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TRANSGRESSIVE GNOSIS:
RADICAL THINKING ABOUT THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

When the National Geographic Society premiered its documentary about finding the lost Gospel of Judas and the «good news» that it related on April 9th, 2006, two-million viewers saw it. I was among them, hearing for the first time about the Gospel of Judas. My husband and I were fascinated to see my colleagues on the National Geographic team tell their story about Judas – that they had found a gospel that presented a very different story about Judas, one in which Judas was a hero, even Jesus' «soul-mate», the disciple who was asked by Jesus to kill Jesus in order to release his spirit and bring about salvation.

The interpretation of the gospel they related in that documentary and in their book *The Gospel of Judas* was one that essentially reclaimed and affirmed an opinion of a famous Church Father, Epiphanius, who wrote about the existence of a Gospel of Judas and condemned it around the year 375.¹ He said that it belonged to a group of Gnostics called Cainites, who claimed to be related to all the villains in scripture, villains who really were not villains but opponents to the biblical God.² Because the Cainites equated Yahweh with the Demiurge, an ignorant jealous god who ruled the world and battled against the Father God, the villains in the bible who resisted Yahweh and rebelled against him, were actually good guys in disguise working for the Father God, trying to topple the Demiurge's regime.

Judas was one of these guys. According to Epiphanius' account of the Gospel of Judas, he betrayed Jesus because he was actually a «power» from on high whose knowledge was supreme. Judas knew if he betrayed Jesus,

¹ R. KASSER – M. MEYER and G. WURST, *The Gospel of Judas*, Washington, D.C., National Geographic, 2006.

² Cf. CLEM., *Str.*, 7, 17, 17; TERT., *Praescr.*, 33; TERT., *Bapt.*, 1; Ps. TERT., *Haer.*, 2, 5-6; Ps.-HIPPI., *Haer.*, 8; OR., *Cels.*, 3, 13; FILASTR., *Div. haer. lib.*, 34, 1; EPIPH., *Haer.*, 38, 1, 5-2, 3; 38, 2, 4-5; 39, 1, 1-2.

that Christ's crucifixion would destroy the archons, the gods who ruled this world. So he carried it out himself because Christ's flesh was weak. He 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» (Epiph., *Haer.*, 38, 1, 2-5; 38, 3, 1, 5).

After the documentary concluded, I was thrilled that this lost gospel had been recovered, and I was intrigued that Epiphanius may have had it right after all. So I went to our home computer. From the National Geographic website, I downloaded and printed the English translation that had just been posted. It was the first time that I had laid eyes on the text since the members of the National Geographic team had to sign non-disclosure statements to work on the Gospel. But as I read it, my excitement began to wane, and by the time I finished reading it, I had a knot in my stomach. Upon reading lines 11-21 on page 56 of the manuscript, I turned to my husband and said, «Oh no, something is wrong. Judas is sacrificing to Saklas».

Setting straight what the Coptic says

The next day at my office, I got to work on the Coptic transcription that National Geographic had uploaded on their website.³ As I worked I felt like I was working blindly because I had no photographs to evaluate their transcription. I began to be concerned about the English translation when I noticed that the translation choices I was making were not the same as the National Geographic team's. Their choices were curious to me because they were unconventional. For instance, in the *Gospel of Judas* 44, 18-21, Jesus calls Judas the «Thirteenth *Daimon*». I wondered why the National Geographic team chose the word «spirit» to translate «δαίμων» when throughout Christian and Gnostic literature this word indicates a demon or malicious power.

All occurrences of the word δαίμων or a cognate in the New Testament are references to demons.⁴ Christian literature in the early period (as well

³ R. KASSER and G. WURST, «Coptic transcription», National Geographic webpage, The Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art, April 2006.

⁴ W. FOERSTER, «δαίμων, δαιμόνιον», in G. KITTEL and G. FRIEDRICH (ed.) and G.W. BROMLEY (transl.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. II, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964, pp. 16-19.

as the later medieval period) contain hundreds of references to words built from the word δαίμων. The meaning of these words? They refer to demons, evil spirits, devils, demon possession, and devilish behavior.⁵ Of the Gnostic books from Nag Hammadi, I have located fifty occurrences of the word δαίμων or its cognate. The word δαίμων consistently refers to an Archon or one of his demonic assistants.

SETHIAN GNOSTIC TEXTS

Early second century

– *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII, 1) mentions Archons, Angels, and Demons (35, 17). Ialdabaoth the Demiurge is called «the great Demon» who produces the cosmic realms (40, 5). Mentioned also are the «chains of the demons of the underworld» which the Redeemer broke (41, 6).

