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# The Gospel of Judas in Context

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*Edited by*

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THE MYSTERY OF BETRAYAL.  
WHAT DOES THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS* REALLY SAY?

APRIL D. DeCONICK\*

The opening words, “The secret revelatory discourse that Jesus spoke with Judas,” (*Gospel of Judas* 33,1–3) is enough to give us pause. Jesus in conversation with his betrayer? What good can come of that? According to the team of scholars hired by National Geographic to reconstruct and analyze the *Gospel of Judas*, Judas’ “good news.”

On April 9, 2006, this team presented us with an early view that, in the *Gospel of Judas*, “Judas is the perfect Gnostic, worthy to be in a sense ‘transfigured’ by ascending into a luminous cloud where he will receive his vision of the divine.”<sup>1</sup> He is perfect because he has been “enlightened,” learning about the divine world and “the self-knowledge of the divine light within.”<sup>2</sup> The “native star of Judas is blessed” because Judas will become “the outcast from the circle of the twelve disciples.” Because he is the thirteenth “spirit” whose star will lead the way, “thirteen turns out to be a lucky number for Judas.”<sup>3</sup> Judas’ betrayal is a “righteous act, one that earns him the right to surpass” all the other disciples. “By handing Jesus over to the authorities, Judas allows Jesus to escape his own mortal flesh to return to his eternal home.”<sup>4</sup> Other disciples will also offer sacrifices, “but what Judas will do is the best gift of all. Jesus says to Judas, ‘But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me’” (56). Judas could do no less for his friend and soul mate, and he betrays him. That is the good news of the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation was sensational, even riveting, and it shocked the world. For one long week, the story captured the headlines and talk shows. Judas appeared rehabilitated.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kasser, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst, with additional commentary by B.D. Ehrman, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic), 2006, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 139; cf. p. 84; pp. 97–101.

<sup>3</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, pp. 164–65.

<sup>4</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 167.

With such a sensational release and intriguing interpretation, I wanted nothing better than to spend a few days in my office translating the old Coptic gospel for myself. So I downloaded the Coptic transcription of the *Gospel of Judas* from the National Geographic website as soon as it was posted and began my translation and analysis of the gospel.<sup>6</sup> However, my own work on the text itself has left me disenchanted with the team translation and interpretation, both of which appear to me to be in error. I immediately noticed that their (mis)translation of several key phrases supported their provocative and sensationalist interpretation, while my “corrected” translation did not. In fact, the “corrected” translation showcased an evil Judas who remains separated from the holy or saintly generation, unable to ascend beyond the cosmic girdle and Ialdabaoth’s realm in the thirteenth aeon.

#### *Text Corrections*

The work that the team has put into the restoration of this manuscript is not only commendable but incredible, taking bits and pieces – mere scraps in many cases – of broken papyri and puzzling them together with the help of state-of-the-art computer technology. Without their painstaking exhaustive labor over several years, we would not have a manuscript to read at all, let alone disagree over particular matters. Nonetheless, there are several points of error in translation and reconstruction that have come to my attention while I have worked through the transcription on my own.

On page 44,21. Ⲡ ⲡⲓⲙⲉⲩⲙⲡⲓⲧⲓⲡⲓ ⲗⲗⲓⲙⲱⲛ Jesus calls Judas the “thirteenth demon” (ⲡⲓⲙⲉⲩⲙⲡⲓⲧⲓⲡⲓ ⲗⲗⲓⲙⲱⲛ). The team translated this word “spirit,” with no reference to its capricious and malicious nature: “You thirteenth spirit, why do you try so hard?”<sup>7</sup> The standard English translation “spirit” suggests the presence of the word πνεῦμα (spirit) in the manuscript original, which, by the way, is used readily throughout the *Gospel of Judas* (35,7; 37,19; 43,19; 47,9; 49,12; 49,16; 53,17; 53,20; 53,23; 53,25; 54,5), but not here! In a footnote, the team makes an

<sup>6</sup> All Coptic references (except where noted otherwise) are taken from the website for National Geographic on the *Gospel of Judas* (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/document.html>), where I downloaded a pdf file the team’s initial Coptic transcription. The transcription is established by R. Kasser and G. Wurst, and will be referred to in this article as Kasser and Wurst, “Transcription.”

<sup>7</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 31.

attempt to explain this odd translation, suggesting that it reflects Plato’s use of the word in the *Symposium* 202e–203a.<sup>8</sup>

Granted, in *pre-Christian* sources this word did have a broader meaning, and was used by Hellenistic writers to denote the concept of higher powers that lie beyond the human capacity, whether for good or evil.<sup>9</sup> In some pre-Christian sources, it is used to denote the sense of the “divine.”<sup>10</sup> So in popular Greek thought, the *daimon* becomes connected to concepts such as fate and destiny, as a higher power that overtakes a person and weals his fortune. For this reason, stars were called *daimones*, abstract forces or personal intermediary beings that controlled the cosmos and the fate of human beings.<sup>11</sup> Plato’s *Timaeus* 41e likely contributed to the stellar association given the fact that he says that every person’s soul is assigned to a particular star. In this way, he explains personal subjugation to the laws of destiny as well as the equability of the creator. Eventually in philosophical writings, however, the *daimones* become associated with human emotion that corrupted the soul and reason. So the *daimones* are demoted to the air immediately surrounding the earth, a location that signaled imperfection and wickedness due to its vast distance from God.<sup>12</sup>

In early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions – those based on a cosmology with Satan and his fallen angels hovering in the air around the earth – the concept of the *daimon* is amalgamated with the demonic host and evil spirits that war against God and possess human beings, tempting, tormenting and corrupting human souls.<sup>13</sup> In the New Testament and other early Christian literature, *daimones* are not divine spirits or intermediaries between human beings and God. In fact, they are antithetical to angels, radically distinct.<sup>14</sup> The *daimon* is a demon, in contrast to a benevolent spirit. This is the case not only for the noun itself, but also for its cognates in the Christian period-literature

<sup>8</sup> R. Kasser *et al.*, p. 31, n. 74; cf. pp. 163–166 too.

<sup>9</sup> W. Foerster, “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον,” etc., in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2, pp. 2–3.

