

Top Seminary Head Refutes 'Gospel of Judas' Claims

Saturday, Apr. 8, 2006 Posted: 12:28:32PM EST

As commentators, scholars, and the media build up sensation that the “Gospel of Judas” may force a reexamination of the traditional Gospel understanding of Judas, Jesus, and Christianity, some of the nation’s most respected theologians are stepping in to quell the hype.

Just days before Easter, the English translation of the “Gospel of Judas,” which portrays Judas as a favored disciple who turned Jesus in at his request, was made public Thursday by the National Geographic Society, causing some to question the central events leading to the death of Jesus on the cross.

“According to some commentators, the publication of this new document will force a complete reformulation of Christianity and our understanding of both Judas and Jesus,” stated Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“In reality,” he added, however, “nothing of the sort is in view.”

Mohler is one of a number of respected theologians who have come out to expose that the “Gospel of Judas” shows strong Gnostic characteristics and to confirm the authority of the four canonical Gospels.

In a commentary posted by the president of one of the world’s largest seminaries on Friday, Mohler called the newly translated document “highly interesting” but asserted that the text does not conflict with the four Gospels but only offers a glimpse into the thinking from heretical groups with alternative understandings of Christianity.

Despite claims that the ancient text was written by Judas, Mohler said the document was “certainly” written in the third century after Christ, long after Judas’ death.

Furthermore, the text strongly displays Gnostic characteristics such as in its ideas and word choice.

“The most remarkable feature of this text is its thoroughly Gnostic character,” wrote Mohler, who has been asked to represent the Christian voice on programs including CNN’s “Larry King Live,” NBC’s “Today Show,” and “Dateline NBC” and been quoted by publications such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. “The substance of this gospel bears virtually no resemblance to orthodox Christianity – a fact which explains why the early church recognized this writing for what it is, and rejected it as neither authoritative nor authentic.”

Examples of Gnostic character in the text were pointed out such as in the text’s conversation between Jesus and Judas where Jesus uses Gnostic categories such as “aeons” and an “eternal realm.” Mohler also highlighted the fact that Judas is also called the “thirteenth spirit” in the “Gospel of Judas” and is selected to free Jesus from his physical body so that he can enter the spiritual world.

A key concept of Gnosticism is its focus of secret and mysterious knowledge and emphasis on the dualism between the material and spiritual worlds.

“In essence, the Gnostics sought to escape the material world and to enter the world of spirit,” explained Mohler.

The Gospel of Judas contains scene where Jesus reveals secrets to Judas that has been kept hidden from the rest of humanity including the defining statement, “but you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”

Strong Gnosticism is seen in this statement where Jesus is claimed to reveal the secret knowledge of his fate and requests Judas to help him escape from his physical body and releasing him as spirit.

Moreover, as Mohler noted, the message that Jesus died on the cross in place of humanity and thus redeemed mankind is “completely missing from The Gospel of Judas.”

As a result, the text was rejected by the early church leaders and deemed heretical by Irenaeus, a major early Christian figure, in his writing at about year 180.

Simon Gathercole, a New Testament professor at Aberdeen University, has also voiced that although the text is authentic, it has no significant impact on the Gospel.

“It is certainly an ancient text, but not ancient enough to tell us anything new,” explained Gathercole, according to Mohler. “It contains themes which are alien to the first-century world of Jesus and Judas, but which became popular later.”

“Indeed, those Gnostic ideas did become popular later, and they are becoming increasingly popular now,” concluded Mohler.

“The truth of the Gospel stands, and Christians will retain firm confidence in the authenticity of the New Testament and, in particular, of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,” he continued.

“Informed Christians will be watchful and aware when confronting churches or institutions that present spurious writings, rejected as heretical by the early church, on the same plane as the New Testament.”