

## Chapter 8

### THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS: A PARODY OF APOSTOLIC CHRISTIANITY

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On the evening of 9 April 2006, the National Geographic Society aired a documentary, *The Gospel of Judas: The Lost Version of Christ's Betrayal*. The movie showed the scholars who were members of the National Geographic team tell their stories about the recovery, reconstruction and interpretation of the 'found' *Gospel of Judas*. They said that this gospel presents us with a very different story of Judas Iscariot, one in which Judas is the hero, not the villain. As Jesus' 'soul-mate', Judas was asked by Jesus to kill him in order to release Jesus' spirit and bring about salvation. This opinion formed the basis for the team's book, *The Gospel of Judas*, released on the same day.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, this line of interpretation reclaimed and affirmed the opinion of Epiphanius who said that Judas, in his gospel, betrayed Jesus because he was a strong Power from above whose knowledge was supreme. Judas knew if he betrayed Jesus, that Christ's crucifixion would destroy the Archons, the gods who ruled this world. So Judas carried it out. Epiphanius writes, 'Knowing this, Judas made every effort to betray him, thereby accomplishing a good work for salvation. We should admire and praise Judas because through him the salvation of the cross was prepared for us' (*Pan.* 38.3.1-5).

This line of interpretation has been accepted and reaffirmed by many well-known scholars who quickly released their own interpretations, and in some cases translations, of the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, these studies are based on the faulty provisional Coptic transcription originally posted by the National Geographic Society on its website and the English translation in the original popular English publication.<sup>3</sup> In some quarters, however, re-evaluation of the Coptic and a reassessment of the initial reading of the *Gospel of Judas*

1. R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006).

2. Cf. B. D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Gospel of Judas* (London: SPCK, 2006); E. Pagels and K. L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007).

3. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*.



substantial portion of the ancient book, some 50 photographed fragments (a.k.a. the Ohio fragments), remain unpublished because this part of the book is being held hostage in a legal battle over ownership. So it is important for us to remember that we do not know yet the full extent of the contents of the Tchacos Codex. The portion that we do have appears to be the first 66 pages of the codex.

The *Gospel of Judas* is found on pages 33 to 58 of the Tchacos Codex. It is the only surviving copy from antiquity of the *Gospel of Judas*. The other documents within the book are another copy of the *Letter of Peter to Philip* (1–9; cf. NHC 8, 2 132.10–140.27), another version of the *First Apocalypse of James* (10–22; cf. NHC 5, 3 24.10–44.10) and a fragment of the beginning of another work whose central figure is named Allogenes (59–66). Two of the Ohio fragments (Ohio 4578, 4579) from *Corpus Hermeticum* 13.1–2 have also been identified. It remains to be seen whether they were part of this book.

The Tchacos Codex was not discovered alone. In the 1970s, it was found with three other ancient books in limestone box when a tomb near Jebel Qarara just north of Al Minya was looted. Like the Tchacos Codex, the three other books do not survive intact. They were divided into smaller portions by antiquities dealers who wanted to increase profits from their sale. One of these books was a fourth- or fifth-century papyrus codex containing a very important version of Exodus.<sup>6</sup> This codex survives in pieces scattered in private collections and university libraries.<sup>7</sup> The second codex, a book containing Paul’s letters, has not resurfaced. What we know about it comes from the brief report written in 1983 by Stephen Emmel, who had the opportunity to view the codices when they were being offered for sale.<sup>8</sup> The third book in the limestone box was a Greek geometry book called the *Metrodological Tractate*. It was torn in half and was sold to two separate buyers – Lloyd E. Cotsen, who has donated his portion to Princeton University, and an anonymous private collector.<sup>9</sup>

Why was the Tchacos Codex buried in a tomb with these three other books? If nothing else, their burial together points to their privileged place in the life of an early Christian living in ancient Egypt, a Christian who seems to have had esoteric leanings. Whoever was buried with these books had no difficulty during his or her lifetime studying canonical favourites like Paul and Exodus alongside the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*. Since both the Hermetics and the Gnostics studied mathematical theorems in order to map their universe, understand

6. D. A. DeSilva and M. P. Adams, ‘Seven Papyrus Fragments of a Greek Manuscript of Exodus’, *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006) 143–170.

