

Reviews

THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS: REWRITING EARLY CHRISTIANITY by Simon Gathercole (*Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007*), Pp.150, £16.99

This is the book to buy for the relative who has been taken in by the *Da Vinci Code* treatment of the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*. Gathercole's research is methodical, judicious, and scholarly, while his writing is clear, flowing, and aimed at a wide audience. The book undertakes its own full translation of the Coptic in which *Judas* survives, and adduces the historical background both of the period and of the work itself.

The story of Codex Tchacos, the papyrus on which *Judas* is attested, is related soberly in Chapter One. Little is known of its discovery, since it almost certainly left Egypt illegally, but it is clear that it has been the victim of appalling mistreatment. The outrageous asking-prices, changes of dealer, and careful — but necessarily partial — restoration that led to its final publicizing and publication are recounted without the quasi-messianic teleologies that seem to have gripped many of the players in this sorry drama: Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos, for example, has commented: 'I had a mission. Judas was asking me to do something for him. It's more than a mission, now that I think of it. I think I was chosen by Judas to rehabilitate him' (p.14).

The manuscript was donated by Nussberger-Tchacos, the last antiquities dealer to obtain it, to an obscure organization, the Maecenas Foundation, which took charge of the difficult and painstaking restoration. While the restoration itself has been generally favourably received, the secrecy with which it was conducted has been the focus of much criticism. Maecenas then sold the right of publication of the manuscript to National Geographic, which assembled a 'dream team' of experts to study the text. This process was also shrouded from view, even to the point of participants having to sign non-disclosure agreements before being told what the project was. National Geographic chose scholars prominent in their disciplines, but whose prominence was sometimes due to their controversial and polarizing views, such as Elaine Pagels or Marvin Meyer.

Controversy erupted shortly after the media-courting press conference at which *Judas* was revealed in April of 2006. National Geographic's central assertion was that the text portrayed Judas as Jesus' close friend and confidant, who fulfils his Master's wishes in handing Him over. Some scholars who had not been part of National Geographic's team were appalled by the claim, arguing that it rested on mistranslations that would not have been possible if a more transparent investigation had been made. A full history of the dispute by Thomas Bartlett can be found in the May 30th, 2008 edition (vol. 54, issue 38) of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (online at <http://chronicle.com/free/v54/i38/38b00601.htm>).

These disputes are passed over quietly in the volume under review; note is made in Chapter One of the disagreement, but because a new translation is featured, Gathercole does not have to pick a side. Throughout, although he refutes certain outrageous claims of members of the National Geographic team, his interest is in giving correct interpretations rather than attacking wrong ones. He does appear to argue *sub silentio* that Judas' reputation is not at all the point of *Judas*, and that the modern interest in this question is not shared by the text's author. Rather, *Judas*

is focused on criticism of the Great Church (which it treats as a real institution, founded by the apostles) and on imparting a portion of the knowledge (*gnosis*) that leads to salvation. The widespread suggestion that rehabilitating Judas would be a blow against Christian anti-Semitism is rebutted by the near-Marcionite hatred *Judas* evinces for the Old Testament God and His followers.

Gathercole's second and third chapters discuss Judas as he appears in the New Testament and in writings of the next hundred years thereafter. These sections provide useful background for the non-expert, and survey various difficulties ranging from the meaning of 'Iscariot' to the death Judas died. The Gnostics are also introduced, and the interaction of the figure of Judas with the Sophia myth discussed.

The meat of the book is served in Chapter Four, where translation and interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* alternate. The benefit of commenting as Gathercole does on each passage is that the reader never feels lost in a trackless Gnostic wasteland; its drawback is that the already fragmentary text seems even more disjointed with commentary interspersed. Gathercole's explanations are concise and reflective, preferring interpretation to speculation; his translation is as clear as any Gnostic text can be made.

In Chapter Five, the Cainites, the sect who are meant to have given rise to *Judas*, are treated, on the basis of ancient heresiologies. If Gathercole is ever guilty of making an unlicensed inference it is here, after he weighs up the arguments concerning whether the *Judas* now attested is the same as that mentioned by ancient authors such as Irenaeus of Lyons. He shows that there are no strong reasons for assuming their identity, but then goes on as though they were one and the same. Almost every other treatment of *Judas* has done so as well, so Gathercole must treat them as related if only for the sake of argument; it might have been worthwhile however to specify that this was what was being done.

After Chapter Six deals with the dating of *Judas* and firmly rejects any claim that this 'gospel' might make to provide insight into the life of Jesus, Chapter Seven gets down to the ideas in the text. Gathercole draws out the implications of *Judas*' rejection of the God of the Old Testament, and demonstrates how this is in stark contrast to the New Testament Gospels. The Jesus of *Judas* is not particularly Jewish, laughs scornfully at the apostles' ignorance, sometimes including Judas, and does not suffer: His body is something from which his divine self must be released.

Although Gathercole is too restrained to say it, this is not Christianity at all, but rather a conspiracy-cult centred around esoteric, arcane 'knowledge', presented in a deliberately obscure and almost gnostic style. Indeed, *Judas* would have received little modern notice except among specialists if its author had not chosen to make Jesus the bearer of its *gnosis*; other Gnostic texts, even in the same codex, are widely ignored, because they mention no familiar names and cannot be sensationalized.

B. N. WOLFE

ORDAINED WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH. A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, editors and translators (*The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2005*) Pp.240, £32

This excellent volume sets out to be 'a comprehensive resource of all textual evidence – literary, canonical, and epigraphical – in the Greek and Roman worlds' relating to ordained women in the early church up to c.600CE (p.1). In this alone, the book is to be highly recommended because in setting out the primary evidence