Mid-second century

– *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5) refers to the Archons Solomon, Phersalo and Sael who sent out an «army of demons» to seek out Mary the virgin to try to kill Jesus when he incarnated (79, 5).

Late second century

– *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III, 2) mentions one of the Chief three Archons, Nebruel, calling him the «great Demon» twice (57, 10-20). The Demiurge is said to create «defiled (seed) of the demon-begetting god which will be destroyed» (57, 25).

Early third century

– *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII, 1) contains a fragmentary reference to demons (43, 12).

UNAFFILIATED GNOSTIC TEXTS

Mid-second century

– *Apocalypse of Paul* (NHC V, 2) speaks of principalities, authorities, archangels, Powers, and the whole race of demons.

⁵ E.C.E. OWEN, *Δαίμων and Cognate Words*, in «Journal of Theological Studies», XXXII, 1931, pp. 133-153.

Late second century

– *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX, 3) interprets the leaven parable to refer to the «errant desire of the angels and the demons and the stars». These figures are associated with the Pharisees and the scribes of the law who belong to the Archons who have authority over them (29, 17). The Gnostic author speaks about fighting against the Archons and the Powers and the Demons (42, 25).

Third century

- *Authoritative Teaching* (NHC VI, 3) speaks of the «force of ignorance and the Demon of Error» (34, 28).
- In the context of discussion of Archons, the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII, 3) talks about dreams coming from a demon worthy of the person's error (75, 5). The physical body is called an «abode of demons, the stone vessel in which they live» (82, 53-54). The *Testament of Solomon* says that Solomon confined demons to these sorts of vessels.
- *Paraphrase of Shem* (NHC VII, 1) contains a series of thirty-five passages which speak of demons who are part of the darkness which work to create this world (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).

Early fourth century

– *Concept of Our Great Power* (NHC VI, 4) refers to the dissolution of the Archons following Jesus' crucifixion. They are referred to as evil demons who will be destroyed (42, 17).

The reason for this sinister designation in Gnostic literature is the fact that the classic Gnostic cosmology was fairly consistent in terms of its view that a chief 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 δαίμων is used in Gnostic sources, it is applied frequently and consistently to these wicked Archons and their assistants. There is no reason apparent in the *Gospel of Judas* to make me think that its application to Judas here should be understood differently. Jesus is identifying Judas as a demon.

Not only that, the expression «Thirteenth» narrows down the field to a particular demon in Sethian demonology. It is the combination of the two words as a title for Judas – the number thirteen with the word δαίμων –

that reveals Judas' identity in no uncertain terms. It is well-known among scholars of Gnosticism that in the Sethian tradition «God of the Thirteen Realms» is the nickname for Ialdabaoth, the chief Archon (*Gospel of Egyptians* NHC III, 2 63, 19). Why this designation? Because he lives in the Thirteenth Realm in the cosmos and rules over the world, its seven heavens and its five abysses. In this same text, Nebruel, one of Ialdabaoth's chief Archons living in the Thirteenth Realm is twice called «the great demon (ΠΝΟΒ ΝΑΔΑΙΜΩΝ)» (NHC III, 2 57, 10-20). This is the same Nebro(el) who is also known as Ialdabaoth in the *Gospel of Judas* 51, 12-15.

The particular demon that Judas has been associated with in the *Gospel of Judas* is quite evident when it is realized that in another passage the author connects Judas with the Thirteenth Realm and its star (55, 10-11). This is a transparent statement associating Judas with the Thirteenth Realm and its «star» or Archon who resides there. Furthermore, the author of the *Gospel* places Judas physically in the Thirteenth Realm in the near future where he will rule over the Twelve Realms occupied by the twelve apostles below him (46, 19-24). Thus he soon is going to be doing the job of Ialdabaoth, the ruler of the world. My analysis has led me to a very firm position that 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 (51, 12-15).

Since Judas is the Demon Archon in the *Gospel of Judas*, he certainly does not belong to the holy or Gnostic generation. Where does the idea come from that the *Gospel of Judas* says that Judas in fact belongs to the Gnostic generation? This interpretation is based on two main phrases in the *Gospel of Judas*. One is found on page 46, lines 14-18, which has been consistently translated by the National Geographic team and Marvin Meyer, «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”».⁶

When I first noticed the underlying Coptic, my eyebrows raised since this translation deviates substantially from its lexical meaning, «to separate

⁶ KASSER – MEYER – WURST, *Gospel of Judas*, p. 32; KASSER – WURST – MEYER – GAUDARD, *Critical Edition*, p. 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, p. 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, p. 60, with «from» listed as an alternative reading in n. 67.