<sup>10</sup> W. Foerster, “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον,” etc., in *ibid.*, 2, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> T. Hopfner, *Griechisch-ägyptischer Offenbarungszauber: mit einer eingehenden Darstellung des griechisch-synkretistischen Daemonenglaubens und der Voraussetzungen und Mittel des Zaubers überhaupt und der magischen Divination im besonderen*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert), 1974 (reprint), section 166.

<sup>12</sup> W. Foerster, “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον,” etc., in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2, pp. 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> W. Foerster, “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον,” etc., *ibid.*, pp. 12–16.

<sup>14</sup> W. Foerster, “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον,” etc., *ibid.*, pp. 16–20.

which contain hundreds of references to demons, evil spirits, and devils (δαμόνων, δαμόνισσα), demon possession (διαμονιάω, δαιμονιακός, διαμονιάρης, διαμονιασμός, διαμονίζομαι, δαιμονιόληπτος, δαιμονισμός, δαιμονιωδώς, δαιμονιώδης) and devilish behavior (δαμονώδης).<sup>15</sup>

The identification of the *daimon* with Satan and the fallen host of angels from apocalyptic mythology is made even stronger in Sethian mythology where the heavens surrounding the earth are populated by evil archons who create and rule this world. The beings that live in these lower realms are those who war against the Father, and trick and enslave human beings. So to call Judas “the thirteenth *daimon*” is to locate him in the thirteenth cosmic realm and identify him with Ialdabaoth, the chief demonic archon who resides in this particular realm.

On page 46,5–7. ΜΗΠΟΤΕ ἄω ΠΑΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΖΥΠΟΤΑCῚ[Ε] ΝΝΑΡΧΩΝ. Judas declares aloud, “Enough! At no time may my seed control (or: be controlled by) the archons!” The English rendering by the team has, “Could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers?”<sup>16</sup>

The Coptic is not in the form of a question, but is a “lest” assertion with an exclamatory particle, ἄω.<sup>17</sup> The team translation has rendered ΖΥΠΟΤΑCῚ as a passive, when the Coptic shows an active form whose meaning in Greek can only be “to subject” or “control.”<sup>18</sup> The normal use of this Greek verb in Coptic, however, admittedly can be peculiar, its active form often used to indicate a passive meaning in Coptic when it is followed by a dative which we may have here if we read η- as ηΑ- rather than the direct object marker η- as ΗΜΟ- (cf. *Apocryphon of John* NHC III,1 11,12; Luke [Sahidic] 10:17; 10:20; Romans [Sahidic] 8:7).<sup>19</sup> So the meaning is ambiguous grammatically and our only hope to solve the dilemma is to argue for the best reading from the context.

Both readings, however, have Judas deny Jesus’ prediction that he either will be King of the Archons, or be controlled by them. Neither reading is a positive assertion of Judas’ association with the rulers of

<sup>15</sup> E.C.E. Owen, “Δαίμων and Cognate Words,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1931), pp. 133–153.

<sup>16</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> B. Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, second edition, revised and expanded (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag), 2004, section 240.

<sup>18</sup> H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1968 (reprinted), p. 1897.

<sup>19</sup> On this point, I am indebted to a discussion with Louis Painchaud following the Sorbonne conference. He himself was made aware of this though a previous exchange he had had with Wolf-Peter Funk about this passage.

this world. When the *immediate* context is analyzed, it is noted that Jesus discusses how Judas will “rule over” the lesser generations (*Gospel of Judas* 46,23). This may be the point of the fragmentary sentence immediately preceding 46,6–7 as well, that Judas’ seed will control the twelve lesser aeons (46,2–4). So the best reading based on the immediate context may be the active. But I remain torn since the passive reading fits the practical determinism promoted throughout the *Gospel*, that Judas is subjugated to his fate, his actions under the influence of the stars which are the archons in the heavens (cf. *Gospel of Judas* 46,14–24; 54,13–55,20; 56,23; 57,19–20).

At any rate, Judas is not questioning whether the archons *might* be controlling his seed. He is contradicting Jesus, exclaiming that he does not want to hear Jesus prophesize about his future demise either as the king of the twelve lesser aeons (a description which, by the way, places him on equal footing with Ialdabaoth) or subjected to them. The former reading coincides with Jesus’ nomenclature two pages earlier in the manuscript when he calls Judas the thirteenth demon (*Gospel of Judas* 44,21), while the latter with the determinism of the gospel, that his actions are written in the stars (56,23; 57,19–20).

On page 46,17. ΑΚΠΟΡΧΤ ΕΤΓΕΝΕΑ ΕΤΜΜΑΥ. Judas asks Jesus what is so great about the fact that he has received esoteric teaching from Jesus, “because you have separated me from that generation” of holy saints. The National Geographic team renders the clause very differently: “because you have set me apart for that generation.”<sup>20</sup>

Not only is this English translation nonsensical – why would Judas be upset about receiving esoteric teaching if he were to be included among the holy? – it is verbally impossible in Coptic. The phrase in question consists of a Coptic verb, ΠΟΡΧ, whose meaning is “to divide; be divided; or separate.” The preposition that follows this verb is Ε and expresses an idiomatic statement when linked with ΠΟΡΧ, “to be divided or separated from.” Its meaning is lexically fixed. The linkage of certain verbs with certain prepositions to render idiosyncratic meanings is a common aspect of Coptic language. When such combinative constituents as “Ε” are present with particular verbs, certain intended meanings are expressed. The replacement or absences of the constituent causes entirely different verbal meanings.<sup>21</sup> So Ε following ΠΟΡΧ cannot

<sup>20</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> B. Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, section 181.

mean “for,” even though ε as a lone preposition can mean “for” as well as “to,” “as regards,” and “according to.”

The lexical difference that this one preposition makes in our sentence is striking indeed. Judas has not been set apart from the other disciples to belong to the holy generation as the team’s translation suggests. My corrected translation reads completely the opposite: Judas is upset because he has received esoteric teaching about the upper Aeons from Jesus, teaching which he sees as useless because he has been separated from the generation of holy saints who populate the upper world.

