Neil Brodie 2006

“The lost, found, lost again and found again Gospel of Judas”

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The lost, found, lost again and found again

Gospel of Judas

A review of:

The Secrets of Judas by James M. Robinson

The Gospel of Judas, edited by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer & Gregor Wurst

The Lost Gospel, by Herbert Krosney

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On 6 April 2006 the National Geographic Society announced that a project funded by the National Geographic and the Waitt Institute for Historical Discovery in collaboration with the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art had restored and translated a previously unseen Gospel of Judas. The Gospel was discovered in Egypt and ultimately it will be donated to the Coptic Museum in Cairo. It was featured in the April 2006 issue of the National Geographic magazine and in a National Geographic television documentary programme that is now available on DVD. It also forms the subject matter of two National Geographic books that are reviewed here, one authored by Krosney and the other edited by Kasser et al. The third book under review is by James Robinson of Claremont Graduate University, who has known about the existence of the Judas Gospel since 1983 and who has now written his own account of the events leading up to the Gospel’s publication.

These three books have much to say that is of theological interest, but between them they also cast a great deal of light on the trading history of the Gospel, which stretches back to the 1970s or earlier, when it was discovered in Egypt. The amount of provenance-related information published is unusual for what would normally be considered an ‘unprovenanced’ antiquity, and offers a good opportunity to consider the organization and operation of the underground trade in ancient manuscripts, as well as the actions and motivations of the people involved.

The books agree in outline about the sequence of events leading up to the National Geographic project, though there are some interesting differences of opinion about key issues. None of the authors can be considered an unbiased commentator. The Krosney and Kasser books are published by National Geographic and are clearly intended by National Geographic to constitute the authorized accounts of the Gospel’s discovery and publication, Krosney up to the year 2001, Kasser after that date. Robinson had himself tried but failed over many years to secure access to the
Gospel, and so his book provides a more sceptical account of events and of the main protagonists. His Preface sets the tone when he says that his narration is not expurgated, sanitized, cleaned up to make it an appetizing story. What has gone on in this money-making venture is not a pleasant story — about how all this has been sprung upon us, the reading and viewing public — and you have a right to know what has gone on (p. vii).

The books also make use of different primary sources. Krosney’s role as official chronicler seems to have afforded him access to several people who had come into contact with the Gospel while it was still on the market, and he relies particularly on the testimony of Mario Roberty and Frieda Tchacos-Nussberger, principles of the Maecenas Foundation and present owners of the Gospel. By contrast, for his commercial information, Robinson draws upon the website of Michel van Rijn, and he was provided with information by many of his academic colleagues that was not available to Krosney.

The Gospel of Judas is a third- or fourth-century AD Coptic translation of a Greek original composed in the second century AD, one of four Coptic texts found together in leather-bound papyrus codex. The codex is not intact but what survives comprises:

- Pages 1–9, Letter of Peter to Philip, also known from Nag Hammadi Codex VIII;
- Pages 10–32, ‘James’, a version of a text known from Nag Hammadi Codex V;
- Pages 33–58, Gospel of Judas, text previously unknown;
- Pages 59–66, Book of Allogenes (provisional title), previously unknown.

(Kasser p. 49).

**The discovery of the codex**

Krosney’s account of the discovery of the codex leans heavily on the testimony of an Alexandrian art dealer, hiding behind the pseudonym Joanna Landis, who claims to have been taken to the place of discovery in 1978 by a friend of the finder. The finder is now dead, but in 2005 Landis obtained more information over the telephone from another of the finder’s friends. The story goes that the codex was discovered sometime during the middle to late 1970s inside a white limestone sarcophagus that had been deposited in a still uninvestigated catacomb in the Jebel Qarara on the east bank of the Nile in Al Minya province. Along with the sarcophagus were two caskets, also containing texts, and found with the codex inside the sarcophagus were a human skeleton and some Roman glass flasks. Different accounts of the discovery stem from dealer Hanna who subsequently bought the codex. Ultimately, however, any report of the codex’s discovery is hearsay. None have been and perhaps cannot be corroborated — at this distance in time they are best discounted.

**The provenance of the codex 1980–1999**

By 1980, the codex had reached the hands of a Cairo-based antiquities dealer, identified in Krosney’s book by the pseudonym Hanna Asabil, by Robinson as Hanna, and henceforth here as Hanna. Kasser (p. 51) thinks that Hanna would not have realized the significance of the codex and must have been alerted to its value by European papyrologists. Krosney concurs, reporting that Ludwig Koenen of the University of Cologne and, after 1975, the University of Michigan was an active buyer in the 1960s and 70s and ‘opened the eyes of the dealers’ to the value of ancient papyri (p. 40), but that it was probably the papyrologist Manfredo Manfredi of the University of Florence who suggested to Hanna it might be worth $3 million (p. 41).