7. A list of the whereabouts of these fragments is kept by Ernest A. Muro, Jr on the World Wide Web. See [www.breadofangels.com/geneva1983/exodus/index/html](http://www.breadofangels.com/geneva1983/exodus/index/html) (last accessed on 23 September 2007).

8. Reported in J. M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006) 117–120.

9. H. Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006) 226–227, reports that both sections of the treatise will be published by A. Jones and R. Bagnall in 2008.

their place within it and route the spirit's journey home, the burial of the *Metrological Treatise* with them should not come as a surprise. Knowledge of their contents may have provided the deceased assurance that his or her spirit would find the proper path to the divine realm and not become trapped in the hells and purgatories along the way.

## 2. *Setting Straight the Coptic Transcription of the Gospel of Judas*

National Geographic's involvement in the publication of the *Gospel of Judas* has complicated the work of scholars. On the one hand, the Society is to be commended for restoring the Tchacos Codex, and for bringing back to life 85 per cent. of the *Gospel of Judas*. On the other hand, the rush to publish an English translation of the Gospel for public consumption has resulted in the distribution of faulty information. Part of the faulty information is the consequence of the fact that the scholars who made the first English translation based it on a *provisional unfinished* Coptic transcription. This transcription was released on the National Geographic website at the same time that the English translation was made available in bookstores.

Unfortunately, we now know that the provisional transcription was flawed in crucial areas of the text. These flaws were corrected a year later in the *Critical Edition*, but not before they became part of the academic discourse and the public consciousness. They skewed our perception of the Gospel's actual story and its presentation of Judas. Doesn't the Gospel say that Judas will ascend to the holy generation? Only in the flawed original transcription does Jesus say to Judas, 'In the last days, *they will curse your ascent to the holy generation*' (*Gos. Jud.* 46.24–47.1; italics mine).<sup>10</sup> This particular sentence was the result of a faulty parsing of the Coptic and an emendation of the sentence that resulted in the erasure of the negative future tense from the verb, *bôk*, 'to ascend'. What does the corrected transcription read? 'In the last days *they <will--> to you, and you will not ascend on high to the holy generation.*'<sup>11</sup>

Doesn't the Gospel say that it is possible for Judas to go to the Kingdom? Only in the flawed original transcription does Jesus say to Judas, 'I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. *It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal*' (*Gos. Jud.* 35.25–27; italics mine).<sup>12</sup> What does the corrected transcription say? 'I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, *not so that you will go there, but you will grieve a great deal.*'<sup>13</sup> This opposite reading is the consequence of re-examining the ink traces on the edges of a lacunae in line 26, and correctly adjusting the reading from *oun com*, 'it is possible', to *oukh hina*, 'not so that'.

10. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 33.

11. Kasser *et al.*, *Critical Edition*, 211.

12. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 23.

13. Kasser *et al.*, *Critical Edition*, 189.

What this means in terms of interpretation is that there is no evidence in the *Gospel of Judas* that would support an ascent by Judas to the holy generation or any realm beyond those contained within this cosmos. It is quite unfortunate that the faulty readings are now such a large part of the scholarly and public discourse, since the corrected readings present us with a Judas who never leaves this universe.

### 3. The Thirteenth Daimon

The faulty readings generated from the provisional Coptic transcription were compounded by substantial translation errors in the original English translation, many of which, unfortunately, have been retained in the English translation published in the *Critical Edition*. The most important in terms of identifying Judas is the statement found in the *Gospel of Judas* 44.18–21. Jesus mockingly laughs at Judas and says to him, ‘Why do you compete (with them), *O Thirteenth Demon?*’<sup>14</sup> The Coptic behind ‘demon’ is *daimon*, which the National Geographic team rendered ‘spirit’ in their original publication, while wisely shifting to the more ambiguous ‘*daimon*’ in the *Critical Edition*.<sup>15</sup> The ‘spirit’ translation was justified on the grounds of Plato’s *Symposium* 202e–203a, and it was used to posit Judas as a positive figure.<sup>16</sup>