On pages 46,24–47,1.  $\text{CENAK'AYW <N>NEKKT\text{H} EPW\text{W}\text{I} ETΓE[NEA ET] OYAA\text{B}}$ . A mistake had been made in a reconstruction. I noticed while working through the text that the way that the team had reconstructed this line is grammatically impossible. For this to mean, “they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation],”<sup>22</sup> the team had to assume that  $\text{CENAK'AYW}$  was a variant form of  $\text{CENAKWNEYW}$ .<sup>23</sup> Worse than this, is the emendation  $\text{<N>}$  which has eliminated a negative future verb! The line apparently stated (as the Coptic reads without the emendation) that Judas will “not ascend” to the holy generation, rather than something about Judas’ “ascent” to the holy generation.

How should the lines be reconstructed? Conservatively, we would have:

46,24 $\text{C}\epsilon$	They
46,25 $\text{NAK' AYW NEK [..] EPW\text{W}\text{I}$	to you. And you will not [...] up
47,1 $\text{ETΓE[NEA ET] OYAA\text{B}}$	to the holy generation.

Did a line accidentally drop out between  $\text{C}\epsilon$  and  $\text{NAK}$ ?<sup>24</sup> If so, then we would have:

46,24 $\text{C}\epsilon$	They
46,24b [...]	[...]
46,25 $\text{NAK' AYW NEK[... EPW\text{W}\text{I}$	to you. And you will not [...] up
47,1 $\text{ETΓE[NEA ET] OYAA\text{B}}$	to the holy generation.

If this were the case, then we would have “They [...] to you.” The next clause would continue, “and you will not [...] up to the holy generation.” Since I have not viewed the area of the manuscript following  $\text{NEK}$ , I cannot know with certainty what may have been there.

<sup>22</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1939, p. 62b. Gregor Wurst explained this to me recently since I had wrongly been under the impression that they had assumed a contraction of the verb  $\text{καταβάσκει}$ .

<sup>24</sup> I became aware of this possibility when I discussed this passage with Wolf-Peter Funk.

Because I found the team’s reconstruction so puzzling, I personally contacted Marvin Meyer, and since then have found out that this is an area of the manuscript that the team has reconsidered since its initial publication. Apparently  $\text{BOK}$  following  $\text{NEK}$  is certain under infrared light. So why the team opted for  $\text{KT\text{H}}$  initially is a fair but unanswered question. At any rate, the team has changed its initial assessment so that a more accurate reconstruction and reading will appear in the team’s critical edition:  $\text{C}\epsilon$  [...]  $\text{NAK' AYW NEKBOK EPW\text{W}\text{I} ETΓE[NEA ET] OYAA\text{B}}$ . “They [...] to you, and you will not ascend up to the holy generation.”<sup>25</sup>

This reconstruction and translation is entirely opposed to the former given by the team. Judas will *not* ascend beyond the cosmic girdle. Unfortunately bold (and completely wrong) assessments about Judas’ identity as a true holy Gnostic have already been made by scholars who have based their interpretations on this erroneous initial published reconstruction.<sup>26</sup> Such erroneous statements and interpretations will have to be retracted.

On page 55,10–11.  $\text{AYW \{AYW\} QNAP\text{E}[..]PEKCIΟΥ EX\text{N} ΠME\text{Z}M\text{N}\text{T}[WOM]TE NAIW(N)}$ . No reconstruction was offered, when, in fact, the reconstruction I think can be ascertained to read,  $\text{AYW \{AYW\} QNAP\text{E}[PONAI]PEKCIΟΥ EX\text{N} ΠME\text{Z}M\text{N}\text{T}[WOM]TE NAIW}$  “and your star will [rule] over the thirteenth aeon.” This isn’t a very favorable thing to say about Judas, since it suggests that he will never ascend beyond the cosmic girdle and its thirteen realms, the seven heavens and the five abysses. But it lines up with *Gospel of Judas* 46,6–7.23.25.

On page 56,18–19.  $\text{NTOK ΔE KNA\text{P} ZOYO EPPOY THPOY ΠPOME ΓAP ET\text{P} ΦOPE\text{I} \text{N}MOE\text{I} KNA\text{P} ΘYCIACE \text{N}MO\text{C}}$ . The Coptic should be read: “But you will do worse than all of them. For the man who clothes me, you will sacrifice him.” The team has a different English translation: “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”<sup>27</sup>

I have to say that the team’s English translation surprised me very much, since it does not accurately render the Coptic comparative expression,  $\text{P-ZOYO EPPOY THPOY}$ . The phrase consists of a verb of

<sup>25</sup> Graciously supplied by Gregor Wurst during the international conference on the *Gospel of Judas* organized by Madeleine Scopello at the Sorbonne (October 27–28, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> In addition to those found in R. Kasser, *et al.*, see now also B.D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2006, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 43.

existence,  $\bar{\rho}$ , which is coupled with a noun  $\text{ⲉⲟⲩⲟ}$  meaning “the greater part,” followed by a preposition,  $\epsilon$ . This is an idiomatic expression in Coptic which means “to be more than,” and picks up its comparative from the context. It modifies the sentence by expressing a sense in which the predication is made.<sup>28</sup>

In this case, the context is a negative one. This is not readily apparent in the team’s translation because it has been separated from the negative by introducing a new paragraph at this point, divorcing the comparative from its expressed context. Although fragmentary, the lines immediately preceding these involve a discussion in which Jesus is speaking about the abhorrent behavior of the twelve disciples who sacrifice to the lower god of the cosmos. This is an internal reference to a horrific dream sequence earlier in the *Gospel of Judas* (38–41). Jesus concludes the immediate discussion by saying that all the sacrifices the disciples make are “evil”: “everything that is evil” ( $\text{ⲉⲩⲟⲩⲟⲛⲉⲛⲉⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩ}$ ) (56,17). The next line in the manuscript is the one in question. Jesus addresses Judas, “But you will do more (evil) than all of them. For the man which clothes me, you will sacrifice him.”

The Coptic comparative must mean that Judas will do more evil than all the rest of the disciples, who sacrifice lesser things to the lower god. Judas will commit the worst sin, because he will sacrifice Jesus to the lesser god. The context is negative, so the comparative must be negative. This means that Judas is not being asked by Jesus to release his soul from the body,<sup>29</sup> but the statement is a prophecy from the lips of Jesus that Judas’ action will result in another sacrifice to the lower god, and is an action worse than any the rest of the disciples will ever commit.

