

Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth about Christianity? by N.T. Wright, 2006, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI

The author grants that the recently found "Gospel of Judas" is an ancient archaeological find, but that it is totally undeserving of the designation "gospel" - in fact it's an anti-gospel, the story which second-century Gnostics were telling (p.71). "It is like a messenger coming smiling into the prison camp to say that the war has been won - only to reveal that the other side has won, and that all the prisoners are to be killed." (pp.71- 72) Being witty, Wright says that to expect the "Gospel of Judas" in the Bible "[y]ou might as well expect President Bush to include Texas in his list of states that constitute an 'axis of evil.'" (pp.75-76) Further, to say that it offers an alternative narrative, not at variance with the Christian faith, is "quite breathtaking," "a radical misreading" of the Bible, "simply wishful thinking." "These two sets of belief are like oil and water." (pp.81, 82)

Although the book is short (146 pages, plus notes), it seems quite lengthy, saying the same thing over and over. However, the chapter divisions provide particular sounding boards, supplying historical background and information through various topics of discussion. Wright's scholarly writing doesn't lend itself to superficial reading, but his points become clear by following the thread of his reasoning.

Wright asks why would Meyer, Ehrman, Pagels, and other scholars give any credence to the contents of this document, especially since they do so "at the cost of writing what most historians will regard as manifest nonsense"? (p.120)

The answer: "Anything will do, it seems, as long as it is not classic Judaism or Christianity." (p.123) Liberal American academics adhere to what Wright calls the New Myth, which portrays Jesus as not seeing Himself as divine, which doesn't think the Bible is authoritative, and which has nothing to do with the need for atonement (pp.77, 121,122). They think the God of Israel is a malicious demiurge (p.111), the wrong deity (pp.117-8). "Every time another scrap of 'evidence' turns up which can be 'spun' so as to favor the Myth rather than mainline Christianity," there's a "media firestorm," which shows the power of the "Myth." (p.124) Incidentally, Gnostics weren't persecuted like the Christians because their beliefs didn't threaten political authority (p.96).

Wright discusses how thought has been downgraded in recent years through a "postmodern instinct to disbelieve everything." (p.127) First-century readers wouldn't know anything about the philosophical split of the last 200 years between "'religion' and 'real life'." They would not "emasculate" a book speaking "so clearly of God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven" by thinking it doesn't apply to the created world (p.90). Those in the 18th and 19th centuries did "serious historical work" when jolted out of complacency by the Enlightenment to question "previous certainties."

But nowadays, a "relentless hermeneutic of suspicion" has caused a confinement of truth to a subjective level. "The primary source of 'authority' is one's own experience '[D]iscovering who I really am' is the primary religious imperative,"

along with a "relentless ... 'pursuit of happiness' in terms of ... material and emotional well-being." (pp. 127,128,130) The impact these cultural impulses play is translated into an unrecognized incongruity between different parts of life. Reconciliation is made where none is possible. In the "Gospel of Judas," Wright says, Jesus' name is "used to legitimize teaching utterly foreign to his announcement of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven." (p.119) In comparison with the canonical gospels, the "Gospel of Judas" is nothing other than "the cancelation of their entire theology and the substitution of a different one altogether." (pp.119,120) In another instance of Wright's wit: the "Gospel of Judas"'s use of the Bible is "in much the same way as a child might 'use' a Shakespeare play by tearing out a page to make a paper dart." It's reading the Bible "against the grain," not as it was intended (p.113). A whole is made where there is no whole.

There was one section of the book (pp.130-133) that seemed like someone had hacked into it (despite it being a hardcover book) because it was such a departure from the gravity and well-reasoned approach of the rest of the book. Couldn't Wright have picked some more illustrative and less subjective examples of gnosticism? If he has a beef against what he calls dispensationalist fundamentalism, let him give Biblical arguments, not dignify the Left Behind fiction series as being worthy of his criticism.

Wright differentiates between God's promise of salvation (which is not from the world but for the world) (p.91) and Gnosticism's (which is only from the world, an escape) (pp.96,144). So let him use such Biblical reasoning as this: We have eternal life through knowing Jesus and are sent out into the world as He was (John 17:3,18). "As He is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). In the same manner that Jesus overcame His tribulations in the world, we overcome ours (1 John 4:4). We are "strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness" (Colossians 1:11).

Along these lines, when someone tells me we have eternal life because of what happens after I die, and yet thinks the natural is all we have till we escape, so to speak, I say, that following that reasoning, we don't have eternal life. There is no eternal life if we look only to the physical. We all die, no matter how much faith we have. How old is the oldest person? Not very old. No one is living and living. Romans 8:11 says, "the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you. . ." if we are in Christ Jesus (v.1). We have the same Spirit in us that was in Jesus while He was on the earth if we are His! (v.9). We don't have to wait till we die. That is the point Wright is trying to make.

Also uncharacteristic, Wright, admitting the irony, criticized and belittled America's Declaration of Independence as being only the United States "discovering its own identity" in the spirit of the gnostics (p.133). Wright is a bishop in the Church of England and British. Maybe he had some personal ax to grind.

The book ends discussing the true gospel of the real Jesus. He is the Messiah and He is God, "in his actions and teaching and supremely and decisively in his death

and resurrection." (p.145) True, and well said. The rest of the passage is somewhat murky, and a "sacramentally constituted family" is not supported by the Bible (Mark 3:31-35). Also, it doesn't convey awe of God, which it could very easily.

Wright says the signs of a future uniting of heaven and earth are in the changed lives and societies in the present time (pp.145,146). W. H. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, said, "The whole hope of human progress is suspended on the ever growing influence of the Bible." Wright could have cited myriad of examples of how the life of the Bible quickens us in this world (1 John 4:17).

The conclusion is that the "Gospel of Judas" is a false gospel and is in direct contrast with what is found in the Bible. We don't live in a world "rejected and scorned," and those who think they "have found a way of escaping it" (pp.144,146) are in serious error of disbelief (2 Corinthians 4:4). The "ultimate justice [is] that God the creator will one day put everything to rights" (p.102). That's the good news.