In March 1980, Hanna gathered his stock together in his apartment in readiness for a visit by a female friend of the Greek antiquities dealer Nikolas Koutoulakis. Known familiarly as Mia or Effie, she introduced some customers who agreed to buy Hanna’s entire stock before leaving to fetch their money, which they said was on their yacht in Alexandria. They never returned. The next day Hanna’s apartment was burgled and his entire stock, including the Coptic codex and some other papyrus manuscripts, written in Greek, was stolen.

Not surprisingly, Hanna suspected a Greek connection, and in 1981, 18 months after the burglary, he turned to Athenian art collector and occasional dealer Yannis Perdios for help in recovering the stolen material. Perdios persuaded Koutoulakis and Mia to meet with Hanna in Cairo, though the meeting proved inconclusive. In 1982, Hanna, Perdios and Koutoulakis met again, this time in Geneva. Koutoulakis told
Hanna that he had come into possession of the stolen papyrus manuscripts, including the codex, and would return them, but nothing else that had been stolen. Hanna, with no real options to do otherwise, accepted the offer. He then deposited the codex in a safe deposit box in a Geneva bank, and together with Perdios proceeded to look for a buyer. Perdios sent photographs of the material to several potential purchasers, including Koenen, and also gave some photographs to the antiquities dealer Frieda Tchacos-Nussberger (henceforth Tchacos) whom he visited at her Zurich Galerie Nefer. The identity of the person who burgled Hanna’s apartment, or of the person who initiated the theft, remains unknown.

From this point on, the provenance of the Judas Gospel becomes more secure. Koenen wanted to inspect Hanna’s papyrus manuscripts with a view to purchase. He came to Geneva with two Michigan colleagues (David Noel Freedman and Astrid Beck), where they were joined by Stephen Emmel, then of Yale University, who had been nominated to attend by James Robinson. The Michigan contingent was interested in buying the Greek papyri, while Emmel was authorized to buy the Coptic codex. Between them, they had something like $150,000 available for purchase. The meeting took place on 15 May 1983, but Hanna’s asking price of $3 million was more than the visiting academics could afford. The meeting broke up and the codex was returned to the bank vault. Soon afterwards, Emmel wrote down what he recalled seeing of the manuscripts on offer, and sent his memorandum to Robinson. The memorandum’s contents were not made public at the time because Robinson and Emmel did not want the vendors to discover the significance of the material on offer and so increase its price. Robinson did, however, communicate some of the memorandum’s content to various colleagues, including Hans-Gebhard Bethge (then at Berlin’s Humboldt University) and Marvin Meyer (then a student of Robinson), who both made early mentions of the codex in their academic publications.

Emmel’s memorandum is the earliest reliable account of the composition and condition of Hanna’s papyri, including the codex, and in his book Robinson publishes it for the first time (pp. 117–20) and discusses its content in some detail. Emmel recorded three boxes containing papyri, which comprised a mathematical treatise and a Book of Exodus, both in Greek, a Coptic manuscript Letters of Paul, and a Coptic codex with its back cover missing. The codex contained the First Apocalypse of James and the Letter of Peter to Philip, both texts already known to scholars, and a third, previously unknown text. He thought there were also possibly the remains of a second Coptic codex. Emmel counted page numbers in the codex up to 60, and he suspected that the back part of the codex might have been missing along with its back cover.

After the intended Geneva transaction had fallen through, in 1984 Hanna took the codex to the United States to look for a better market. He had good contacts in the Coptic community of New Jersey, who arranged a meeting for him with the Manhattan book dealer Hans P. Kraus, but again no sale was agreed. A second meeting between Kraus and Hanna was arranged for 27 March 1984 in the Columbia University office of Classicist Roger Bagnall. Bagnall later told Krosney that he had recognized the codex texts as ‘Nag Hammadi’ (p. 149), but at that time the Gospel of Judas had still not been identified. Again, however, the asking price was too high. Disillusioned, Hanna placed the codex in a safe deposit box at Citibank in Hicksville, Long Island, and returned home to Cairo.