from». It makes a big difference if Judas is set apart for the holy generation, or separated from it! The Coptic is very clear here, using the expression πωρϣ ε-. This expression is a Coptic unit with a fixed lexical meaning – that is, the preposition is bound to the verb in terms of meaning.⁷ Although ε as a lone preposition might have a variety of meanings, including «for», when it is bound with this particular verb it can only mean «from».⁸

This expression is found frequently in Coptic literature, including translations of Old and New Testament passages, and always indicates separation «from», exclusion or opposition.⁹ In Coptic translations of the Bible, it is used to render Paul's question in *Rm.*, VIII, 35 (S) – «Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?» – and the words of Jesus in *Mt.*, X, 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 (NHC II, 3 70, 21) and woman from man (NHC II, 3 70, 10).¹⁰ The same is true of the translator of the *Tripartite Tractate* who wishes to discuss the powers that separate the Pleroma from the Logos (NHC I, 5 97, 21). In *On the Origin of the World*, the expression is used to speak about the separation of Sabaoth from the darkness (NHC II, 5 106, 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 (NHC II, 5 103, 3, 5). In the *Apocryphon of James* NHC I, 2 14, 33, it indicates the parting of two people – «I shall depart from you».

Since I have been unable to locate a reference to πωρϣ ε- in the literature to mean «set apart for», I wonder if the National Geographic team had in mind *Rm.*, I, 1 where Paul is «set apart for the gospel». If the basis for their translation is *Rm.*, I, 1, then it cannot be maintained. The expression πωρϣ εβολ ε- is a different expression from πωρϣ ε-. In the phrase πωρϣ εβολ ε-, the πωρϣ is primarily linked with εβολ, so that the bound expression πωρϣ εβολ means «to divide or set apart».¹¹ This allows for the subsequent ε- to function with its normal range of meanings, including «for» but also «into» and «from».¹² Thus the Sahidic version of *Rm.*, I, 1

⁷ B. LAYTON, *A Coptic Grammar*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004², sec. 181.

⁸ W.E. CRUM, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939, pp. 271b-272a. It translates Greek expressions such as χωρίζω από, διχάζω, διαστέλλω, ἀφορίζω, and ῥήγνυμι.

⁹ Cf. *IV Rg.*, I, 23; *Prv.*, XVIII, 1; *Sap.*, I, 3; *Mt.*, X, 35; *I Cor.*, VII, 10; *II Cor.*, VI, 17; *Rm.*, VIII, 35.

¹⁰ For additional usages, see *Gospel of Philip*, NHC II, 3 53, 16, 64, 18.

¹¹ CRUM, *Coptic Dictionary*, p. 272a.

¹² *Ibid.*

uses πωρϣ εβολ ε- to mean «set apart for the gospel», while using πωρϣ ε- in VIII, 35 to render, «Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?».

The second passage that was used to make the argument that Judas belongs to the Gnostic generation was a misguided attempt to transcribe a difficult area of the manuscript at the bottom of page 46. Lines 24 and 25 are troubled because the end of line 24 and the beginning of line 25 do not flow grammatically. The simplest and best explanation is that a scribe accidentally dropped a line or two between line 24 and 25. But instead of relying on this explanation, the National Geographic team chose to parse the lines differently and emend them to read, «In the last days, *they will curse your ascent to the holy generation*» (*Gospel of Judas* 46, 24-47, 1).¹³ This was properly fixed in the Critical Edition, but not before the public damage had been done: 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*».¹⁴ What they did in their initially published emendation resulted in the erasure of the negative future tense from the verb νεκβωκ, so that «you will not ascend» became a nominal phrase, «your ascent».

Although it is commendable that this has been corrected in the *Critical Edition*, because this was the initial publication, some scholars used it to form their published impressions and interpretations of Judas as a great Gnostic. One strategy to now get around the obvious problem that Jesus tells Judas emphatically that he shall not ascend to the holy generation is to ignore the word altogether, as if it were not even in the manuscript. This was the approach of Marvin Meyer who translates this passage in the New International version of the Nag Hammadi collection (a version that is meant to replace the standard, James Robinson's *The Nag Hammadi Library*): «In the last days they will... up to the holy [generation]».¹⁵ Meyer moved the word νεκβωκ into footnote 65, which reads: «This remains a difficult passage, and it may be possible to understand that Jesus is telling Judas that others will try to do something to him so that – as the text seems to say – “you may not ascend up to the holy [generation]”».

Meyer further adjusts this translation in his *Judas* anthology, retranslating the passage with νεκβωκ included: «In the last days they will...to you,

¹³ KASSER – MEYER – WURST, *Gospel of Judas*, p. 33.

¹⁴ KASSER – WURST – MEYER – GAUDARD, *Critical Edition*, p. 211.

