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## The Gospel of Judas. Edited by Johanna Brankaer

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## *Book Reviews*



Johanna Brankaer ed., (2019) *The Gospel of Judas*. Introduction by Bas van Os.

Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts; Oxford: Oxford University Press. 288 pp.

\$160.00 / £115.00. ISBN: 9780199672622.

The editors of the series Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts, Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett, bring to the reader several interesting insights into the type of volumes that they will publish within these series: “without wishing to pre-determine what any individual editor of a particular volume might wish to argue, we would probably say that, for the most part, the non-canonical gospels treated in this series are not likely to extend our knowledge about the person of Jesus significantly beyond that provided by the canonical gospels. Many of these texts seem to presuppose the existence of the canonical gospels already in existence, and, as often as not, perhaps being used here as sources” (x).

Is the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas and the Jesus of the Gospel of Judas the same or does it “seem” unlikely? Has the reader any possibility to use historical arguments instead of rhetorical ones in order to break this monolithic view of completeness as the one expressed by the editors of this series? Should the “study period” be temporarily positioned always “after” an orthodox view expressed by a part of the scholarly body of secondary literature, and should this study period stand only for something already indistinctively labeled as being non-canonical by the same body of knowledge rooted in the anti-heretical discourses? These are only some of the questions which the reading of this introduction generates.

Johanna Brankaer proposes to the reader a *new* translation and a *new* commentary to the infamous Gospel of Judas. The introduction of this new enterprise dedicated to this writing is signed by Bas van Os. The need for such a new enterprise is unveiled within the preface. Here the reader is updated with the long, and yet scholarly short, history of this intensely debated and popularized document. The preface is important because it brings together Johanna

Brankaer and Bas van Os's intentions within this critical edition of the Gospel of Judas.

The Gospel of Judas can be found in Codex Tchacos and was popularized by the National Geographic (2006). The codex is supposed to have been discovered in 1978, near El Minya, Egypt. But what is the Gospel of Judas? How can one characterize this textuality without using any modern categories or labels such as "revelatory discourse," "Erscheinungsevangelium," or anything else? The introductory narrative begins with the story of the release of the documentary and the publication of the Gospel of Judas by the National Geographic Society (2006). The fact that "all authors worked under a non-disclosure agreement, which prevented scholarly discussion prior to the release of the documentary" (xiv) seems to reiterate the ingrained tradition of secrecy present in academic practices as was the case when studying textual assemblages such as Gospel of Thomas.

Bas van Os's introduction proposes the following main ideas: a description of the Codex as a whole, a strong focus on the way the text designates itself, an emphasis on the composition of the work as a whole and its three constituent parts, the relationships of the document with respect to the gospel "tradition," "apostolic" Christianity to Sethian Gnosticism, as well as the origins and reception history of the document. Furthermore, Bas van Os claims that "the aim of this introduction is to provide the modern reader with sufficient context to appreciate the Gospel of Judas as a coherent composition and understand the contribution it can make to our understanding of the historical Jesus and early Christianity" (2). What is not said here is that the reader cannot control how a scholar has constructed this "context" and why the scholarly work has arrived to this or that conclusion knowing the scarcity of historical evidence.

The translation realized by Brankaer reads fluidly and clearly. The commentary does not remain tributary to the fossilized vein of other commentaries dedicated to "non-canonical" gospels. The reading experience of this assemblage shows a peculiar attention for details. The commentary is not written as a repetition of powerful sets of academic ideas already popularized by other commentaries. Her interpretations are fresh and genuine. Brankaer has no problem with challenging and proposing new lines of flight for new interpretations. Starting from the idea of self-representation, passing through that of the polemical nature of the Gospel of Judas, to the claim of going back to a secret tradition and the last days of Jesus, Brankaer develops new views about this textuality.

The orthodox theological perspective is entangled with the views dedicated to the corpus discovered at Nag Hammadi (c. 1945, Egypt). The dialogue with

the views expressed by other scholars is reflected throughout this commentary. The comparison between the Judas of the New Testament and the Judas of the Gospel of Judas is neither avoided nor neglected. This comparison game lets no chance for the Gospel of Judas to escape the interpretive chains of the mainstream body of scholarly work. The dialogue between the writings of the New Testament and non-canonical textualities such as the Gospel of Judas shows an uncritical strategical approach, one which is specific for today's scholarly world of early Christianities.

The commentary abounds with specialized philological analyses and substantial characterizations meant to disclose the intra-textual consistency of the fabric of ideas as well as the similarities with other textual assemblages and "traditions" labeled as Gnostic, apocryphal or patristic depending on the sides of the academic ideological spectrum (orthodox or heretic), one positions herself on.

This assemblage (translation and commentary) dedicated to the Gospel of Judas can be regarded in two ways. On the one side, it proposes a *new* translation of a difficult artifact, and on the other side, it offers an original and learnt commentary, one which enriches the reader with new insights into the inner world of this infamous textuality. This enterprise will remain for a long time a useful instrument for any student of the complex world of ideas of early Christianities and is a quality addition to the continually expanding literature dedicated to the Gospel of Judas.

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