

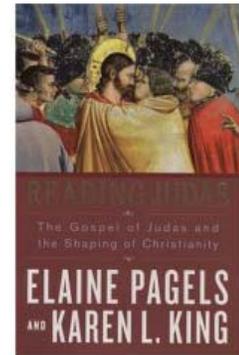
Too Many Factual Errors!

Elaine Pagels & Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007)

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When I purchase books by other scholars in my field I seldom expect to agree with everything they say, much less their central theses. I do however expect them to present the facts accurately. What they do with them afterwards in terms of interpretation is their business. If they use the facts to build outrageous or idiotic theses, that provides opportunities for other scholars to write other books refuting them.



Scholars writing for popular audiences have a special responsibility with regard to setting forth the facts accurately, because non-specialists turn to them for help in educating themselves. They trust that the basic facts the scholar is telling them are true. It is the duty of the scholar to make sure they're trust has not been misplaced.

Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King do their readers a disservice by allowing their new book *Reading Judas* (2007) to make it all the way into print containing simply too many factual errors.

Following is a selection of examples of what I am talking about, chosen for the ease with which they can be explained. I am aware of other examples that I leave out of the discussion because they are harder to briefly explain to the average [non-specialist] reader. With one exception I present them in the order in which they appear in the book:

(1) On page four they write: "the betrayer always intrigues us more than the disciples who remain loyal, as artists have shown. From Giotto's famous painting of the traitor's kiss ... to Michelangelo's Satan, pictured for eternity in the act of devouring Judas in hell." Given my own early background in the arts I felt I knew the corpus of Michelangelo's work fairly well, but never remembered seeing anything like the work described by Pagels/King. Given the limits of my own expertise at this point I sought the help of William E. Wallace, author of *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur* (1994); *Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English* (1996), and *Michelangelo: The Complete Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture* (1998). Professor Wallace, who is Barbara Murphy Bryant Distinguished Professor of Art History at Washington University in St. Louis, is also currently engaged in writing a biography of Michelangelo. I put my question to Professor Wallace on 19 March 2007 as follows:¹

I recently came across a reference to a work said to be by Michelangelo in which Satan is depicted eating Judas Iscariot. I have known Michelangelo's work fairly well but I do not recall ever coming across such a work. My first impression was that the author I was reading had confused Michelangelo with some other artist. Does such a work exist, and if so can you provide any information about it?

Wallace responded on 20 March as follows:

Nothing at all like that in Michelangelo. It sounds very much like the mosaic by Cimabue in the Baptistry at Florence, or some other such image of hell. I think you are dealing with a very obvious confusion on your author's part.

(2) On page 5 they tell us that "Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons ... mentioned the *Gospel of Judas* among many others, including the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Gospel of Thomas*." Irenaeus does mention the *Gospel of Judas* (*Against Heresies* 1.31.1). He does not, however, mention the *Gospel of the Egyptians* or the *Gospel of Thomas*. There is a story sometimes associated with the *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* that appears in Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.20.1), but he does not "mention" the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in connection with it.

But even if he did, Pagels/King seem quite clearly to be referring here to the *Gospel of Thomas*, not the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. When they want to refer to the latter they call it the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (see *Reading Judas*, p. 126).²

(3) On page 174, note 2, which gives the source for a saying on page 36, we read: "*Gospel of Thomas*, 114, in Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Random House, New York, 2003). All citations of the English translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* are from the appendix of *Beyond Belief*." In addition to an extra "New York," in the publishing information, which is just a minor error, it should be mentioned that the original 2003 edition of *Beyond Belief* didn't contain the appendix in which the *Gospel of Thomas* was found.

(4) On pages 6 and 7 they note that "many of the gospels that Irenaeus dismisses as illegitimate, like the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*, also claimed to be written by members of the same inner circle of disciples." Again Irenaeus didn't mention, and therefore could not have dismissed, the *Gospel of Thomas*. Nor does he mention or dismiss the *Gospel of Philip*.

(5) On page 9, they say, referring to the late second century Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, "He warned that dissenters, even if they were priests, placed themselves in mortal danger, since 'outside the church there is no salvation.'" Although the statement is presented in such a way as to suggest it came from Irenaeus, it is actually a famous axiom of the third century bishop Cyprian of Carthage: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church, no salvation") (Cyprian, *Epistle 72:21, To Jubaianus*).