The codex was to remain undisturbed in its box for 16 years. During that time, Robinson, who was in receipt of Emmel’s report and of some photographs he had been sent by Koenen, had found a possible buyer for the codex in the person of Norwegian collector Martin Schøyen. Robinson also in 1990 made contact with Perdios in Athens. Between them they arranged that Perdios, Hanna, Robinson and Schøyen should meet in New York in January 1991 to discuss a possible sale, but the meeting was cancelled when Hanna refused to leave Egypt in the run-up to the 1991 Gulf War. Robinson didn’t give up there. Krosney records that in 1994 Schøyen visited Robinson in Claremont, and in August the same year Robinson travelled to Norway to view Schøyen’s collection. Schøyen subsequently bought 10 Dead Sea Scroll fragments ‘that were housed at Claremont’, each containing one letter, for $50,000, and Krosney goes on to make the alarming allegation that Robinson personally transported the fragments
from Claremont to Norway, carrying them in a pouch around his neck to avoid attracting the attention of either US or Norwegian customs (p. 161). Not surprisingly perhaps, Robinson makes no mention of this escapade in his own account of events. In 1997 Robinson again made contact with Perdios, but nothing came of it.

The provenance of the codex 2000–2004

After meeting with Perdios at her Zurich gallery in 1982, Tchacos had contacted the J. Paul Getty Museum curator Jiri Frel about a possible sale, who had in turn put her in touch with PhD student Roy Kotansky at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, though there does not appear to have been any follow up. Seventeen years later, in 1999, she received a phone call from a Greek person offering her a manuscript. She asked for photographs, which she then sent for identification to Robert Babcock, curator at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Babcock advised that the manuscript most likely comprised pages taken from the Coptic codex recorded by Emmel in Geneva. Tchacos subsequently bought them. The photographs supplied to Tchacos had been taken against the background of a Greek newspaper dated to 21 October 1982, and she thinks the Greek seller was most probably Mia.

Tchacos remembered the visit of Perdios 16 years earlier. She had done business with Hanna since the 1970s, and in late 1999 during a visit to Egypt she made contact with him, and managed to persuade him to meet her in New York where she would buy the papyri. The purchase was agreed on 4 April 2000 for a price said by Tchacos to have been in the neighbourhood of $300,000 (Cockburn 2006, 93). Unfortunately, the papyri had deteriorated badly during their 16-year sojourn in the safe deposit box, and were clearly in need of expert attention. Tchacos deposited them with Babcock at Yale, where they were also examined by Bentley Layton and Harry Attridge, both also of Yale. Layton became the first person to recognize that one of the previously unknown Coptic texts in the codex was in fact the Gospel of Judas. By August 2000, however, Yale’s lawyers had vetoed the purchase of the codex because of its uncertain provenance, and it was returned to Tchacos.

According to Krosney (p. 211), the London-based dealer Bill Veres had visited Tchacos in Zurich in June 2000 and suggested that the manuscript dealer Bruce Ferrini of Akron, Ohio might be a potential buyer. Veres had been introduced to Ferrini by a curator of ancient coins at Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum. Tchacos contacted Ferrini, and after retrieving the papyri from Yale, she travelled to Akron where they agreed a sale on 8 September 2000. The price was $2.5 million, and in return for the papyri Ferrini handed over two post-dated cheques for $1.25 million each, one dated to 15 January 2001 and the other to 15 February 2001. Robinson quotes from the sales contract, which was subsequently posted by van Rijn on his website.

Ferrini’s backer was US businessman James Ferrell, who arrived in Akron a few days later. However, by that time, Ferrell had lost faith in Ferrini and decided against buying the papyri. It is said that Ferrini had deep frozen the manuscripts to help separate the pages. On 11 September 2001 Ferrini offered them to Schøyen, but Schøyen’s valuation of $986,000 fell far short of Ferrini’s requirements. Krosney (p. 215) suggests that Ferrini was in financial trouble, and Tchacos was worried that he might fail to honour the cheques. Ferrini himself has claimed that he pulled out of the deal because he didn’t believe Tchacos’s account of provenance (Schutten 2005). In December 2000 Tchacos and her lawyer Mario Roberty met with Ferrini and his lawyer Eric Kaufman in New York. Roberty had already spoken to Ferrini in October 2000 about the possibility of a charitable foundation to conserve and exploit the codex, and at the December meeting the idea was explored further through the concept of the ‘Logos Project’.

According to Krosney (pp. 211–13), the idea of a foundation set up to conserve, publish and exploit the commercial content of the manuscripts occurred first to Ferrini and Veres, in autumn 2000. The plan was to put together teams that would perform the necessary scholarly work, another team ‘to Do Film Journalism’, while Ferrini and a friend would ‘Sensationalize and Romanticize’. In a memorandum dating to 15 December 2000 quoted in part by Krosney, and more extensively by Robinson from a copy that is available on van Rijn’s website, Roberty built on their idea and outlined to Kaufman plans for a
proposed Logos Project, which would be a charitable trust under Swiss law. Ferrini would pay Tchacos $300,000 for the mathematical treatise and the Letters of Paul, he would return the codex and the Book of Exodus to Tchacos (in exchange for his cheques), Tchacos would then transfer the manuscripts to the Logos Project in return for 80 per cent of the Project’s future income from commercialization. Ferrini was offered the option of buying into the Project for $1,100,000 in exchange for half of Tchacos’s rights to any future revenues. The purpose of the Logos Project would be to:

... save and publish the Gospel of Judas and other related manuscripts for the benefit of historical truth and to generate the funds necessary for this task as well as for the compensation of the expenses and efforts incurred by he promoters, leaving them with a decent profit.