On page 56,23.  $\text{ⲛⲉⲕⲥⲓⲟⲩⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩⲟⲩ}$ . This phrase should be translated, “your star has passed” or “your star has ascended.” The team translation has “your star has shown brightly.”<sup>30</sup> The Coptic verb is  $\text{ⲕⲱⲩⲟⲩ}$   $\text{ⲛⲉ}$ , whose lexical meaning is “to pass by, over; to surpass, reach.” It can carry the sense of ascent.<sup>31</sup> I cannot determine how the translation “has shown brightly” was made. The intent of the phrase is to prophesize Judas’ involvement in the death of Jesus. In astrological terms, the ascent of his star means that the time has arrived for Judas to fulfill his part in Jesus’ demise, and that it has been determined that he will follow through with this course of action.

<sup>28</sup> B. Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, section 183.

<sup>29</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 43, n. 137.

<sup>30</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1939, D. 759a.

### *An Alternative Interpretation*

Given the fact that the “corrected” transcription and translation yield up a Judas associated with a demon, separated from the holy generations, and unable to ascend into the Kingdom, I decided to reassess the entire content of this gospel, paying particular attention to the Sethian meta-narrative that the author and intended audience knew and assumed. It is quite evident to me that the *Gospel of Judas* is an “insiders” text, written by Sethians for Sethians. It is filled with Sethian jargon, based entirely on premises of Sethian reverse exegesis, and critical of mainstream Christianity and its ignorance of the Sethian Gnostic perspective. It is not simply Sethian in its internal retelling of Sethian mythology (*Gospel of Judas* 47,5–53,7), nor is it an older non-Gnostic text now glossed in a Sethian manner. Its composition is Sethian because its assumptions are Sethian, right down to its humor. The only way to “get” the joke – to laugh with Jesus – is to become immersed in the Sethian meta-narrative. When this referential horizon is in place, the boundaries of humor it marks become recognizable. Without them, Jesus laughs at us.

My examination of the *Gospel of Judas* as a Sethian gospel has led me to see that Judas is not a blessed figure, but the opposite – a corrupted and tragic figure who becomes connected to Ialdabaoth, operating as his human hinchman to destroy Jesus in the archonic war against the Father.<sup>32</sup> The author of the *Gospel of Judas* creatively uses the villain Judas and his tragedy to assess and harshly critique features of mainstream Christianity, in particular the confession of the Church, its tradition of apostolic authority, and its coveted atonement theology. The result is Sethian humor that mocks the stupidity of mainstream Christianity in, what I think, are frighteningly profound ways.

### *Judas’ Confession*

The *Gospel of Judas* contains a remarkable “midrash” on the story commonly known as Peter’s Confession, first spun by the Markan author

<sup>32</sup> Ialdabaoth is also known as Nebro(el) in the *Gospel of Judas*. This figure also appears to be welded with Saklas in other parts of the narrative. As in other Sethian sources, the demiurge has many names.

in which Peter recognizes him as “the Messiah” (Mark 8:27–30). In Matthew, he is recognized by Peter as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:13–16) while “the Messiah of God” in Luke (Luke 9:18–20). Another version of the story came to light when the *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered, a version in which Thomas confesses to know Jesus’ true identity as the manifestation of Yahweh on earth (*Gospel of Thomas* NHC II,2 Saying 13). So the Judas version represents yet a third telling of the confession, from the perspective of Judas. This perspective reverses the traditional exegesis of the story, and in so doing maintains the Sethian identification of the biblical God with the lesser God Ialdabaoth.

In this reverse exegesis, the twelve disciples are gathered, and declare that Jesus is the “Son of our God” (*Gospel of Judas* 34,11–13), by which is meant the biblical creator God Yahweh. Their position is equivalent to that held by mainstream Christians.

34,11 ΠΕΧΑΥ ΧΕ ΠΕΡΑΤΩ ΝΤΟΚ	They said, “Teacher,
34,12 ΟΥ[Ν Δ]Ν <sup>33</sup> ΠΕ ΠΩΗΡΕ ΠΠΕΝΝΟΥ	[are] you [not] the son of our
34,13 ΤΕ	god?”

But Jesus rejects this identification, and expresses concern that the disciples seem to be ignorant of what they have just said, since in the Sethian tradition Jesus is the Son of God the Father, not Ialdabaoth who is the biblical God that the disciples have referred to. Jesus tells the twelve that, so wrong are they in their understanding of his identity, that none of them will ever be able to know him.

34,13 ΠΕΧΑΥ ΝΑΥ ΝΕΙΨΗ	Jesus said to them,
34,14 ΧΕ Ε[ΤΕΤ]ΝΟΟΟΥΝΕ ΗΜΟΕΙ	“How do [you] know me?
34,15 ΖΗ ΟΥ [Ζ]ΑΜΗΝ [Τ]ΧΩ ΗΜΟC ΝΗ	Truly, [I] tell you,
34,16 ΤΗ Χ[Ε] ΗΝ ΛΑΦ[Υ]Ε ΝΓΕΝΕΑ ΝΑ	No generation will
34,17 ΟΟΥΩΝΤ ΖΗ ΝΡΩΗΕ ΕΤΗΖΗΤ.	know me from the people who
	are among
34,18 ΤΗΥΤΗ	you.”

In this way, the story serves as a strong critique of the traditional Christian confession, implying that the mainstream Christians inadvertently and unknowingly worship Ialdabaoth when they confess Jesus as the

<sup>33</sup> As read by Funk; Bethge and Nagel suggest [ΠΧΟΙC], “You, [O Lord], you are the son of our god,” or, “You are [the Lord], the son of our god.” R. Kasser and G. Wurst, “Transcription,” do not provide a reconstruction.

Messiah and Son of God. Because of their ignorance, truly they will never confess or know the Son.

As in the Markan version and the Thomasine version of the confession, one of the disciples comes forward with the correct confession. In this case it is Judas rather than Peter or Thomas. Judas “stands before” Jesus and turns aside his face because he is not able to look him in the eyes.