This may reflect the world-view of Plato and later Hellenistic philosophers, but it does not reflect the world-view closest to the author of the *Gospel of Judas* who was a Sethian Gnostic writing within the Christian tradition. All occurrences of the word *daimon* or a cognate in the New Testament are references to demons.<sup>17</sup> Christian literature in the early period as well as the medieval period contain hundreds of references to words built from the word *daimon*. The meaning of these words? They refer to demons, evil spirits, devils, demon possession, and devilish behaviour.<sup>18</sup> Of the Gnostic books from Nag Hammadi, I have located about 50 occurrences of the word *daimon* or its cognate. In every case, the word refers to an Archon or one of his demonic assistants.<sup>19</sup>

The reason for this sinister designation in Gnostic literature is the fact that the Gnostic cosmology was fairly consistent in terms of its view that a chief

14. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 48–51, 77.

15. Kasser, Meyer and Würst, *Gospel of Judas*, 31; Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, 207.

16. Kasser, Meyer and Würst, *Gospel of Judas*, 31 n. 74, 163–165.

17. Kittel, *TDNT*, 2, 16–19.

18. E. C. E. Owen, ‘Daimon and Cognate Words’, *JTS* 32 (1931) 133–153.

19. *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* 57.10–20; 59.25; *Apocalypse of Paul* 19.5; *Apocalypse of Adam* 79.15; *Authoritative Teaching* 34.28; *Trimorphic Protennoia* 35.17; 40.5; 41.6; *Testimony of Truth* 29.17; 42.25; *Apocalypse of Peter* 75.4; 82.23; *Concept of Our Great Power* 42.17; *Zostrianos* 43.12; *Paraphrase of Shem* 21.26; 21.36; 22.7; 22.25; 23.9; 23.16; 24.7; 25.9; 25.19; 25.22; 25.26; 25.29; 27.24; 28.7; 28.15; 29.10; 29.17; 30.1; 30.8; 30.23; 30.32; 31.16; 31.19; 32.6; 32.16; 34.5; 35.15; 35.19; 36.27; 37.21; 40.26; 44.6; 44.15; 44.31; 45.17; 45.23.

Archon, an arrogant and rebellious Demiurge, created and rules this world. Below him exists heavens or realms populated by his own wicked creations, an entourage of Archons and assistants who, alongside him, are rebelling against the supreme transcendent God. When the word *daimon* is used in Gnostic sources, it is applied frequently and consistently to these wicked Archons and their assistants. Its application to Judas in the *Gospel of Judas* should be understood no differently. Jesus is identifying Judas as a demon.

What is perhaps even more fascinating is that the Gospel tells us that Judas is a particular demon, the Thirteenth (*Gos. Jud.* 44.18–21). In another passage in the Gospel, Judas is connected with the Thirteenth realm and its star or planet, which is a reference to the particular Archon who resides there (*Gos. Jud.* 55.10–11). The Gospel physically places Judas in the Thirteenth realm in the near future (*Gos. Jud.* 46.19–24). These references are to Sethian cosmology which is mapped out in terms of thirteen realms. There are five hells or abysses and seven heavens ruled by the demon Archons. These twelve realms are the creations of Ialdabaoth, Saklas and Nebruel, the chief demon Archons who reside above them in the thirteenth realm. In Sethian literature, Ialdabaoth is known by the nickname, ‘god of the thirteen realms’ (*Gos. Egy.* 63.19). In this same text, Nebruel, one of Ialdabaoth’s chief archons living in the thirteenth realm is twice called ‘the great demon (*pnoc ndaimôn*)’ (*Gos. Egy.* 57.10–20). This is the same Nebro(el) who is also known as Ialdabaoth in the *Gospel of Judas*. This is the particular demon that Judas has been identified with in the *Gospel of Judas*.

