.* 35.27) seems to call to mind Judas’s grief after handing over Jesus to the authorities according to Matthew 27:3-5, although Judas’s act is interpreted quite differently in the *Gospel of Judas*. The subsequent lines read, “For someone else will replace you, in order that the twelve [disciples] may again be complete in their god” (*Gos. Jud.* 36.1-4); this saying seems to hint at the election of Matthias in the place of Judas as narrated in Acts 1:15-26.

The next saying to be noted is, “It is impossible to sow seed on [rock] and harvest its fruit” (*Gos. Jud.* 43.26-44.2). This is inspired by one element of the parable of the sower, which deals with the seed that fell on rocky ground, sprang up and withered away (Matt 13:3-6; Mark 4:3-6; Luke 8:5-6).<sup>48</sup> After some pages it is told that during Jesus’ instruction of Judas “a luminous cloud appeared there” (*Gos. Jud.* 47.14-16). This reminds one of the cloud that overshadowed Jesus and three of his disciples at the mountain of the transfiguration (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34).<sup>49</sup> Later on it is told, “So Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. Those <sup>lp. 171</sup> standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying...” (*Gos. Jud.* 57.21-26). Presumably the person who entered the cloud is not Judas, however, but Jesus.<sup>50</sup> In Luke 9:34 we read that Jesus and his three disciples “entered the cloud,” and according to the three synoptic accounts a voice came from the cloud (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). These elements may have inspired the author of the *Gospel of Judas*.

Jesus’ words to Judas, “For you will sacrifice the man who bears me” (*Gos. Jud.* 56.19-21), have no parallel in the canonical Gospels, but one might wonder whether this announcement of what Judas would do to Jesus goes back to an authentic instruction. In the canonical Gospels the nearest parallel to these words can be found in John 13:27, where Jesus says to Judas, “Do quickly what you are going to do” (literally: “What you do, do [it] quickly”), which sounds like an order. In Craig Evans’s book *Fabricating Jesus* it appears that he had this saying in mind when he said about the *Gospel of Judas*, “This gospel may even help us better understand things hinted at in the New Testament Gospels themselves” and “It is possible that the Gospel of Judas preserves an old memory that Jesus had actually instructed Judas in private, and the other disciples did not know about it.”<sup>51</sup> The Gospel of John first

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<sup>46</sup> E.g., Matt 14:33; 16:16.

<sup>47</sup> Matt 13:11 reads “the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens,” Luke 8:10 “the mysteries of the kingdom of God,” whereas Mark 4:11 reads the singular “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” In *Gospel of Thomas* 62 Jesus refers to “my mysteries.”

<sup>48</sup> See also Matt 13:20-21; Mark 4:16-17; Luke 8:13, where it is explained that the seeds had no root. *Gospel of Thomas* 9 does not tell that the seed fallen on rock sprang up; in Marvin Meyer’s translation it reads, “Others [other seeds] fell on rock, and they did not take root in the soil and did not produce heads of grain,” in Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 140.

<sup>49</sup> Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas*, 137, observes that Matthew is the only evangelist to mention that the cloud at Jesus’ transfiguration is “a luminous cloud” (italics mine), which may point to the *Gospel of Judas*’s special dependence on the Gospel of Matthew.

<sup>50</sup> See Painchaud, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas”, 563-565.

<sup>51</sup> Press Release of National Geographic Society, “Ancient Text Titled ‘Gospel of Judas’ is Authenticated, Translated”, 6 April, 2006; Laurie Goodstein, “Document Is Genuine, but Is Its Story True?”, *New York Times*, 7 April, 2006; Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 244-245; 271.

tells, however, that Jesus was troubled in spirit when he declared that one of his disciples would hand him over (or: betray him; John 13:21), which precludes the interpretation of Jesus' words, "Do quickly what you are going to do," as a positive instruction in the context of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>52</sup> The synoptic Gospels tell in other words that Jesus knew Judas's intention to hand him over to the authorities,<sup>53</sup> but there Jesus' ominous words, "woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is handed over (or: betrayed)" (Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21; cf. Luke 22:22), do not hint at a positive instruction either.

To be sure, it is possible to consider these accounts as non-authentic traditions that were shaped in the first decades of the Christian movement or – as for John – by the evangelist.<sup>54</sup> But if one considers the canonical accounts more or less trustworthy, could the *Gospel of Judas*, then, help us better understand things hinted at in the New Testament Gospels, in that they betray Jesus' positive instruction to Judas in spite of the evangelists' negative view of Judas? In other words, did the historical Jesus possibly instruct Judas to hand him over to the authorities in order to provoke the death of his body?

Even though, in the initial enthusiasm about the newly discovered *Gospel of Judas*, many people were inclined to give some credit to its account of Jesus' alleged instructions, in my judgment it is most unlikely that a document the theology of which deviates so strongly from the older accounts of Jesus' life and death preserved this particular element of the historical Jesus and the historical Judas.<sup>55</sup> In terms of tradition<sup>[p. 181]</sup> history it is far more likely that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* further developed the 'canonical' view of Jesus' death. In the synoptic Gospels Jesus is afraid of his imminent death, but he accepts and announces it as something willed by his heavenly Father.<sup>56</sup> The Gospel of John describes Jesus as being more in command of the events that will lead to his death,<sup>57</sup> although it also briefly alludes to his fear.<sup>58</sup> Because of his foreknowledge and sovereignty Jesus could say there to Judas, "Do quickly what you are going to do" (John 13:27). In the *Gospel of Judas* Jesus is even more divine and more in command of the things that are bound to happen. For that reason Jesus explicitly announces there that Judas would sacrifice his body.