35,10 ΛΟΒΗ ΟΟΜ ΜΕΝ [Ε]Ψ	He was able to
35,11 ΖΕΡΑΤΩ ΠΠΕΡΜΤΟ ΕΒ[ΟΛ] Η	stand before him.
35,12 ΠΕΟΒΗ ΟΟΜ ΔΕ ΕΒΩΨΤ [ΕΖ]ΘΥΝ	He was not able to look him in
35,13 ΕΖΡΑΥ ΠΝΕΟΒΑΛ ΔΛ[ΑΔ Ν]ΤΑΥ	his eyes, but he
35,14 ΚΤΕ ΖΡΑΥ ΕΠΑΖΟΥ	turned his face away.

This is the common language of deference and worship in early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and mystical literature, applicable to angels who stand before God’s throne in worship with averted eyes.<sup>34</sup> Clearly Judas recognizes Jesus’ divinity, but with a twist not found in the non-Gnostic literature. He does not declare Jesus to be Yahweh’s prodigy, but proclaims the Sethian confession, “I know who you are and where you come from. You came from the immortal Aeon of Barbelo, and the one who sent you, I am not worthy to speak his Name” (*Gospel of Judas* 35,14–21).

35,14 ΠΕΧΑΥΑ ΝΑΥ	Judas [said] to him,
35,15 ΝΒΙ ΙΟΥΔΑC ΧΕ ΤΟΟ[Ο]ΥΝΕ ΧΕ	“I know
35,16 ΝΤΚ ΝΗ ΔΥΩ ΝΤΑΚ[Ε]Ι ΕΒΟΛ	who you are and from what
	place you have come.
35,17 ΖΗΝ ΔΥ ΝΜΑ ΝΤΑΚΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ	You came from the immortal
35,18 ΠΑΙΩΝ ΝΤΕΔΡΒΗΛΩ ΠΑΘΑ	aeon of Barbelo,
35,19 ΝΑΤΟC ΔΥΩ ΠΕΝΤΑΥΤΑΟΥΟΚ	and the one who sent you,
35,20 ΠΑΙ ΕΤΕ ΝΤΗΠΩΑ ΔΝ ΝΤΑΟΥΟ	is he whose name I am not
	worthy to speak.”

35,21 ΠΠΕΟΡΑΝ

The language here is similar to Saying 13 in the *Gospel of Thomas* where Thomas claims that his mouth is not able to say whom Jesus is like, a reference evoking the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton and Yahweh

<sup>34</sup> J. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 36 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 1985, pp. 55–58, 120–124, 139–141.

manifest.<sup>35</sup> In the *Gospel of Judas*, however, the unpronounceable Name is not Yahweh, but the great Barbelo Aeon who, in Sethianism, is the God whom words are unable to express (cf. *Three Steles of Seth* NHC VII,5 125,10).

Certainly this is a recognition scene with peculiar variations on the typical story. But then it is a Sethian “midrash,” so exegetical reversal and the revelation of hidden agendas are to be expected. Typically, the heroic disciple is the one who recognizes and confesses Jesus. But does this mean that Judas is the *heroic* disciple in this confession scene? We should not rush to this conclusion because the Sethians appear to be reversing the story in their midrash. The traditional “good guy” Peter was known by the ancient Christians to have recognized Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah from the biblical narratives. But the Sethian exegesis flips this upside down, suggesting that Jesus’ disciples got the attribution wrong. Jesus laughs at them. It was the unexpected “bad guy” who really got it right. This appears to have been extremely humorous to the Sethian Christians who were harshly criticizing the ignorance of their mainstream Christian brothers and sisters.

What is so genius about this interpretation is that it, in fact, aligns perfectly with the synoptic narrative, particularly as it is framed by Mark. It plays with the fact that the disciples of Jesus are ignoramuses and faithless, while the demons and demon-possessed are those who recognize Jesus and articulate this long before Peter catches on. We might add that it is quite possible that Peter’s recognition of Jesus may have some connection to demon-possession too, since Mark and Matthew have Jesus rebuke Peter as “Satan” immediately following the confession itself (Mark 8:33; Matthew 16:23). We find in Mark 1:34 that “he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” Not only do the demons recognize him as the “Son of God” in Mark 3:12, but they fall down and worship him. This is epitomized in the story of Legion who, when seeing Jesus at a distance, ran up to him and worshiped him. “And crying out with a loud voice, he said, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’” (Mark 5:6–7).

<sup>35</sup> A.D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation, With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel*, The Library of New Testament Studies 287 (T & T Clark: London), 2006, pp. 84–85.

If Judas is to be understood in this sense, then it is a very sophisticated Gnostic critique of mainstream Christianity and its claim to knowledge and legitimacy through apostolic succession. In the mind of the Sethians who wrote this gospel, the mainstream’s reliance on the authority of the apostles for the sake of legitimacy is ridiculous. Not only were the apostles ignorant (as the gospels themselves say), but the only one who actually recognized Jesus was the disciple Judas, who was himself a demon!

So Judas’ confession in the gospel is far from demonstrative of his Gnostic stature as the team would have us believe.<sup>36</sup> Certainly he appears to recognize the reality of Jesus’ origin and nature, while the other disciples do not, but it is questionable whether he realizes this nature because he is a perfect Gnostic or a man who is a demon or demon-possessed, as the authors of both Luke and John in fact suggest (Luke 22:3; John 13:26–27).

#### *Judas’ Identity*

So who is Judas according to his gospel? A perfect Gnostic? Or a demon associate? In my opinion, the text is unambiguous. On page 44 of the manuscript, Jesus calls Judas the “thirteenth demon” (*Gospel of Judas* 44,21).

44,19 πε	He said
44,20 και ναυ γε αβφοκ κβ γυμνα	to him, “Why do you compete (with them),
44,21 γε ω πμεζμντττ λαιμων	O’ thirteenth demon?”

Jesus tells Judas that he will be “separated from” the holy aeons beyond the cosmos (*Gospel of Judas* 46,17–18). Judas will become “the thirteenth,” cursed by the generations of the twelve apostles, but at the same time ruling over them (46,20–24).

46,14 ναϊ ντερεστωττ	When he heard this,
46,15 εροφ[γ] νβι ιουδας πεχαι	Judas said
46,16 ναυ γε ου πε πεζογο ντα	to him, “What is the advantage
46,17 ειχιττ γε ακπορxt εττε	I received, since you have separated me from that

<sup>36</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, pp. 97–98; p. 140; see also two of the team’s members’ immediate releases: B. Ehrman, pp. 89–90; C.A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press), 2006, pp. 242–245.