How and why this transparent reference to Ialdabaoth was missed in the initial interpretations of the *Gospel of Judas*, I do not know. But until someone can offer a better explanation about the identity of a ‘thirteenth spirit’ beyond an allusion to lucky numbers,<sup>20</sup> the most reasonable starting point for understanding who Judas is in the *Gospel of Judas* is what the Coptic actually tells us: he is the Thirteenth Demon, Nebro(el)-Ialdabaoth, who is also called the Apostate, the renegade and traitor (*Gos. Jud.* 51.12–15). Saklas, who is mentioned as a separate archon, appears toward the end of the gospel to be amalgamated with this figure too.

#### 4. Separation from the Gnostic Generation

Another window into the character of Judas is a very important statement made by Jesus that Judas has been ‘separated from’ the holy generation (*Gos. Jud.* 46.14–18). The Coptic is very clear here, using the expression *pôrj e*. This expression is a Coptic unit with a fixed lexical meaning – that is, the preposition is bound to the verb in terms of meaning.<sup>21</sup> Although *e* as a lone preposition

20. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 164–165.

21. Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar* (2nd edn Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004) sec. 181.

might have a variety of meanings, including 'for', when it is bound with this particular verb it can only mean 'from'.<sup>22</sup>

This expression is found frequently in Coptic literature, including translations of Old and New Testament passages, and always indicates separation 'from', exclusion or opposition.<sup>23</sup> In Coptic translations of the Bible, it is used to render Paul's question in Rom. 8.35 (S) – 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' – and the words of Jesus in Mt. 10.35 (SB) – 'For I have come to set a man against his father.'

It is chosen by the Coptic translator of the *Gospel of Philip* to indicate the separation of Eve from Adam (70.21) and woman from man (70.10).<sup>24</sup> The same is true of the translator of the *Tripartite Tractate* who wishes to discuss the powers that separate the Pleroma from the Logos (97.21). In *On the Origin of the World*, the expression is used to speak about the separation of Sabaoth from the darkness (106.12), while in two other passages the translator uses it to indicate the separation out of a part from the whole during the process of creation (103.3, 5). In the *Apocryphon of James* 14.33, it indicates the parting of two people – 'I shall depart from you.'

How has this been translated by the National Geographic team in the original publication and is retained in the *Critical Edition*? 'When Judas heard this, he said to him, 'What is the advantage that I have received? For *you have set me apart for that generation*.'<sup>25</sup> It makes a big difference whether Judas is set apart for the Gnostic generation or separated from it! But separated he is, just as we discover earlier when Jesus interprets Judas' dream to mean his exclusion from the holy generation (*Gos. Jud.* 44.15–46.4). In the *Gospel of Judas*, Judas is no hero, and certainly no Gnostic.

### 5. Criticism of the Apostolic Church

Because Judas is identified with the chief Archon, Ialdabaoth, there are a couple of passages in which he is told that he will rule in the thirteenth realm over the twelve Archons and their realms below him (*Gos. Jud.* 45.25–46.24; 55.10–11; cf. 46.2–4) and that he will be in control of the Archons (*Gos. Jud.* 46.5–7).

22. W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939) 271b–272a. It translates Greek expressions such as χωρίζω από, διχάζω, διαστέλλω, ἀφορίζω, and ῥήγνυμι.

23. Cf. 2 Kgs 1.23S; Prov. 18.1SA; Wis. Sol. 1.3S; Mt. 10.35; 1 Cor. 7.10; 2 Cor. 6.17; Rom. 8.35.

24. For additional usages, see *Gos. Phil.* 53.16, 64.18.

25. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 32; Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, 211. The n. for lines 17–18 in *Critical Edition* offers '... from that generation' as an alternative. Unfortunately Marvin Meyer continues to perpetuate this faulty translation in the new international edition of the Nag Hammadi texts, and in his anthology of 'Judas' sources. See M. Meyer, *The International Edition of the Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007) 765, with 'from' listed as an alternative reading in n. 63); M. Meyer, *Judas: The Definitive Collection of Gospels and Legends about the Infamous Apostle of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007) 60, with 'from' listed as an alternative reading in n. 67.

This is not an exaltation of Judas, but a sinister association of him with the King of the Archons. It is an association that Judas resists and laments, while Jesus laughs and mocks (*Gos. Jud.* 46.6–13; 55.10–13; cf. 44.18–22).