¹⁵ MEYER, *International Edition*, p. 765. He has moved the word into footnote 65, which reads: «This remains a difficult passage, and it may be possible to understand that Jesus is telling Judas that others will try to do something to him so that – as the text seems to say – “you may not ascend up to the holy [generation]”».

that you may not ascend up to the holy [generation]». ¹⁶ He tries to explain the passage in footnote 69, «This remains a difficult passage, and it may be possible to understand that Jesus is telling Judas that the others will try to do something to him so that – as the text seems to say – “you may not ascend up to the holy [generation]” (cf. the use of the Coptic negative third future). Such an understanding of this passage, however, probably must assume that some letters or words have been inadvertently omitted from the Coptic text». ¹⁷ But the manuscript does not «seem to say» anything. Quite concretely we find the work $\text{NEKBW}\kappa$. The text says that Judas shall not ascend. The use of the emphatic negative future here is not in a purpose or result clause since the words immediately preceding it are $\text{NAK}\ \alpha\gamma\omega$, «to you, and», not $\text{x}\epsilon$ or one of its variants. We cannot assume that the missing line(s) contained $\text{x}\epsilon$. So the translation should not take the optative mood, «may not» or «might not» as it does in Meyer’s latest version, but remain emphatic, «shall not».

Another strategy to deal with these lines, is to read $\text{NEKBW}\kappa$ as a Coptic conjunctive, «and you will ascend», a strategy that further confuses this issue. ¹⁸ But NEK - here is not a conjunctive. The scribe of the Tchacos Codex uses the single n form whenever he translates into the negative emphatic future. Thus he has written in *Gospel of Judas*, $\text{NEYP}\ \chi\text{OEIC}$, «so that they might not rule over them» (54, 10) and in *James*, $\text{NANA}\gamma$, «so that I might not see» (18, 1). Since both of these expressions are in result clauses, their form is uncontested. Furthermore, when this scribe uses conjunctives, he does so consistently with the traditional unvoiced short forms, NTA , NF , NK , NQ , NC , NTN , NTETN , NCE or NCOY . ¹⁹

Can NEK - ever be the second singular form of the conjunctive? Bentley Layton lists it along with NEQ and NEC as variants under his conjugation of the Sahidic conjunctive. ²⁰ When I contacted him privately to discuss this matter, he replied that they are rare and, from a philological perspective,

¹⁶ MEYER, *Judas*, p. 60.

¹⁷ MEYER, *Judas*, p. 158.

¹⁸ Cf. E. PAGELS and K.L. KING, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity*, New York, Viking, 2007, p. 116.

¹⁹ *Letter of Peter to Philip* 6, 9; 9, 5; 7, 7; *James* 11, 13; 11, 22; 12, 4; 13, 20; 15, 23; 16, 4; 16, 5; 16, 6; 16, 14; 16, 17; 16, 24; 18, 22; 20, 11; 20, 20; 20, 23; 21, 2; 21, 16; 23, 12; 23, 25; 24, 18; 25, 4; 27, 21; 27, 22; 28, 15; 28, 23; 28, 25; 29, 14; *Gospel of Judas* 35, 4; 35, 24; 36, 7; 41, 8; 42, 5; 42, 6; 43, 22; 44, 1; 44, 22; 46, 8; 47, 2; 54, 23; 54, 26; 55, 1; 57, 16; *Allogenes* 59, 13; 59, 26; 60, 9; 60, 10; 60, 11; 61, 20; 61, 23; 63, 27. I am indebted to Wolf-Peter Funk for sharing his personal concordance of the Tchacos Codex with me.

²⁰ B. LAYTON, *A Coptic Grammar*, second edition, revised and expanded, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004 («PLO», 20), p. 276.

«bad spellings». They are found in medieval manuscripts of Shenoute’s works, and he included them only to alert readers of Coptic that they exist. Ariel Shisha-Halevy, in fact, refers to them as examples of the «Shenoutean conjunctive». ²¹ There is the rare occurrence of the NE - form in literature from the fourth to sixth centuries, but these are considered to be errors. In *Exegesis of the Soul*, NEC - appears to be a scribal error introduced due to the similarity of the immediately preceding imperfect NEC - (133, 23). A similar error was corrected by the scribe who copied the *Acts of Paul* found in the Heidelberg manuscript (47, 23). He first wrote NEQ - but went back and deleted the epsilon and marked the conjunctive with a superlinear stroke. ²²

To further complicate matters of interpretation is the corrected reading found on page 35 of the *Gospel of Judas*. According to the *Critical Edition*, lines 24-27 read: «I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that you will go there, but you will grieve a great deal». ²³ The original publication reads the opposite: «I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal». ²⁴ After the editors re-examined the lacunae, they shifted their transcription from $\text{OYN}\ \text{DOM}$, «it is possible that», to $\text{OYX}\ \text{ZINA}$, «not so that».