46,18 ΝΕΑ ΕΤΗΝΑΥ ΑΦΟΥΩΦΒ	generation?" Jesus answered
46,19 ΝΒΙ ΙΗΘ ΠΕΧΑΔ ΧΕ ΚΝΑΨΩ	and said to him, "You will become
46,20 ΠΕ ΗΜΕΘΗΝΤΙΓ ΔΥΩ	the thirteenth, and
46,21 ΚΝΑΨΩΠΕ ΕΚΟΖΟΥΟΡΤ ΒΙ	you will be cursed by
46,22 ΤΗ ΠΚΕΣΕΠΕ ΝΓΕΝΕΑ ΔΥ	the other generations and
46,23 Ω ΚΝΑΨΩΠΕ ΕΚΑΡΧΙ ΕΧΩ	you will rule over
46,24 ΟΥ	them."

What is the meaning of this? Certainly the cursing by the generations of the twelve apostles is a contemporary reference to the opinion of their mainstream brothers and sisters who cursed Judas for killing Jesus. But what about the association of Judas with the thirteenth and his elevation over the rest of the disciples? Is it Judas' lucky number as the team has suggested?<sup>37</sup>

Not according to Sethian numerology and cosmology. Thirteen in fact is the most unlucky number you can have, because it is the number associated with Ialdabaoth and his assistant archons and his heaven. In the Sethian *Gospel of the Egyptians*, we are told that two angels who would rule Chaos and Hades were brought forth, Saklas and the great demon Nebruel. These angels established twelve spheres below them, twelve heavens which they populated with twelve archons (*Gospel of Egyptians* NHC III,2 57,10–20). They occupy the thirteenth heaven, the highest realm in the cosmos along with Ialdabaoth who is known as the "god of the thirteen aeons" (NHC III,2 63,19). Through Jesus' body, the thirteen aeons were "nailed" (III,2 64,4). The Sethian *Apocalypse of Adam* recounts thirteen kingdoms who are ruled by archons, in contrast to the holy "generation without a king" above them (*Apocalypse of Adam* NHC V,5 82,10–21). In *Zostrianos*, the Gnostic initiate tells us that he cast his body "upon the earth to be guarded by glories." In the process of this initial ascent, he "was rescued from the whole world and the thirteen aeons in it and their angelic beings" (*Zostrianos* NHC VIII,1 4,24–29). In the *Apocryphon of John* there are twelve archons below Ialdabaoth: seven rule the spheres of heaven and five rule Hades (*Apocryphon of John* II,1 11,5–7).

This is the cosmology assumed by the *Gospel of Judas* where Nebro-Ialdabaoth and Saklas produce "twelve angels in the heavens with each one receiving a portion of the heavens" (*Gospel of Judas* 51,5–23). Judas' star belongs to the thirteenth Aeon (ΠΜΕΘΗΝΤ[ΥΟΜ]ΓΕ ΝΑΙΩ) (55,10–11) and he is addressed by Jesus as the "thirteenth demon" (Ω ΠΜΕΘΗΝΤΙΓ ΛΑΙΩΝ) (44,21). Both of these expressions mean that

<sup>37</sup> R. Kasser, *et al.*, pp. 164–165.

Judas is Ialdabaoth's "man," not some blessed Gnostic. Unlike the holy Gnostic initiate in *Zostrianos* who is able to ascend beyond the thirteenth heaven and cosmic girdle into the Aeonic world beyond, Judas' best fate is a final ascent to the thirteenth heaven where he will rule over the twelve disciples who have cursed him. In 55,10, this is repeated, "Your star will [rule] over the thirteenth Aeon" (ΥΝΑΡΕ[ΡΟ ΝΒΙ] ΠΕΚΣΙΟΥ).<sup>38</sup>

This is transparent in Judas' dream vision of the heavenly Temple, the holy place of the holy Aeons. He sees people around the Temple and he asks Jesus to allow him to enter the Temple with them. Jesus tells him that he has been misled to think that he could possibly enter the heavenly Temple, the Aeon above this world.

45,12 ΑΦΟΥΩΦΒ ΝΒΙ [ΙΘ] ΠΕΧΑΔ	[Jesus] answered and said to him,
45,13 ΧΕ ΑΠΕΚΣΙΟΥ ΠΛΑ[ΝΑ] ΗΜΟΚ	"Your star has deceived you,
45,14 Ω ΙΟΥΔΑ ΔΥΩ ΧΕ ΝΚΗΠΩΔ	O Judas," and
45,15 ΑΝ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΧΠΟ ΗΡΩ[Μ]Ε ΝΗΜ	"No one born of a mortal is worthy
45,16 ΝΘΗΝΤΟΝ ΕΒΩΚ ΕΖΟΥΝ Ε	to enter
45,17 ΠΗΕΙ ΝΤΑΚΝΑΥ ΕΡΟΔ ΧΕ ΠΤΟ	the Temple that you saw, because
45,18 ΠΟΣ ΓΑΡ ΕΤΗΝΑΥ ΗΤΟΔ ΠΕ	that place is
45,19 ΤΟΥΑΡΕΖ ΕΡΟΔ ΗΝΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ	open to the saints (only).
45,20 ΠΜΑ ΕΤΕ ΗΠΡΗ ΜΗ ΠΟΘΩ	Neither the sun nor the moon
45,21 ΝΑΡ ΕΡΟ ΗΝΑΥ ΑΝ ΟΥΔΕ ΠΕΩΩ	will rule there, nor the day.
45,22 ΟΥ ΑΛΛΑ ΕΥΝΑΩΩΕΡΑΤΟΥ Η	But they [the saints] will stand
45,23 ΟΥΟΕΙΩ ΝΗΜ ΖΗ ΠΑΙΩΝ ΜΗ	always in the Aeon with
45,24 ΗΝΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ ΕΙΟ	the holy angels. Look,
45,25 ΖΗΗΤΕ ΔΕΙΧΩ ΕΡΟΚ ΗΜΗΥ	I have told you the mysteries
45,26 ΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΗΤΗΝΤΕΡΟ	of the Kingdom
46,1 ΔΥΩ ΑΪΤΟΔΑΒΟΚ [ΗΤΕΠΑ]ΑΝΗ	and I taught you [the
	deceitfulness] of
	the stars."
46,2 ΝΗΦ[Ι]ΟΥ	

So Jesus teaches him that only the holy people, the Gnostics, who have been reborn in some mysterious way, can enter the Aeon above this world. The rest of humanity is under the rule of the stars. The text breaks but appears to accuse Judas of being the leader of the archonic twelve. Judas responds by crying out to Jesus, "Enough! At no time may my seed control<sup>39</sup> the archons!" (*Gospel of Judas* 46,5–7). But Jesus does not back down from his prediction. Rather he reaffirms this prophecy by repeating the curse that Judas will be overcome with lamentation when he sees the Kingdom and its fabulous generation, even though he will rule over the archons (46,7–14).