Even more sinister is the Gospel's association of the twelve Archons that Judas will rule over with the twelve apostles of the Church who curse Judas and try to stone him (*Gos. Jud.* 44.24–26, 46.2–24). The *Gospel of Judas* is very clear that Judas has been replaced with a twelfth apostle so that their number will match the numerology of Ialdabaoth's realms (*Gos. Jud.* 36.1–4; cf. Acts 1:12–14). The association of the disciples with the twelve signs of the Zodiac is not unique to this text. Theodotus the Valentinian taught that 'the Apostles were put in place of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, as birth is governed by these signs, so is rebirth (governed) by the Apostles' (Clem. Alex., *Exc. Theo.* 25.2). For Theodotus, they are functioning positively. Closer to *Judas'* demonic interpretation of the Twelve, however, is the *First Apocalypse of James*, which explains that the twelve Archons, who are armed adversaries of Jesus, are a 'type' of the twelve disciples (NHC 26.2–27.25; NHC 36.1–3).

Whoever wrote the *Gospel of Judas* is lodging criticism against the Apostolic Church by identifying its authorities with ignorant and rebellious Archons, demons who curse the very demon who made possible their atonement. So this Gospel does not go easy on the Twelve. To begin with, Jesus does not approve of the disciples as they partake of the Eucharist (*Gos. Jud.* 33.22–34.10). In fact, he laughs at them in a very sinister way. They collectively respond by trying to defend the ritual, saying, 'Teacher, why are you laughing at our eucharist? We have done what is right.' Then Jesus tells them that he laughed at them because whenever they partake of the Eucharist, Ialdabaoth is receiving the benefit. It is he they are worshipping, and it is this they are ignorant of.

They continue to show off their ignorance when they are unable to confess correctly who Jesus is and are shown up by the worst demon of all, Judas Iscariot, who is able to proclaim Jesus' true identity and is demonstrably more perfect than they (*Gos. Jud.* 34.11–35.20). For an early Christian Gnostic text to say that Judas the demon 'got it' while the Twelve could not – and that even Judas, the wicked and cursed disciple, was more perfect than they – is a characterization of the Twelve that could not be more subversive or severe.

In the next appearance scene, the disciples want to know where Jesus goes when he leaves them (*Gos. Jud.* 36.11–37.20). They are informed by Jesus that he ascends to the holy generation. The Twelve are shocked. So out of their ignorance, they ask Jesus, 'Lord, who is the great generation more exalted and holier than us?' Again Jesus laughs at them. He explains to them that they are unable to associate with the holy Gnostic generation because they belong to the human generation, a generation which is ruled by the stars. They are troubled but keep silent.

Jesus joins the Twelve on another occasion when they recount a collective dream that they had experienced that night (*Gos. Jud.* 37.20–39.5). They claimed to have seen twelve priests executing their own children on the Temple's



altar in Jesus' Name. Jesus offers a shocking interpretation of their dream. He tells them that it is their worst nightmare. They are the twelve priests who stand over the altar, invoke Jesus' Name, and present the sacrifices. But it is not an offering to the supreme God, but to the 'Deacon of Error', the 'Lord of the Universe', Ialdabaoth. Furthermore, on that final day of consummation when judgement is rendered, the Twelve will be guilty of worshipping this false god and leading astray countless generations of people who are yet to be born.

This portrait of the Twelve, although queer to modern Christian sensibilities, is not an *ex nihilo* fabrication of anti-Christians. Rather it is an interpretation dependent upon a very literal reading of the *Gospel of Mark*. As such, it is incredibly faithful to scripture. It is in the *Gospel of Mark* that the demons are the entities who recognize Jesus and confess him, including Peter who is rebuked as Satan (1.34; 3.11; 5.6-7; 8.31-33). The twelve disciples never fare well. They are faithless and ignorant straight through to the end of the Gospel even though they are handpicked by Jesus and given special teachings (3.13-19; 4.10-20; 4.37-41; 6.52; 8.15-21; 9.15-19; 9.33-35; 10.13-14; 14.50). At one point in the narrative, Jesus rebukes the disciples for their failure to heal an epileptic boy, 'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?' (Mk 9.15-19). The disciples' reputation is never redeemed, even in the longer ending of Mark where the disciples are chided by Jesus 'for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen' (16.14).

