



The Gospel of Judas and the Emperor's New Clothes

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

That a document carries – or is given – the title “gospel” guarantees nothing at all. We know of about 30 documents from the period up to the year 600 AD that claim to be gospels. Judging by the four gospels in the New Testament – the canonical gospels – we must conclude that the Gospel of Judas (recently published in Coptic and English), understood in its *entirety*, is a false gospel. The same can be said of the Gospel of Thomas, which is popular in many circles.

But to maintain that something is false is not the same as saying it is irrelevant. From an academic point of view, any new find is of interest. The critical question is whether the Gospel of Judas and other New Testament apocrypha provide new insight about Jesus of Nazareth. We cannot, for example, exclude the possibility that some of the 114 logia in the Gospel of Thomas are more original than their parallels in the canonical gospels. Each writing must be examined and evaluated, and scholars arrive at quite different conclusions.

The Gospel of Judas may increase our insight into the development of a gnostic form of Christianity in the second century. It seems, however, to have very little to say about Jesus of Nazareth and what he stood for.

When we consider the Gospel of Judas in its entirety, there should be no disagreement that this document is of a different spirit. The Jesus portrayed in the canonical gospels is fundamentally different from the Jesus presented in the Gospel of Judas. The god in the Gospel of Judas is not identical with the God of Israel – the Father of Jesus Christ. And Jesus has been “stripped” of the Jewish clothing he wears in the canonical gospels.

According to the canonical writings, the God of Israel is the God of creation; according to the Gospel of Judas the created world is a misunderstanding. The important thing is to escape the prison – namely the body – in which the soul or spirit is confined. The goal is to attain knowledge (*gnosis*) of one's own divine origin.

In the canonical gospels, salvation means forgiveness of sin and guilt, a forgiveness which is accomplished through the substitutionary work of Jesus. This element is absent from the Gospel of Judas.

In the Gospel of Judas, Judas Iscariot is portrayed as having a positive

role in the death of Jesus: "For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me," Jesus tells him. This means that Jesus was imprisoned in his own body; with Judas' help he managed to get out of this prison through death.

The Gospel of Judas knows nothing of salvation history. The suffering and death of Jesus in order to take away the sin of mankind is of no importance. Nor has salvation anything to do with the resurrection of the body. This is a far cry from Paul who, on the basis of what had been passed on to him in Jerusalem, wrote, "... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared ..." (1 Cor 15:3-5).

If we look at Judas in the canonical gospels, there are several possible interpretations of his behavior. His betrayal is an *evil* act, he is *responsible*, and yet it is God's will that happens.

Perhaps Judas is the most clear-sighted of Jesus' disciples. He seems to be the first among the twelve to have reached the understanding that Jesus actively *wanted* his own death and that the disciples could do nothing to prevent it. This happens in connection with the anointing of Jesus at Bethany.

Some decades ago Judas was partially vindicated in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which has been called "The Gospel According to Judas." Central to this work is Judas' struggle to understand Jesus. When all is said and done, the Jesus of this musical is just as disillusioned as Judas.

The publication of the Gospel of Judas before Passover 2006 inspired a lot of media coverage. In 2003 *The Da Vinci Code* was published. In 2004 Mel Gibson produced his film *The Passion of the Christ*. Altogether, these things should make it easier to talk about Jesus of Nazareth and to present him in his New Testament clothing.

When you consider the enormous media exposure the Gospel of Judas has received and the excitement its publication has stirred, you cannot help being somewhat disappointed when you hold the book in your hand. And I assume it is the "real" thing that has been published, not a forgery. Somehow I cannot help but think of "The Emperor's New Clothes," Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale about two impostors who told the emperor that they could weave clothes that would be invisible to all who were either unsuited for their office or outrageously stupid. None of those who "saw" the clothes would admit that they saw nothing. Then the emperor announced that he would wear his extraordinary new clothes in a formal procession. All the bystanders pretended they could see his clothes – except for a little child who said what was on everyone's mind: He is not wearing anything!

The Jesus of the Gospel of Judas is clothed in gnostic clothing. Like other gnostic writings, there is no *gospel* in it when judged according to the New Testament.