Ferrini could not have been too keen on the idea of collaboration, because Roberty decided to involve Michel van Rijn as a means of bringing pressure to bear on him. Van Rijn maintains a widely-read and scurrilous website on which he reports and passes opinion on the illegal art and antiquities trades. On 27 January 2001, he announced to the world that Ferrini was in possession of a papyrus codex containing the Gospel of Judas, that Tchacos had set up a public foundation to arrange for its receipt, but that Ferrini was trying to sell it to Japan. He also hinted of legal proceedings and criminal prosecutions. This web posting seems to be the first public announcement of the existence of the Judas Gospel. Robinson suggests, from reading an e-mail sent by Roberty to van Rijn that was available on van Rijn’s website, that Roberty had actually written the text for this posting (Robinson p. 135). If he is right, then Roberty was directly responsible for leaking news about the Gospel. Roberty was later to admit that ‘deploying van Rijn worked’ (Cockburn 2006, 95), a surprising admission perhaps for a practising lawyer, but he was right, and within a month the codex was back in the possession of Tchacos.

On 16 February 2001 at Akron, Ferrini paid Tchacos $100,000 for the Greek mathematical treatise and returned to her the remaining papyri, including the codex. Krosney (p. 228) states that it was on the flight home to Switzerland that Roberty persuaded Tchacos to hand over the papyri to his Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art, though van Rijn’s web posting of 27 January 2001 had already mentioned the existence of a ‘public foundation’. Kasser says that the Maecenas Foundation was founded by Roberty in 1994 (p. 55) and according to Krosney it has ‘participated actively in supporting several archaeological digs in Egypt, safekeeping the archaeological collection of the Republic of Tajikistan, and cooperating in other archaeological projects in the various countries of the former Soviet Union as well as China’ (pp. 228–9). Robinson suggests otherwise — that the only purpose of the Maecenas Foundation is ‘to commercialize The Gospel of Judas and other less sensational texts’ (p. 139). His view is shared by Ted Waitt, who ultimately provided financial support for the National Geographic project (see below), and who has been quoted as saying that the ‘foundation is just a vehicle for Mario Roberty and Frieda Tchacos ... to make money’ (Bell 2006). On 19 February 2001 the codex was imported into Switzerland as the property of the Maecenas Foundation. Roberty has been quoted as saying that in exchange for the codex he paid Tchacos $1.5 million and half of any proceeds that might accrue from its commercialization, and that he put $1 million into the initial work of restoration (Gugliotta & Cooperman 2006). This transaction has been confirmed by Tchacos (Felch & Frammolino 2006).

Ferrini subsequently separated the Greek mathematical treatise into two parts. One part he sold to an unnamed US collector through the mediation of London dealer Sam Fogg. It is being studied by Alexander Jones of the University of Toronto together with Columbia’s Roger Bagnall. The second part (of three pages) he sold to US collector Lloyd Cotsen, who deposited it in the University of Princeton’s archives, where it was recognized by Jones. Ferrini filed for bankruptcy on 15 September 2005.

Ferrini also involved Charles Hedrick of Southwest Missouri State University. Hedrick occasionally identified material for Ferrini, and in late 2000 Ferrini sent him nearly 200 digital images and photographs of the codex and associated papyri. Hedrick circulated these images and his own transcriptions of the texts to several of his colleagues, including Robinson. Tchacos and Roberty were alarmed by the prospect of Hedrick
publishing a full translation of the Gospel before their own plans were fully mature because, according to Krosney, a pre-emptive publication would lead to 'misinterpretation or inaccurate speculation' (p. 252), or, according to Robinson, it might threaten their chances of 'of making big money from sensationalizing the text' (p. 144). Ferrini’s despatch of photographs was in breach of his agreement with Tchacos, by which he was obliged to return all photographs and images of the papyri to Tchacos along with the material itself. When they became aware of Hedrick’s photographs, Tchacos and Roberty contacted him through a Cleveland law firm. Hedrick replied that he held the material legally and in June 2002 he gave first notice in the academic literature of the existence of the Judas Gospel in _Bible Review_ (Robinson p. 131). Hedrick had transcribed and translated pages 40 and 54–62 of the codex.