(6) On page twelve they write: "Josephus ... who wrote the famous history *The Jewish War*, mentions Jesus as a notorious troublemaker." Their accompanying footnote directs the reader to Louis H. Feldman's Loeb Classical Library edition of Josephus's *Antiquities*. The passage referred to is the well known *Testimonium Flavianum* where the first century historian gives his report on Jesus. Most scholars agree that the text as it now stands has been tampered with by Christians. The question is, however, does the passage as it stands describe Jesus as "a notorious troublemaker." Here is the passage as translated in the source they refer to:³

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a

//teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

It may be that in making this claim they were endorsing the restoration of Josephus's text proposed by R. Eisler, and described in a note in the Feldman edition. If this was the case however should they not have provided their readers with some indication that that was what they were doing?

(7) On pages 13-14 we read "The philosopher Celsus says that many people despised the Christians because, in his words, "the worship a crucified sophist." But the famous line about early Christians worshipping a crucified sophist comes from Lucian not Celsus. We find it in Lucian's *The Passing of Peregrinus* 13: ⁴

Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his ways.

Pagels/King give as their reference in Celsus on page 173, note 12: Origen, *Against Celsus* 5:62. The passage, however, says nothing of crucified sophists. I include the entire section, cited in the English translation of the Ante Nicene Fathers Series 3:

He next pours down upon us a heap of names, saying that he knows of the existence of certain Simonians who worship Helene, or Helenus, as their teacher, and are called Helenians. But it has escaped the notice of Celsus that the Simonians do not at all acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God, but term Simon the "power" of God, regarding whom they relate certain marvelous stories, saying that he imagined that if he could

become possessed of similar powers to those with which he believed Jesus to be endowed, he too would become as powerful among men as Jesus was amongst the multitude. But neither Celsus nor Simon could comprehend how Jesus, like a good husbandman of the word of God, was able to sow the greater part of Greece, and of barbarian lands, with His doctrine, and to fill these countries with words which transform the soul from all that is evil, and bring it back to the Creator of all things. Celsus knows, moreover, certain Marcellians, so called from Marcellina, and Harpocratians from Salome, and others who derive their name from Mariamme, and others again from Martha. We, however, who from a love of learning examine to the utmost of our ability not only the contents of Scripture, and the differences to which they give rise, but have also, from love to the truth, investigated as far as we could the opinions of philosophers, have never at any time met with these sects. He makes mention also of the Marcionites, whose leader was Marcion.

For the critical text of this chapter see the third volume of Marcel Borret SJ's edition for the *Sources Chrétienne* (147), pp. 166-169.

(8) On page 47 we read that Irenaeus was in rural France as "a missionary from Syria." Irenaeus was not from Syria but from the Roman province of Asia (see, e.g., Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.5)

(9) On the following page (48) Pagels/King speak of Irenaeus's "beloved teacher and mentor, the venerable Polycarp," often called "the teacher of Syria." Polycarp was not called "the teacher of Syria." Perhaps Pagels/King were misremembering the passage in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12, where Polycarp is called (in some manuscripts) "the teacher of Asia."

(10) On page 53 they refer to "Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Asia Minor." The Antioch of which Ignatius was bishop was in Syria not Asia Minor. He refers to himself as "the bishop of Syria" in his epistle to the Romans 2:2 and 9:1. Pagels/King quote from this same epistle in the context where they make the mistake.

Professors Pagels and King do their readers a real disservice with a work characterized by such sloppiness of scholarship. Not only are the errors too plentiful to be easily excused in a volume of less than 200 pages, but several of them deal with such basic and introductory matters as to make it difficult to

believe the book was really written by two distinguished scholars from Harvard and Princeton?

References

¹ I have corrected minor misspellings in my and Professor Wallace's emails.

² As is indicated as well by note 2 on p. 174 and 175 which credits a quotation on page 36 from the *Gospel of Thomas* (not the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*): "*Gospel of Thomas*, 114, in Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Random House, New York [sic], 2003). All citations of the English translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* are from the appendix of *Beyond Belief*."

³ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63.3ET: Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus* (volume 9 of 10; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard; London: Heinemann, 1981) 49 and 53.

⁴ ET: A.M. Harmon, *Lucian* (vol. 5 of 8 vols.; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge Harvard; London: Heinemann, 1936)15.