Gregor Wurst was kind enough to send me high resolution photos of this particular line, so that I could examine this for myself. What I found is that the third letter space on line 26 cannot be n (as in OYN) because there are only four dots at the four corners of the space and what looks like faint diagonal lines crossing in the center. I cannot see any vertical lines. So we have to have an x (as in OYX). In the seventh letter space, there is a no vertical stroke to indicate m (as in DOM). There is a dot to the far right upper corner of the letter space, but it appears to be part of the ink trace of the following letter x , not part of this letter. This means that the faint ink traces in the space form an a (as in ZINA). My own examination of the photographs supports the corrected reading in the *Critical Edition*. But again we find that the corrected transcription says clearly that Judas is going nowhere beyond this universe.

Moreover, these lines tell us why Judas Iscariot, the Thirteenth Demon, was taught the mysteries of the kingdom. It was not because he is a Gnostic

²¹ A. SHISHA-HALEVY, *Coptic Grammatical Categories: Structural Studies in the Syntax of Shenoutean Sahidic*, Rome, Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1986 («AO», 53), p. 187.

²² I wish to thank Wolf-Peter Funk for these references.

²³ KASSER – WURST – MEYER – GAUDARD, *Critical Edition*, p. 189.

²⁴ KASSER – MEYER – WURST, *Gospel of Judas*, p. 23.

initiate. It is because Jesus wishes him to become knowledgeable so that he will lament greatly what he is about to do. The Coptic grammar is very clear here, using two consecutive $\alpha\epsilon$ result clauses. Thus the best translation of these lines is: «I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that ($\sigma\upsilon\chi\ \zeta\iota\upsilon\alpha\ \alpha\epsilon$) you will go there; but so that ($\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha\ \alpha\epsilon$) you will grieve greatly». This is not a sadistic Jesus, but a god who rightfully punishes the wicked for their apostasy.

The long and short of this is that Judas is told by Jesus that he shall not ascend to the holy generation, that he is separated from the holy generation, that he is not going anywhere beyond this universe, and that he is the Thirteenth Demon. There is no way around the fact that this is what our manuscript of the *Gospel of Judas* says about Judas. The question only becomes, what do we do with this interpretatively.

The subversive message of the Gospel of Judas

Once I had finished my translation work, I began to study the text as a Sethian Gnostic document, since the markers are indicative of Sethian cosmology, cosmogony and hermeneutics, rather than Valentinian, Basilidian, or otherwise. I find it necessary in my work to maintain some of the standard nomenclature when referring to the various Gnostic communities.²⁵ Although I do not think there was an early Gnostic religion in antiquity, and therefore avoid the word Gnosticism, I do think it essential to discuss distinct Gnostic communities, since these communities marked themselves ritually, socially, and theologically, and related to Apostolic Christians in a variety of ways. I think if we do not acknowledge these distinctions in some way, we run the risk of watering down, even missing, the author's specific affiliations, references, and the bigger complex of issues with which he is connected.

What I discovered is that whoever wrote the *Gospel of Judas* disliked mainstream or Apostolic Christians, disapproved of their doctrine of atonement and its liturgical performance as the Eucharist, and went about

²⁵ There has been a move recently to eliminate «Gnostic» and «Gnosticism» from our academic vocabulary. Cf. M. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996; K. KING, *What is Gnosticism?* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003. This position has been challenged by A. H.B. LOGAN, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult*, London, T. & T. Clark, 2006; B. PEARSON, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007.

pointing out the errors of Apostolic Christianity by reading Christian scripture and tradition transgressively. That is, they read the texts and received traditions in such a way that they not only subverted the common interpretation, but trampled on taboos in so doing. It is a type of interpretation that is a radical hermeneutics, one that thinks from the ground and calls into question all givens.

We can see the Sethians doing this with the Genesis story in several of the Nag Hammadi documents such as the *Apocryphon of John*, and the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. Eve is not disobedient when she eats the apple. It is a delicious act that reveals to her that Yahweh is not the God that should be worshiped. The snake is not a demon, but a redeemer, one who reveals knowledge of the high God to Eve so that she and Adam will not succumb to the lesser god, the Demiurge, who created and rules the world. In anger, the Demiurge throws them out of the garden into denser bodies so that they will forget the knowledge revealed to them by the high God and remain under his rule.

This type of transgressive or radical reading – the one that exposes taboos – makes people outside Sethianism uncomfortable and disoriented. More often than not, outsiders miss the «revealed» message and do not understand how or why their scriptures and traditions can be so queerly interpreted. But this type of radical reading is meant to recover the esoteric meaning of the text that God had hidden in it. This Sethian recovery of revealed knowledge results in insult and grief for the ordinary Christian, but transcendence and glory for the Gnostic.