The reason that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* portrays the apostles so harshly is not because he hates Christianity. Rather he worried that Christians were being led astray by the Apostolic Church, which claimed to rely on teachings derived from the Twelve. From his acquaintance with the Gospel of Mark, the author of *Judas* reasoned that the Twelve were so ignorant and faithless that even the demons – including Judas – were more knowledgeable than they were. So the author's purpose was to challenge the Apostolic Church's doctrines and practices, which were claimed by its leaders to be passed down as the authoritative teachings from the apostles to the current bishops in an unbroken chain of transmission. For the author of the *Gospel of Judas*, the foundational link in this chain was corrupt. Because the disciples were ignorant and faithless, whatever information they passed on was bogus. Following their teachings leads Christians astray, and joining in their rituals tricks them into worshipping the wrong god! The consequence of this horrible situation was the annihilation rather than salvation of countless Christians.

Whoever wrote the *Gospel of Judas* was himself a Gnostic Christian who operated from a perspective informed by highly literal interpretations of biblical stories about the twelve disciples and was grounded in an apocalyptic cosmology in which Archons created and ruled the universe as opponents of the supreme God, Jesus' Father. According to these Gnostic Christians, the apostles did not possess God's mysteries, but like the Archons remained ignorant of the truth. They were leaders of the 'human generations' that belonged

to the archonic kingdoms. Particularly loathsome to these Gnostics was the Church's doctrine of atonement and its re-enactment in the Eucharist. The reason that this doctrine and practice was so hideous to them was because it assumed infanticide – that a father would and should kill his own son. So heinous a crime was this, so immoral, that the Sethian Christians could not stomach it, and so in the *Gospel of Judas* the Twelve are accused of engaging in child sacrifice and understand Judas the demon as the one who initiated it.

But doesn't Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas* ask Judas to kill him in order to release his spirit? No. This conversation does not occur anywhere in the *Gospel of Judas*. What occurs is a short diatribe by Jesus in which he condemns all the sacrifices that are made to the Archons (*Gos. Jud.* 56.11–21). This appears to be a flashback to the twelve apostles' earlier nightmare when they are severely chastised by Jesus for making sacrifices to the lower god (*Gos. Jud.* 37.20–40.26) and when he commands them to stop sacrificing (*Gos. Jud.* 41.1–2). In the middle of the fragmented diatribe, Jesus declares that their sacrifices are evil. Then he tells Judas, 'You will do *more than* all of them. For the man which clothes me, you will sacrifice him.'

The question is, do more than what? The answer must be determined from the immediate context of the Coptic phrase, *er-houo eroou terou*, 'more than'. The context does not indicate that Judas will do a good thing as the National Geographic interpretation suggests in its original publication and maintains its *Critical Edition*: 'But you will *exceed* all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me.'<sup>26</sup> Rather given the negative context, Jesus is telling Judas that his sacrifice will be the worse kind possible, because he will be sacrificing Jesus himself to the Archons.

The atonement was (and still is) a cherished interpretation of Jesus' death among Christians. Nonetheless, it is an interpretation that came after the fact of his death. Because of this, the interpretation did not align exactly with the way in which the Christian story remembered Jesus' death – that a demonic Judas was the one who actually made it happen. The Sethian Gnostics in the *Gospel of Judas* pointed out the obvious problem with this. If Jesus' death really was a sacrifice made by God for the purpose of salvation, why would a demon be the instrument? And why would Judas be cursed for his involvement?

The Apostolic doctrine struck them as dangerous and humorous at the same time, because they felt that it showed up the ignorance and ineffectiveness of the Apostolic faith. Judas was a demon, and the god who put out Jesus' death warrant was Ialdabaoth. Judas collaborated with him, and together they brought about Jesus' sacrifice, which was nothing less than apostasy and murder. The sacrifice was a sacrifice to Ialdabaoth, so all Eucharistic offerings serve only to worship and extol him. I find this to be a very clever and powerful argument given the premises of the Gnostic universe.

26. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 43; Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, 231.

6. *The Apostolic Response*

Given what the *Gospel of Judas* has to say by way of critique of Apostolic doctrine and practices, I find it fascinating that the Apostolic Christians begin to become concerned about Judas in the literature produced by the Church Fathers in the late second and early third centuries. His actions appear to have become a liability for the Apostolic Christians.

It seems that the sophisticated Gnostic critique we find in the *Gospel of Judas* concerned a number of Apostolic Christian thinkers, who prior to the publication of the *Gospel of Judas* in the mid-second century rarely mentioned Judas beyond the mere repetition of his stories from the gospels or fanciful embellishments of these stories. Not only does the number of references to Judas in their writings increase in the late second century, but the Apostolic writers begin working hard to provide defences of and interpretations for Judas' actions, especially his connection with demonic forces. These apologies for Judas look like they are meant to resolve the exact problem articulated in the *Gospel of Judas* – that a demon is responsible for Jesus' death, and any atonement he may have brought about was by and for the Archons who rule this world.

Of particular interest is Origen's early-third-century discussion where, as he is thinking about God's bigger plan of redemption, he forges a link between Judas and the Devil. The terms of this plan is a ransom paid to the Devil, an idea rooted in the Gospels and Paul (cf. Mk 10.45; Mt. 20.28; Rom. 3.24; 8.23; 1 Tim. 2.5–6). What Origen begins insisting is that God – not Judas and not the Devil – is responsible for Jesus' sacrifice. He supports this by quoting the apostle Paul that God 'spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all' (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 13.8). How does Judas get involved? Judas, Origen says, was an evil person whose soul was already being eaten by a spiritual gangrene, a wickedness hidden deep within (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 11.9). Because of this, Judas allowed the Devil to possess him fully, as it is written that after the supper, 'Satan entered into him' (Origen, *On First Principles* 3.2; *Comm. John* 10.30) and God delivered Judas to the demons. Then the Devil used Judas to deliver Jesus to those men who would crucify him. Jesus' blood was the ransom that bought the sinful dead from the Devil. But the Devil, when he accepted this purchase price, got a big surprise. Because Jesus' spirit was more powerful than his, Jesus was able to rise from the dead and conquer death. The Devil could not hold on to him so he was cheated out of his ransom. This, Origen thinks, is how God tricked the Devil and Jesus atoned for the sins of humanity (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 12.40; 13.8–9).

What is striking to me is that the end of Origen's story is not so far removed from the Gnostic story, which centred around the moment when Jesus' powerful spirit conquered the Archons who tried to subdue him. The Gnostic interpretation of his death is victory over death and the Archons who enslave the human spirit. On this point, I think that Origen and the Gnostics were on common ground.

The Church Fathers also respond to the *Gospel of Judas* by directly taking on the text itself. The first to do this was Irenaeus around 180 CE in *Against Heresies* 1.31.1. In this passage, he does not give us much in terms of detail, only suggesting that the *Gospel of Judas* had Judas as its central figure, that Judas knew the 'truth' while the other disciples did not, and that his betrayal of Jesus was a 'mystery' that set the earth and heavens into chaos. He never says that Judas was characterized as 'good' or a 'hero' in the *Gospel of Judas*.

It is difficult to know from his description whether he actually read the version of the *Gospel of Judas* that we now possess, or was testifying to hearsay about its contents, or worst of all, was guessing at them. His description appears to me to be fairly accurate of the manuscript we possess, except that he identifies it as a Gospel belonging to people who declared that their ancestors were Esau, Korah and the Sodomites, and that Cain was an entity derived from a Power above.

Since the people who wrote the *Gospel of Judas* understood themselves to be descendants of the great Seth, son of Adam, not Cain nor any of the others whom Irenaeus mentions, this suggests to me two immediate possibilities. Either the *Gospel of Judas* was not originally Sethian, and this non-Sethian version is what Irenaeus knew, or his genealogy is fictitious, whose purpose is to undermine the Gospel's credibility. My analysis of the *Gospel of Judas* suggests that the subversive Sethian hermeneutic is not merely a surface patina, but integral to the entire narrative. So the former possibility is not very attractive to me. The latter is reasonable given Irenaeus' agenda against Gnostic groups and writings, where he embellishes and distorts 'facts', and creates polemics to undercut his opponents, including false genealogies tracing the many sprouting mushrooms back to Simon Magus.