<sup>38</sup> My reconstruction.

<sup>39</sup> Or, he controlled by. See the preceding discussion on leaf 46, 6–7.

Judas' kingship is not something to celebrate. Rather, it associates him with Ialdabaoth, while the other twelve disciples with the twelve archonic assistants of Ialdabaoth. Judas is Ialdabaoth, King of the Archons, while the twelve apostles are his lesser minions, whose stars belong to the twelve realms below him. A harsher treatment of the doctrine of apostolic authority could not be had! And the Sethian humor could not be more excessive! The twelve disciples are little more than puppets of the archons. The disciple who controls all of them is Judas Iscariot, the thirteenth demon, Ialdabaoth himself, who plans Jesus' destruction.

In yet another passage in the gospel, we are taught that the cosmic stars rule the generations of the sinful – those who fornicate, kill their children, and so forth. Judas' star is the thirteenth of these stars, ruling over all the rest (*Gospel of Judas* 54,13–55,12).

54,13 ΙΟΥΔΑΣ ΠΕΧΑΔΙ ΝΙΗΘ ΖΕ  
54,14 ΕΥΝΑΡ [Ο]Υ ΔΕ ΝΙΟ ΝΓΕΑ ΕΤΗ

54,15 ΝΑΥ ΠΕΧΑΔΙ ΝΙΟ ΙΗΘ  
54,16 ΖΕ ΑΛΗΘΟΣ ΤΧΩ ΝΜΟΣ ΝΗ  
54,17 ΤΗ ΖΕ ΝΙΟΙΟΥ ΦΥΧΩΚ ΕΒΟ[Λ]

54,18 ΕΧΝ ΝΑΙΟ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΖΟΤΑΝ ΔΕ  
54,19 ΕΦΩΔΗΧΩΚ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΝΕΙΟΥ  
54,20 ΟΕΙΩ ΝΤΑΥΤΟΨΟΥ ΝΑΔΙ Ν  
54,21 ΔΙ ΣΑΚΛΑΣ ΟΗΗΥ ΝΙΟ ΠΕΥΖΟΥ  
54,22 ΕΙΤ ΝΙΟΙΟΥ ΜΗ ΝΓΕΝΕΑ  
54,23 ΑΥΩ ΝΕΝΤΑΧΧΟΥ ΝΙΟ  
54,24 ΧΟΚΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΤΟΤΕ ΣΕΝΑ

54,25 ΠΟΡΝΕΥΕ ΖΗ ΠΑΡΑΝ ΑΥΩ  
54,26 ΝΣΕΜΟΥΟΥ[Τ] ΝΝΕΥΩΗΡΕ  
55,1 ΑΥΩ Ν[...]  
55,2 ΑΥΩ Ν[...]  
55,3 [...]ΗΥ[...]  
55,4 [...]  
55,5 [...]  
55,6 [...]  
55,7 [...]  
55,8 [...]  
55,9 [...]ΡΟ[...]Ρ[...]ΝΠΑΡΑΝ  
55,10 ΑΥΩ ΑΥΩ ΟΗΑΡΕ[ΡΟ ΝΙΟ] ΠΕΚΙΟΥ  
55,11 ΕΧΝ ΠΝΘΖΗΝΤ[ΦΟΝ]ΤΕ ΝΑΙΩ(Η)

Judas said to Jesus,  
“So what will those generations do?”  
Jesus said,  
“Truly I say to you, the stars bring an end to things for all of them. When Saklas completes the times assigned to him, their first star (will) come with the generations, and what has been said will be accomplished. Then they will fornicate in my name and kill their children and [...] and [...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...]  
[...] my name and your star [will rule] over the thirteenth aeon.”

In this passage, Jesus mocks the entire system of fate, and laughs at the “error of the stars” because he knows that they will be destroyed along with their associates in the end (*Gospel of Judas* 55,14–20).

55,14 ΑΦΟΥ  
55,15 [ΦΒ ΝΙΟ ΙΗΘ ΠΕΧΑΔΙ Χ]Ε ΕΒΙΩ  
55,16 [ΒΕ ΝΙΟΙΟΥ Ν Δ[Ν ΔΛ]ΛΑ ΝΙΟ  
ΤΕΠΛΑ

55,17 ΝΗ ΝΝΙΟΙΟΥ Χ[Ε] ΠΕΒΙΟΟΥ Ν  
55,18 ΟΙΟΥ ΠΑΔΑ ΝΗ ΠΕΒΙΟΥ ΜΠΟ  
55,19 ΑΕΜΙΟΙΟ ΑΥΩ ΝΑΙ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΣΕ  
55,20 ΝΑΤΑΚΟ ΜΗ ΝΕΥΚΤΙΟΜΑ

[Jesus answered and said to him], “I am not laughing at you, but at the deceitfulness of the stars, because these six stars wander with these five adversaries, and they all will be destroyed along with their creations.”

Jesus tells Judas that now he has been told everything. He asks him to gaze upward and see a luminous cloud, the stars surrounding it, and the star in the ascendant, a star that he identifies with Judas' (*Gospel of Judas* 57,15–20). Then “he” enters the cloud (57,23).