On 24 July 2001, Roberty and Tchacos met Coptologist Rodolphe Kasser of the University of Geneva at a cafe in Zurich to show him the codex and to explain their plans for its restoration, publication and eventual return to the Coptic Museum, and a follow-up meeting in September included Florence Darbre, chief restorer from the Bibliothèque Bodmer. After this second meeting, the manuscripts were deposited with Kasser and Darbre for restoration, conservation and study. For three years they worked on the material and were joined by Martin Krause, formerly of the University of Münster, who was later succeeded by Gregor Wurst, also of Münster.

On 1 July 2004, Kasser, speaking at the Eight International Congress of the International Association for Coptic Studies in Paris, announced the existence of a previously unseen Gnostic Gospel of Judas. He said that restoration work was being supported by an anonymous Swiss foundation and the intention was that the codex would be returned to Egypt.

**The National Geographic project**

Krosney first heard about the Gospel of Judas in autumn 2000 from a client of Ferrini, and by June 2004 he had tracked it down to Switzerland. He approached the National Geographic Society about publication opportunities and must have convinced them because on 5 December 2004 they were joined by John Huebesch of the Waitt Institute for Historic Discovery.

Van Rijn must have had notice of this meeting, presumably from Roberty, as he had already announced on his website on 3 December 2004 that the National Geographic were going to film the Gospel. He had also mounted a photograph of the final page of the Judas Gospel together with Hedrick’s translation of the text. Robinson thinks this was the first public mention of National Geographic involvement, but that at the time it attracted little attention (pp. 161–2). On 31 March 2005 van Rijn published photographs of three pages of the Allogenes text, together with transcriptions and translations by Hedrick. In November 2005 Robinson was contacted by the journalist Patrick-Jean Baptiste, who told him that National Geographic planned three books as well as magazine articles and television programmes. Robinson was able to reveal these plans on 20 November at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Philadelphia. Baptiste himself published in the January 2006 issue of _Sciences et Avenir_.

After National Geographic’s 2006 launch, it was reported in the press that in 2005 the National Geographic had indeed bought the publication rights for the contents of the Judas Gospel with $1 million donated by the Waitt Institute (Gugliotta & Cooperman 2006). The full financial details of the arrangement have not been made public, though a spokesman told the _Washington Post_ that Maceenas would receive ‘some compensation’ from book sales (Gugliotta & Cooperman 2006).

**The deterioration of the codex since its discovery**

The extent of deterioration of the codex since its discovery can be assessed from the expert albeit limited examination of Emmel in 1983 (Robinson pp. 117–20), and the more thorough report on the present condition of the codex produced by Kasser and his team. Emmel thought that the codex had probably been discovered intact. He noted that the front leather cover of the codex...
was present, but that the back cover, with part of what is now known to be the fourth text, had probably disappeared since discovery. There were between 54 and 56 pages. By the time Emmel saw the codex it had been divided into two parts by a horizontal break, so that all pages were represented by a smaller upper part (containing page numbers but not much text) and a larger lower part (containing the major part of the text). Already by 1983 these page parts had been ‘shuffled’ — Kasser (p. 55) has recognized that one of the ‘pages’ on a photograph sent to Tchacos at that time was actually a composite of two pieces from different pages.

Kasser was clearly shocked by the condition of the codex when he first saw it on 24 July 2001. He writes about the codex ‘so precious but so badly mistreated, broken up to the extreme, partially pulverized, infinitely fragile, crumbling at the least contact’ (pp. 47–8). His 2006 assessment was that 66 pages survive, containing the first three texts including the Gospel of Judas, but that the fourth text, the provisionally named and previously unknown Book of Allogenes, bound last in the codex, has been badly damaged and lost a number of its pages. The width of the horizontal break has been increased to between one and two centimetres by further fragmentation and crumbling. Emmel thinks this has happened since his 1983 examination (Kasser p. 57). In all, Kasser thinks that between 10–15 per cent of the codex has disappeared.

Not surprisingly, Kasser is highly critical of Ferrini’s reported freezing (pp. 60–61), explaining the physical damage that would ensue. He is also critical of the practice of dealers to break open manuscripts for photography (p. 69). His impression is that the pages of the codex were ‘shuffled about to optimize its commercial appeal’ (p. 70), and he concludes from the photographs sent to Hedrick that Ferrini must have forcibly opened the codex in several places (p. 74). For his part, Ferrini claims that when returning the codex to Tchacos because of its dubious provenance, one of the recipients slammed it on to a table and tiny pieces flew off. Hedrick, who reported this incident to Robinson, does not think that Tchacos would have damaged her merchandise in such a fashion, though Robinson himself is not so sure (p. 148).