Here is where we enter the *Gospel of Judas*. In this text, Jesus calls Judas «the Thirteenth Demon», telling him that he is connected to Ialdabaoth, working as his human agent (*GJudas* 44, 18-21). He is Ialdabaoth's *alter ego* on earth (cp. *Gospel of Egyptians* NHC III, 2 63, 19; 57, 10-20; *GJudas* 51, 12-15). His star is Ialdabaoth's star (*GJudas* 55, 10-11). He will become the Thirteenth Archon ruling over the Twelve below him (*GJudas* 46, 19-24). Who are the Twelve Archons over which he will rule? The apostles of the Apostolic Church, including Judas' replacement (*GJudas* 36, 1-4; 44, 24-26; 46, 2-24). All of this Jesus mocks and laughs, while Judas resists and laments (*GJudas* 34, 2-10; 36, 22-23; 44, 19-20; 46, 5-7; 55, 10-20).

In this same text, however, when Jesus challenges the disciples to lead forward the «perfect man» to stand in front of him, Judas is the only disciple who is able to do so, confessing correctly Jesus' identity as one from Barbelo, the great Aeon (*GJudas* 35, 2-20). As for the one who sent Jesus, Judas says that his name is unspeakable (*GJudas* 35, 19-20). Then Jesus pri-

vately tells Judas that he will reveal «the mysteries of the Kingdom» to him, something he does later in the gospel when he teaches Judas a myth about Sethian cosmogony and answers his questions (*GJudas* 35, 24-25; 47, 1-56.10). The National Geographic team argued that Judas is a Gnostic, since he is more perfect than the other disciples and because he is chosen by Jesus to receive esoteric teaching apart from the other disciples.²⁶

But this interpretation misses the subverted message of this gospel, a message that tramples almost everything that the Apostolic Christians believed to be sacred. To begin with, Jesus does not approve of the disciples who are performing the Eucharist. Jesus laughs at them. It is not a happy laugh. It is a sinister laugh since the disciples respond by trying to defend their actions. They say, «Teacher, why are you laughing at our eucharist? We have done what is right». Jesus tells them that he is laughing because whenever they participate in the eucharist, Ialdabaoth the Demiurge is being worshipped, something of which they are ignorant (*GJudas* 33, 22-34, 10). They continue to show off their ignorance to Jesus by confessing that Jesus is the Son of «our God», an embedded reference to the Demiurge. Jesus tells them that no one «from the people among you» will ever be able to know him. The disciples respond with anger, cursing Jesus (*GJudas* 34, 11-22).

In Jesus' next appearance to the disciples, they want to know where Jesus goes when he leaves them. He tells them that he goes to the holy generation. The disciples wonder at this, «Lord, who is the great generation more exalted and holier than us?» At their ignorance, Jesus laughs. He goes on to tell them that they are not able to associate with the holy generation because they belong to the human generation. They are troubled but silent (*GJudas* 36, 11-37, 20).

Jesus' next visit is when the Twelve relate to Jesus a dream vision that they had in the night. They witnessed twelve priests committing infanticide on the altar of the Temple in Jesus' Name. Jesus interprets the dream, telling them that they are the priests who stand over the altar, invoke Jesus' Name, and present the sacrifices. But it is not to the supreme God that they sacrifice, but to the «Deacon of Error» the «Lord of the Universe» Ialdabaoth. On the last day, Jesus says, they will be guilty of worshiping this false god, and leading astray the countless generations of people yet to come (*GJudas* 37, 20-40, 26).

Judas also has a dream, which he relates to Jesus. In it, the twelve disciples are stoning him. So he runs away to a magnificent house filled with

²⁶ Cf. KASSER – MEYER – WURST, *Gospel of Judas*, pp. 98, 168.

prominent people. Judas thinks that this means that he is going to get to enter the upper Aeon, while the other disciples will not. But Jesus tells him that his interpretation is mistaken. Judas will not enter the holy Aeon that he saw in his dream. It is reserved for the saints (*GJudas* 44, 15-46, 4). What will happen, Jesus says, is that Judas will rule over the Twelve and the generations that will curse him. In this way, the gospel not only identifies Judas with the chief Archon Ialdabaoth, but also the twelve disciples with the twelve lesser archons (*GJudas* 46, 5-47, 1). After telling Judas this and more, Jesus laughs (*GJudas* 55, 12-20).

So let us take stock of what is happening hermeneutically. The disciples are utterly ignorant. They perform the Eucharist, not knowing that they are worshiping Ialdabaoth when they do so. They think that they are the holiest of people, but Jesus tells them otherwise. They think they are visionaries who are privy to revelation, but Jesus tells them that their vision is their worst nightmare. They commit infanticide in his Name at the altar of Ialdabaoth. Judas is the demon Archon Ialdabaoth, and he will rule over the lesser archontic twelve who will curse him. Jesus finds all of this humorous.