The concluding lines of the *Gospel of Judas* strongly remind us of the synoptic accounts, but the differences are significant. It is told that "their chief priests murmured because [...] <sup>59</sup> had gone into the guestroom to pray" (*Gos. Jud.* 58.9-12). Since Jesus' anxious prayer in Gethsemane<sup>60</sup> was inconceivable to the author of the *Gospel of Judas*, he transmitted the element of prayer to the guestroom where, according to Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11, Jesus would eat the Passover with his disciples; this is the Passover referred to in the *Gospel of Judas*'s incipit (*Gos. Jud.* 33.5-6). The word for "guestroom" in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 is also used in the *Gospel of Judas* (58.11; *kataluma*). The *Gospel of Judas* continues that "some of the scribes were there looking out to arrest him during the prayer. For they were afraid of the people, since he was held by all as a prophet" (*Gos. Jud.* 58.12-19). Except for

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<sup>52</sup> See also the critical characteristics of Judas in John 6:70-71; 13:2; 17:12.

<sup>53</sup> Matt 26:21-25; Mark 14:18-21; Luke 22:21-22; cf. John 13:21-26.

<sup>54</sup> Thus Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEKNT; 13<sup>th</sup> ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 366; *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 163.

<sup>55</sup> After his reference to John 13:27 Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 245, writes that, "whatever arrangement Jesus may have had with Judas (...), Jesus did not instruct Judas to hand him over to the ruling priests."

<sup>56</sup> Matt 16:21; 17:12; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 20:28; 21:39; 26:2; 26:36-46; 26:56; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 10:45; 12:8; 14:32-42; 14:49; Luke 9:22; 9:44; 18:31-33; 20:15; 22:39-46.

<sup>57</sup> John 13:1-3; 18:4-9; 19:28.

<sup>58</sup> John 12:27; cf. 13:21.

<sup>59</sup> One may read 'he' or 'they' (*nta[ff]* or *nta[u]*).

<sup>60</sup> See Matt 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46.

the reference to the scribes and to the prayer, these phrases are clearly inspired by Matthew 21:46, which is situated after Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants.<sup>61</sup>

Next, the *Gospel of Judas* tells, "And they approached Judas and said to him: 'What are you doing here? You are Jesus' disciple.' And he answered them as he wished." According to this Gospel Judas did not arrive with an armed crowd sent by the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders,<sup>62</sup> but he was supposed to be present in the guestroom. The short dialogue between the scribes and Judas is not attested in the synoptic Gospels; yet, according to Matthew 26:48 and Mark 14:44, Judas had said to the crowd, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him" (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]). The dialogue in the *Gospel of Judas* also recalls the interrogation of Peter during Jesus' trial in John's Gospel, when Peter was asked, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" (John 18:25 NRSV).<sup>63</sup>

The last phrase of the *Gospel of Judas* reads, "And Judas received money and handed him over to him" (*Gos. Jud.* 58.24-26). The fact that Judas would receive money for handing over Jesus to the authorities is attested in the synoptic Gospels, although the accounts vary. According to Matthew 26:14-15 the chief priests gave thirty pieces of <sup>l.p.</sup> <sup>19l</sup> silver to Judas before he carried out his plan, whereas he wanted to return the amount to them after he repented (Matt 27:3). According to Mark 14:10-11 the chief priests promised to give him money, but it is not told explicitly that Judas received it. According to Luke 22:4-5 the chief priests and the officers agreed to give him money, but it is not explained when they gave it; only the reference to "the reward of his wickedness" in Acts 1:18 confirms that he had indeed received the money. The *Gospel of Judas* is unique in its description that Judas received the money at the moment of Jesus' arrest. Its last words (barring the title), "and he handed him over (*afparadidou*) to them" (*Gos. Jud.* 58.25-26), are clearly inspired by the canonical Gospels.<sup>64</sup>

We can conclude from this survey that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* drew on the traditions known from the synoptic Gospels, and adapted them to his own view of Judas's relationship with Jesus. He may also have been acquainted with the Gospel of John, but borrowings from the Fourth Gospel are far less conspicuous. The *Gospel of Judas*'s dependence on the canonical Gospels implies that it postdates them, which confirms that its historical setting has to be established in one of the Gnostic groups of second-century Christianity.

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<sup>61</sup> Matthew 21:46 reads, "They [the chief priests and the Pharisees, 21:45] wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet" (NRSV); cf. Mark 12:12; Luke 20:19 and Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas*, 134-135 (where on p. 134 "in the house of prayer" should be corrected to "at prayer").

<sup>62</sup> As it is told in Matt 26:47; Mark 14:43; cf. Luke 22:47.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Matt 26:69-73; Mark 14:67-70; Luke 22:56-59; John 18:26.

<sup>64</sup> See Matt 10:4; 26:15-16; 26:21-25; 26:46-48; 27:3-4; Mark 3:19; 14:10-11; 14:18-21; 1:42-44; Luke 22:4-6; 22:21-22; 22:48; John 6:64; 6:71; 12:4; 13:2; 13:11; 13:21; 18:2; 18:5; 21:20; cf. also Acts 3:13; 1 Cor 11:23.