Having said all of this, however, there is something about his description that causes me to pause. The Sethians did teach that Cain was a Power. In their system, however, he was not a benevolent Power, but an evil Archon, a Power ruling one of the cosmic realms. So if the Sethians taught that the human Cain owed his existence to a Power above, he owed it to an evil one, not a good one. Could it be that Irenaeus knew this and merely tweaked the 'facts' slightly to fit his polemical agenda?

The other Church Father to write about the *Gospel of Judas* is Epiphanius who leaves us a very elaborate discussion in *Panarion* 38.1.2-5 and 38.3.1.5, a discussion which at least has been influenced by Irenaeus. Epiphanius rids the Irenaean description of any ambiguity it might have had, so that Cain is said to be from 'the stronger power and dominion above' as are also Esau, Korah and the Sodomites. He adds that Abel is from 'the weaker power'. He gives the name Cainites to the authors of the *Gospel of Judas*, and says that they believed that Judas was their kinsman, knew about the upper Aeons, and possessed the highest of knowledge.

He goes into several elaborate schemes about how the crucifixion came about according to the Cainites (cf. Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 7.17.17; Tert. *Prescription* 33; Tert. *On Baptism* 1; Ps.-Tert. *Ag. Haer.* 2.5-6; Hipp. *Ref.* 8; Origen, *Contra*

*Celsum* 3.13; Philastrius, *Diverse Heresies* 34.1; Epiph. *Pan.* 38.1.5–2.3; 38.2.4–5; 39.1.1–2). One scheme sets up Judas as a strong power who triumphs over the weaker, Christ's body. Another scheme involves a wicked Christ who is betrayed by an admirable Judas in order to stop Christ from destroying 'sound teachings'. A final scheme understands Judas to betray Jesus because Judas was a high power who knew that the Archons power would be drained if Jesus was crucified. So Judas did everything he could to accomplish this good work of salvation and should be admired and praised for this. Of course, none of this is found in the *Gospel of Judas*. Epiphanius appears to be passing along a story that had been fabricated long before him about a fictitious group of Gnostic Christians called the Cainites. This invention was likely the result of (mis)reading Irenaeus in an attempt to further discredit the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*.

### 7. A Sethian Parody

What I find especially valuable about the *Gospel of Judas* is that it preserves traditions that demonstrate just how close the Apostolic and Sethian Christians were, and yet how far apart. It appears to be a given of both types of Christianity that Judas is a demon. The dispute is over which one, the Devil or Ialdabaoth. Both forms of Christianity recognize the implications of this identification, because it means that a demon brought about salvation through atonement. It is this problem that Origen finally solves by fashioning the doctrine of the Devil's Ransom in the early third century.

For the Gnostic Christian, no apology was necessary. The tradition that Judas a demon brought about atonement proved to the Sethians that this doctrine was put into place by the demons as part of their plan to trick human beings into worshipping them instead of the supreme God. Every time people participated in Eucharist ceremonies, which re-enacted the bloody sacrifice of Jesus' body, they were making their offerings to the Demiurge not the transcendent God. Who else would want bloody offerings except Ialdabaoth-Nebro(el) whose appearance was corrupted with blood (*Gos. Jud.* 51.11)?

The Gnostic Christians worried that the Apostolic Christians were being led astray by their leaders, whose ignorance and faithlessness could be traced back to the Markan characterization of the Twelve, their direct predecessors. If the Sethian Christians could not convince them of this, in the End the Apostolic Christians would be judged to be apostates and destroyed along with Judas-Ialdabaoth and his 12 underlings. It was the weight of this hidden tragic knowledge that likely seeded the idea to retell Judas' story as 'good news'. Parody The Sethian author rewrote Judas' story with both humor and satire so that the Apostolic Christians would be critiqued, corrected and hopefully saved.

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