This transgressive message, this queer interpretation, is not created from thin air by the Sethian author. What is so brilliant about it is that it is exegetical, the revelation of the hidden meaning of the Gospel of Mark. As such it is incredibly faithful to that scripture. Mark is a text in which the demons are the ones who confess who Jesus is, including Peter who is rebuked as Satan (*Mc.*, I, 34; III, 11; V, 6-7; VIII, 31-33). The Twelve are ignorant throughout Mark, even after they are hand chosen and given private teaching from Jesus (*Mc.*, III, 13-19). The twelve never «get» it. Jesus becomes so exasperated with them that he says to them at one point in the narrative, «O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?» (*Mc.*, IX, 15-19).

Given this unpacking of the transgressive story, this means that Judas stepping forward to confess Jesus from Barbelo and the Unnameable Father, is the action of a demon «in the know» rather than a Gnostic. For the text to say that Judas the demon «got it» while the Twelve could not – that even he, in all his wickedness, was more perfect than they – is the most subversive characterization of the twelve apostles that I have ever seen. Such a picture of the twelve disciples would have completely spoiled the authority of the Twelve, upon which rested the faith of the entire Apostolic Church. And it is this faith that the Sethians were targeting.

Whoever wrote this Gospel operated from a perspective informed by highly literal interpretations of biblical stories about the twelve disciples

and grounded in an apocalyptic cosmology in which Archons created and rule the universe as opponents of the supreme God, Jesus' Father. According to these Gnostics, 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 belong to the Archonic kingdoms.

The Sethian opposition to the twelve apostles is part of a larger conflict of second-century Christianity coming of age in the midst of sectarian battles over Christian truth. The Sethians believed themselves to be the keepers of the mysteries of God, and in these subversive stories in the *Gospel of Judas* they ridicule their opponents, the Apostolic Christians, attacking the credibility of the Twelve, upon which the Apostolic Churches based their faith. These stories remind the reader that the disciples themselves are part of the faithless generation that they lead. Following their teachings leads Christians astray and tricks them into worshiping the wrong god!

The author of the *Gospel of Judas* is not a hater of Christianity. This cannot be said enough times. The author is exceedingly worried that Christians are being led astray by the leaders of the Apostolic Church who themselves claim to be intellectual descendents of Jesus' twelve apostles. Since the Twelve are so badly portrayed in the Gospel of Mark – they are so ignorant and faithless that even the demons knew more than they did – the author of *Judas* thought that the foundation of the Apostolic Church was corrupt. Because the disciples were ignorant and faithless, whatever information they passed on to the leaders of the Church was bogus. He was trying to warn Christians that following the teachings of the Apostolic Church would lead them astray, and joining in the Church's rituals would trick them into worshiping the wrong god. The consequence of this horrible situation was the annihilation rather than salvation of countless Christians, including those yet to be born.

Gnostic revelation

The *Gospel of Judas* is a transgressive text, so if we read it from the outside looking in, we are going to miss the embedded hermeneutic. All we are going to see is nonsense. We run the risk of grasping common trope images from the narrative and interpreting them literally. We will not realize that the common images are meant to expose the uncommon by inverting their traditional meaning, thusly revealing the Gnostic secrets. If we want to «get it» we have to turn ourselves into the text – go inside where the hermeneutic makes sense – and read out.

When we do this, we find that Jesus is treating Judas as the demon the Sethians believed he was – Ialdabaoth – whom this Gospel actually calls «The Apostate» (*GJudas* 51, 12-15). Judas deserves all he gets and more. He is Judas-Ialdabaoth, the Apostate, the Renegade, the Traitor. And Jesus does not want him to operate out of ignorance. He wants him to do what he is going to do knowing full well that he is Ialdabaoth's human agent. Jesus wants Judas to be informed, instead of ignorant, so that he will have the worse punishment of all – self-remorse, loathing, regret, and, at the end of time, annihilation.

So we circle back to the beginning. Was Epiphanius right about the *Gospel of Judas*? No. Judas is not a strong Power from on high who descends to have Jesus crucified to follow through with God's plan. Judas is not the hero of salvation. What he is, however, is an Archon, the demonic power of the thirteenth heaven, who, by crucifying Jesus, hopes to stop whatever redemptive plan God has in mind.