When receiving the codex back from Ferrini, Tchacos had not properly checked that it was complete. Indeed, given its poor state of preservation at the time, a thorough check would probably have been impossible. On 12 March 2001 an ‘Ivy League papyrologist’ ‘who had once examined the codex in some depth’ (Krosney pp. 231–2) examined the recovered material in Switzerland and pronounced that several pages were missing. Nothing more was heard about the missing pages until November 2004 when Tchacos learned from Veres that Ferrini had probably sold some individual pages of the codex before returning it. In January 2006 two pieces of the Gospel (the lower parts of codex pages 37 & 38) were returned by an unnamed New York collector who had acquired them from Ferrini. In April 2006 more papyrus fragments that might be from the Gospel turned up in the hands of Ferrini’s receiver (Kropko 2006). Kasser thinks that some pieces of the codex are still missing, including the upper part of page 31 and lower part of page 32, with the final title of ‘James’. He has identified a possible composite of these two pieces in the catalogue of a travelling religious exhibition in the United States, though has not named the exhibition (p. 71).

The apotheosis of Frieda Tchacos-Nussberger

For her part in acquiring the codex the National Geographic seems keen to cast Tchacos in the role of saviour, a role which Tchacos herself seems quite comfortable with. She has been quoted as saying ‘I think I was chosen by Judas to rehabilitate him, I think the circumstance of this manuscript coming to me was predestined’ (Felch & Frammolino 2006), and ‘I wanted to protect them and give them to people who could read them and conserve them. I wanted to save them.’ (Krosney p. 157). Krosney’s own opinion is made clear in his Acknowledgements where he thanks Roberty and Tchacos for ‘trying to rescue an historical artefact from the darkness to which it had been condemned’ (p. 308). Fundamental to her apparent apotheosis are her responsibility in ensuring that the codex was properly restored and her charity in returning it to Egypt. But are these true depictions of her actions and motives? Tchacos, it must be remembered, sold the codex to Ferrini, a person she hardly knew, in the hope of making a quick $2 million profit, and Fer-
rini’s rough handling has in turn been blamed for causing the codex unnecessary damage. Perhaps Tchacos should shoulder some of that blame for not being properly diligent in ascertaining the expertise and motives of her customer? It is also far from clear that her decision to return the codex to Egypt was a voluntary one. The first mention of Egyptian involvement is in the memorandum Roberty sent to Kaufman on 15 December 2000, so the decision must have been made after that date but before the July 2001 meeting with Kasser. Krosney suggests that it was made on the flight home to Switzerland. The relevant paragraph in the December 2000 memorandum makes for interesting reading:

Depending on the conclusions we will reach regarding Frieda’s title to the manuscripts, we will decide on the further steps to be taken with regard to the legal protection of the Project, including — if necessary — notification to the Egyptian authorities.

This paragraph suggests that the decision to return the Gospel to Egypt might not have been a voluntary one after all, but a pragmatic response to potential dangers posed by the questionable legality of the codex’s provenance. It is important to remember that in early 2001 a police investigation was under way into the activities of US antiquities dealer Frederick Schultz, and in July 2001 he was charged in New York with handling archaeological material stolen from Egypt. The antiquities restorer Jonathan Tokeley-Parry had been convicted only a few years earlier in 1997 of a similar offence. Tokeley-Parry and Schultz must have been known to Tchacos, and perhaps she drew the sensible conclusion that the time was not a propitious one to be caught holding an Egyptian antiquity of uncertain provenance, and so decided to offer its return. Roberty himself said as much in the memorandum:

From a first risk analysis we have concluded that the US are to be considered a potentially risky territory for the manuscripts due to political considerations possibly taking precedence over pure legal aspects, especially when involving application of principles of foreign law.

This sounds like a direct reference to Schultz, whose prosecution was opposed by the trade community on the very grounds that Roberty mentions.

In any event, and despite protestations to the contrary, her actions have hardly been borne out of a charitable impulse — she has in fact made quite a profit. She bought the codex and its associated papyri for something like $300,000 and recouped $100,000 when she sold the mathematical treatise to Ferrini; she then made a further $1.5 million from the subsequent sale of the codex to Roberty. Thus at the present time she has made more than $1 million out of the codex, and stands to make more from the various National Geographic ventures.

