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The Gospel of Judas — New Concerns

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The media frenzy about the manuscript now known as the “Gospel of Judas” has taken a strange and interesting turn. It seems that the patrons of the project, including the National Geographic Society, may not have told the whole story about how the manuscript came to be translated and displayed.

As *The New York Times* reports:

When the National Geographic Society announced to great fanfare last week that it had gained access to a 1,700-year-old document known as the Gospel of Judas, it described how a deteriorating manuscript, unearthed in Egypt three decades ago, had made its way through the shady alleys of the antiquities market to a safe-deposit box on Long Island and eventually to a Swiss art dealer who “rescued” it from obscurity. But there is even more to the story. . . .

Details of how the manuscript was found are clouded. According to National Geographic, it was found by farmers in an Egyptian cave in the 1970’s, sold to a dealer and passed through various hands in Europe and the United States. Legal issues in its transit are equally vague.

No one questions the authenticity of the Judas gospel, which depicts Judas Iscariot not as a betrayer of Jesus but as his favored disciple. But the emerging details are raising concerns among some archaeologists and other scholars at a time of growing scrutiny of the dealers who sell antiquities and of the museums and collectors who buy them. The information also calls into question the completeness of National Geographic’s depiction of some individuals like Ms. Tchacos Nussberger and its disclosure of all the financial relationships involved.

The Los Angeles Times also reports that the Yale Divinity School turned down an offer to buy the manuscript because of ethical concerns:

Harold Attridge, dean of the Divinity School at Yale University and a noted biblical scholar, said that given the importance of the text, he understood why the renowned scientific and educational nonprofit would publish the document and then return it to a museum in Egypt. But, he added, National Geographic has made “moral compromises” in publishing the Judas Gospel.

Dean Attridge added:

In deciding whether to purchase the Gospel, Attridge said, Yale found itself faced with a dilemma: Should the university buy an object that may have been illegally brought into the United States in order to preserve it? Or should it risk losing the piece for ethical reasons? “This is kind of like a hostage situation where you have some artifact that is in effect being held for ransom. What do you do? Not do business with them.... Or do you preserve it, and try to save the piece?”

*After Yale declined her offer, Tchacos tentatively sold it to a Cleveland-area manuscript dealer, who stuck it in his freezer and sold fragments, Tchacos told *The Times* in an interview. When he was unable to come up with the promised \$2.5 million, Tchacos recovered most of the manuscript. In 2001 she sold it to Roberty, her attorney, for \$1.5 million and a share of future profits. A year later, she was arrested by Italian authorities in Cyprus on unrelated charges of trafficking in looted art. In an agreement with the Italian prosecutor, she received a suspended sentence of 18 months and gave a*

lengthy statement about her knowledge of the antiquities trade.

None of this alters the basic authenticity of the manuscript as an ancient document — a prime example of ancient heresy — but it does add layers of moral complexity (at best) to the publication of the manuscript and the project as a whole.

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