By identifying Judas as the Apostate Demon of the Thirteenth realm, the Gnostics are trying to sink the Apostolic doctrine of atonement and its efficacy as a Eucharist performance. To think that the supreme God would have anything to do with killing his own son was morally reprehensible for these Gnostics. So the Gnostics in the *Gospel of Judas* compare the re-enactment of the Eucharist, the liturgical sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood, with infanticide. When priests stand over the altar and offer the elements in Jesus' Name, they are doing nothing less than murdering God's son, they say. Furthermore, they point out that the offering of Jesus' body and blood is not being made to the supreme Father, but to one of the chief Archons, who lords it over this world. Why? Because the person who committed the initial act of sacrificing Jesus' body was Judas, a demon himself. The sacrifice Judas brought about was a sacrifice planned, caused, and committed on behalf of Ialdabaoth by Ialdabaoth's human agent, Judas. Judas was a demon working for a demon. This conclusion completely overturned the efficacy of the Eucharist and made the ritual so ridiculous that Jesus laughs. The fact that Judas the demon made possible the atonement simply proved to the Sethians that this doctrine was put into place by the demons as part of their plan to trick human beings into worshiping them instead of the supreme God.

Where we are affects what we see. The Gnostics saw in the scriptures and the stories of Jesus something very different from the Apostolic Christians. Their transgressive hermeneutic allowed for the emergence of a hidden esoteric message from scripture, a message that was believed by them to be superior to all others. When composing the *Gospel of Judas*, this hid-

den esoteric message was submerged back into narrative. In this way, the Gnostics returned the hidden message to a secret safe place, a place where those who were not «in the know» would not be able to find it.

Unless we can figure out how to enter the assumptions and world of the text, the transgressive message appears on the surface confusing and conflicting, even senseless. The surface reading of a transgressive Gnostic text like the *Gospel of Judas* results in misreading the text, quite literally. Yes, Jesus reveals the mysteries to Judas. But this appropriation of a traditional trope is not as one might expect – to instruct the Gnostic. It is to instruct the demon. Once this is understood, the *Gospel of Judas* opens up and reveals many mysteries hidden within.

APRIL D. DECONICK*

RIASSUNTO – Chiunque abbia scritto il *Vangelo di Giuda* disapprovava la corrente apostolica dominante del cristianesimo, la sua dottrina del perdono dei peccati nonché i riti liturgici che vi erano praticati, tra cui l'eucaristia. Attraverso una lettura trasgressiva delle scritture cristiane e della tradizione, l'autore anonimo ha evidenziato gli errori commessi, a suo parere, dal cristianesimo apostolico. La lettura dei testi che egli propone, nonché il modo con cui è recepita la tradizione, ha come scopo non solo di sovvertire l'interpretazione comune, ma anche di infrangere dei tabù. Il *Vangelo di Giuda* presenta un tipo di ermeneutica radicale, che rimette in causa ogni certezza attraverso una revisione totale dei concetti.

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THE PSEUDO-SETHIANISM OF THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

As the original editors and virtually all other scholars note, the *Gospel of Judas* falls within the branch of Christian Gnosticism that claimed to be descended from Seth, the third son of Adam, commonly known as «Sethian» or «Classical» Gnosticism. Indeed, page 49 refers to «the incorruptible [generation] of Seth» that the divine Autogenes or Self-generated One revealed to the twelve luminaries occupying the divine luminous cloud that encompassed the divine Adamas and his son Seth.¹

Beginning in the late the second century, the exaltation of the heavenly Seth and the holy generation descended from him becomes a prominent theme in Gnostic literature, attested not only in Epiphanius' reports on the Sethians and Archontics (*Haer.*, 39, 3; 39, 5; 40, 7), but also in six narrative revelations (the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, *Melchizedek*, and *Zostrianos*) of the eleven Nag Hammadi titles included in the corpus of Nag Hammadi treatises conventionally called Classical or Sethian Gnostic.² As a Christian Sethian revelation dialogue between Jesus and Judas Iscariot, the *Gospel of Judas* has its closest formal affinity with the *Apocryphon of John*, while the content and outline of its mythical narrative is in many respects similar, not only to the mythology of the *Apocryphon* and the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, but also to portions of the *Apocalypse of Adam*, and *Zostrianos*. In addition it also incorporates material very similar to the non-Sethian work *Eugnostos the Blessed* (possibly of «Ophite» provenance).

On closer inspection, however, it turns out that the Sethian myth employed by the *Gospel of Judas* is of a very odd sort, containing a number of

¹ *GJudas* [49]¹ «And [in] that [cloud]² [be (Autogenes) created Seth after]³ the image [of his father Adamas]⁴ and after the likeness of [these] angels.⁵ He revealed the incorruptible⁶ [generation] of Seth⁷ to the twelve [luminaries]».

² Three Sethian treatises, the *Thought of Norea*, *Allogenes*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes* offer few if any traces of mythical narrative.