Roberty and Tchacos had taken the decision to return the codex to Egypt several years before the National Geographic became involved in 2004. But by then there was another problem. It has been widely reported that in February 2002 Tchacos had been arrested in Cyprus and placed under house arrest pending interrogation by the Italian authorities. On 17 September 2002 she was convicted of handling stolen artefacts. It hardly seems likely that the National Geographic would want to enter into a commercial arrangement with a convicted dealer, though when challenged on the point, the National Geographic stated that it could find no evidence of a conviction (Felch & Frammolino 2006), and Tchacos herself has denied the conviction, calling the situation ‘equivocal’ (Felch & Frammolino 2006). However, an Italian state prosecutor has confirmed the conviction (Meier & Wilford 2006), and told the Los Angeles Times that ‘In the past, she was at the center of the looting in Italy’. Two of the artefacts Italy is reclaiming from the J.P. Getty Museum were sold to the museum by Tchacos. A third piece the museum had bought from Tchacos was returned to Italy in 1999 after it was discovered to have been stolen (Felch & Frammolino 2006).

Clearly, for the National Geographic to proceed with the collaboration, it would want to reassure the public that Tchacos’s business practices were above reproach. From the positive and sympathetic way in which she is portrayed in the two National Geographic-authorized books, particularly the one by Krosney, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the National Geographic deliberately set out to rehabilitate Tchacos by casting her in the role of altruistic saviour. This much is clear from the quotes discussed earlier, but also from the sympathetic treatment accorded to her by Krosney.

Krosney refers to Tchacos routinely throughout his book by her first name Frieda, while calling everyone else by their second names (including
the only other significant female protagonist Florence Darbre). The constant references to ‘Frieda’ evoke in the reader a feeling of familiarity, and ultimately sympathy, which is reinforced by the empathetic reporting some of Tchacos’s actions and recollections. In 2000, for example, Krosney says she arrived at New York ‘feeling nervous, all alone’ (p. 206). When faced with the costs of restoration she says ‘How can I, little Frieda, do this job?’ (p. 206). She describes the Akron recovery meeting as follows: 

Never in my career had I had to undergo such a restitution with litigations and legal representatives all around me. ... I was mortified to the bone ... Everybody looked at me inquisitively ... I nodded sheepishly (p. 224).

Whether calculated or not, this authorial brushwork conjures a cultural stereotype: the caring and sensitive woman adrift in the hard-nosed commercial world of men. Yet this depiction of Tchacos may be far from accurate. She had, after all, for more than thirty years made a successful career out of trading antiquities, she is fluent in several languages and regularly travels around the world. When first introducing Tchacos in his book, at a time before she had become involved with the codex, Krosney describes her as ‘tough and temperamental’ (p. 37), and says that ‘Dealers are a tough breed, and few women have made it into the ranks of the elite’ (p. 66). He sees her to have been a credible rival to the Greek dealer Koutoulakis, whom he describes in turn as a tough fighter (p. 69) and one who ‘was unparalleled in his ability to trade advantageously’ (p. 68). Would this tough rival to Koutoulakis, this successful and cosmopolitan businesswoman, really be nervous when entering New York and nod sheepishly when looked at by a couple of lawyers? Or is it simply another sales pitch, this time selling Tchacos to the general public for the benefit of the National Geographic?

Krosney does not mention her 2002 arrest. When interviewed by the New York Times he said that Roberty was ‘dismissive’ of ‘rumours’ about Tchacos and Italy, and that he had never asked her about it (Meier & Wilford 2006). This arrest was made as part of a long-term and wide-ranging Italian investigation into antiquities smuggling that culminated in 2005 with the arraignment of Getty Museum curator Marion True and US dealer Robert Hecht in an Italian court. Krosney does mention this trial (p. 76), which makes his failure to mention the reported involvement of Tchacos even more surprising.

A positive outcome?
The propriety or otherwise of the collaboration between the Maecenas Foundation and National Geographic will ultimately be judged on its results. Is the outcome a positive one for the Gospel, the public, and Egypt, or could there have been a better outcome if events had taken a different course?

To deal with the second question first, could there have been a better outcome? The legality of the export of the codex from Egypt was questionable, to say the least. Because the Egyptian authorities were never aware of the codex while it was still in Egypt, it is impossible to say how they would have reacted to a request for export, but almost certainly, if the precedent of the Gnostic Nag Hammadi texts is anything to go by, they would have refused it. The Nag Hammadi texts were taken into state ownership after payment of compensation to the dealer who held them (Robinson 1988, 24).

Over the years, many scholars came into direct contact with the codex, though not always recognizing its true significance, and others learned about it indirectly from colleagues in academia and the trade. Many of these scholars were aware that the codex had been taken out of Egypt unlawfully. Emmel for example is quoted in Robinson (p. 97) as saying in 2005 that ‘... there was no question but that this material should have been in Egypt’. The Beinecke Library took a similar view when it turned down the chance to acquire the codex. Yet despite widespread knowledge of its uncertain provenance, not one single person seems to have alerted the Egyptian authorities or indeed any law enforcement agency about the existence of the codex. Bagnall told Krosney that although it was known at the time that the 1983 Egyptian antiquities law had just taken effect, ‘no one in the manuscript trade was taking it seriously’ (p. 147). In fact, the usual and thus presumably conventional response was to hunt around for a financial backer to support a purchase. For the 1983 Geneva meeting, Harold Attridge had secured $50,000 from the Southern Methodist University at Dallas (Robinson p. 93); in the late 1980s Robinson approached Schøyen
and in the 1990s he negotiated with the Canadian Bombardier Foundation (Robinson p. 114). The idea that Egypt might have a legitimate claim to ownership seems not to have entered anybody's head, except perhaps as a possible complication of acquisition.

One reason for this apparent reluctance to report the codex to an appropriate authority is perhaps simple academic cupidity. Scholars were motivated by the opportunity to produce the first and authoritative translation and interpretation of the text, with the academic prestige that would follow. Even Robinson, who seems to favour open scholarly access, is disappointed that the Schoyen purchase fell through (p. 128), perhaps because it would have assured him a leading role in study and publication. If intellectual curiosity alone had been governing the academic agenda, there were several opportunities to secure the return of the codex to Egypt, and to arrange for its conservation and publication by an international team. If prompt action had been taken in the 1980s, for example, it might have prevented the damage caused by 16 years in a safe deposit box and Ferrini's clumsy surgery. Perhaps it is wrong to be too critical of academic practice in the 1980s, the 2000 decision of Yale not to acquire the codex is a sign that attitudes are changing. But even though Yale quite clearly had doubts about the provenance of the codex, it still failed to take the further step of alerting the Egyptian authorities or the police.

As regards the second question, it is not possible to say at the present time whether the outcome is a positive one for the Gospel and all interested parties or not. Although the Gospel will be returned to Egypt, no mention has been made of what — if any — financial arrangements are in place to accompany its return, and whether any provision has been made for the recurrent costs that will be incurred by the Gospel's long-term storage, conservation and display at the Coptic Museum. It is equally unclear what property rights will accrue to Egypt, and this is an important point. If, for example, the Coptic Museum decides to raise money on the Gospel through media collaborations, will it be free to do so or will it be regarded as an infringement of the National Geographic's publication rights? Perhaps this eventuality will not arise because the physical codex itself no longer matters as an intellectual or commercial resource. Its content will in future be channeled onto the world market through the offices of the National Geographic for the benefit of the National Geographic and the Maecenas Foundation, and even with full property rights, there might not be much of a market left for the Coptic Museum to exploit.

If no financial provision has been made to secure the future of the Judas Gospel, then its return will set a dangerous new precedent. It will be deemed acceptable for an illegally-exported artefact to be stripped clean of its commercial potential before being restored to its rightful owner, who will then be expected to pay for its long-term curation. E-mail questions on this subject addressed to the National Geographic were answered with an assurance that the National Geographic will 'certainly help all we can to preserve this document in the future', which is heartening, but that 'we cannot offer financial details', which is less so. The answer fell short of a firm assurance that the Gospel is well-provided for. Until the 'financial details' are made public, the propriety of the National Geographic–Maecenas collaboration will remain in doubt.

Notes
1. All material relating to the Judas Gospel on Michel van Rijn's website can be found at http://www.michelvan­rijn.nl/artnews/judastotal.htm (last accessed 19 March 2007).
2. Even though he had previously recovered two stolen gold artefacts from the possession of London dealer Jack Ogden on the pretext of restoring them to their 'rightful owner'. Koutoulakis subsequently sold one of these pieces to dealer Peter Sharrer (Krosney pp. 99, 104).
3. Presumably the 'Ivy League scholar' must be one of the three Yale academics who studied the Gospel while it was in the Beinecke Library. Why the sudden shyness is not made clear. Krosney also offers thanks in his Acknowledgements to the 'Ivy League scholar who has played an enormous positive role in bringing the manuscript to light and who deserves a medal for his still largely unknown efforts' (p. 308).
4. Jonathan Tokeley-Parry has recently published a book reproducing some pages from his 'journal' (Tokeley 2006), in which he often disguises the identities of individuals by substituting a letter of the alphabet for their name. He records in 1987 that with the knowledge of the Egyptian authorities a female Swiss dealer 'G' operating out of Galerie 'M' in Zurich was entering Egypt under different names and with different passports and was collaborating with an Egyptian citizen to move antiquities out of Egypt (pp. 220, 234, 238).
References


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