57,15 ΕΙΟ ΖΗΗΤΕ ΑΥΧΕ ΖΦ[Β] ΝΗΜ ΕΡΟΚ  
57,16 ΟΙ ΕΙΑΤΚ ΕΖΡΑΕΙ ΝΚ[Ν]ΑΥ ΕΤΩΗ

57,17 ΠΙ ΑΥΩ ΠΟΥΟΙΝ ΕΤΗΖΗΤΕ  
57,18 ΑΥΩ ΝΙΟΙΟΥ ΕΤΚΩΤΕ ΕΡΟΚ  
57,19 ΑΥΩ ΠΙΟΙΟΥ ΕΤΟ ΝΠΡΟΗΓΟΥ  
57,20 ΜΕΝΟΣ ΝΤΟΔ ΠΕ ΠΕΚΙΟΥ  
57,21 ΙΟΥΔΑΣ ΔΕ ΑΦΙΩΤΩ ΕΖΡΑΕΙ  
57,22 ΑΦΗΑΥ ΕΤΩΗΠΕ ΝΟΥΟΙΝ ΑΥ  
57,23 Ω ΑΦΩΚ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΡΟΚ

“Look, you have been told everything.  
Lift up your eyes and see the cloud,  
and the light in it,  
and the stars surrounding it.  
The star that is in the ascendant is your star.”  
So Judas lifted his eyes.  
He saw the cloud of light and he entered it.

The identity of the ascender is unclear because of the fragmentary nature of the text. It could be Jesus, but I think it more likely Judas given the fact that the luminous cloud is described as a cloud within this cosmos surrounded by the stars. Because of its stellar location, it is impossible for it to be identified with one of the luminous clouds within the upper aeons beyond the cosmic gridle. Stars are fixtures of this cosmos, not the transcendent aeons.

So whose cloud is it? In Sethian tradition, this particular cloud is the cloud where Ialdabaoth lives, enthroned. It is the seat of Ialdabaoth and Saklas in the thirteenth heaven. This is standard Sethian cosmology and is even reflected earlier in the *Gospel of Judas* when Nebro-Ialdabaoth's six assistants including Saklas come into being in a cloud (51,5–17). They create twelve angels to rule each of the twelve heavens below them. This cloud is their operation's headquarters and exists in the thirteenth heaven.

51,5	μαρουωπιε η[δ]ι μνητ]	“Let [twelve] angels come into being
51,6	σπουογς ναγγελος [εγπ̄ ε]	to [rule] over
51,7	ρο εχνη πεχαος μη δ[μνητε]	Chaos and the [Underworld].”
51,8	αγω εις ηνhte αφο[γωνη ε]	And look, an [angel appeared] from the cloud,
51,9	βολ ητρηπε ηδ] ογα[γγελος]	his face flashing with [fire].
51,10	ερε[π]ερεσο πογο κρ[ωμ]εβολ	His appearance was corrupted with blood.
51,11	περεινε δε ε[α]χο[2]μ̄ ησνοα	He had a name,
51,12	εουηταα ημαγ η[ουρ]αν χε νε	Nebro, which means
51,13	βρω ετε παει πε [νη]αγερμη	‘apostate,’
51,14	νεγε ημοα χε απ[οσ]τατης	Other peoples say, Ialdabaoth.’
51,15	ηηκοογε δε χε η[αα]δαβαωθ	And another angel also came from
51,16	αγω οη ακααγγελ[ο]ς ει εβολ	the cloud, Saklas.
51,17	[2]η̄ τηηπε χε σακλας	

This cosmology is foundational in Sethian texts. The cloud is fashioned by Sophia in order to hide the monster she had created. The *Apocryphon of John* relates that the monster was so ugly that “she cast it away from herself, outside that place, that no one of the immortal ones might see it, for she had created it in ignorance. And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the Holy Spirit who is called the mother of the living. And she called his name Ialdabaoth” (*Apocryphon of John* NHC II, 1 10,7–20). *On the Origin of the World* NHC II, 5 106,4 relates that Ialdabaoth “sits upon a throne of light; a great cloud covers him.” In the *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHC III, 2 57,10–20, Oroiael calls forth an angel to rule Chaos and Hades. When he does so, “the cloud, being agreeable, came forth in the two monads, each one of which had light. [... he throne] which she had placed in the cloud [above. Then] Saklas, the great [angel, saw] the great demon [who is with him Nebr]uel.” Together they set up the twelve spheres below them and populate the spheres with twelve archons.

From the perspective of Judas Iscariot, the *Gospel of Judas* is a tragedy. Judas is linked to the cosmic system in such a way that he becomes inseparable from Ialdabaoth and his evil plans against Jesus. He is tied to Ialdabaoth’s realm and his cloud of operations, the thirteenth aeon, and Ialdabaoth’s persona as the King of the Archons. He is identified with the arch-demon ruling over his twelve assistants, a coincidence in number that was exploited by the Sethians to expose the illegitimacy of apostolic authority. The mainstream Church’s appropriation of

knowledge handed down from the apostles is ridiculous when the apostles are recognized as the lesser archons ignorant of God and powerless over their arrogant demonic ruler whose evil plan to kill Jesus is engaged.

### *Judas’ Betrayal*

Judas’ role in the passion story is presented to us in the *Gospel of Judas* in such a way that his actions are understood as a mystery with supernatural involvement and consequences. This represents Sethian mentality, where what happens on earth is only the tip of the iceberg. Earthly activities correspond with those in the spiritual world, so that what happens here only happens here because something larger and more profound is happening in the world of the spirit. The spiritual activity has been hidden from humans in such a way that only through revelation given by a descending aeon from the Pleroma can the true meaning of the earthly occurrence become known.

The paradigm here is not a mirror image as it is in the Valentinian Gnostic tradition, where earthly activities are shadows or imperfect reflections of the activities of the upper aeonic world. In Sethianism, human beings are participants in a supernatural drama. This drama always involves an action by the upper aeons to redeem its lost light, and a counteraction by Ialdabaoth and his assistants to stop the redemption. The stories involve intrigue, suspense, and trickery on the part of both parties as they engage in a primordial and historical war over the human spirit. Since some of the action occurs on earth in historical time, the war does not just involve aeons and archons, it involves human beings too. So human beings unknowingly become engaged in this supernatural drama.

This is what the *Gospel of Judas* is about – Judas’ involvement in this supernatural drama. Judas is not a human actor betraying a human Jesus as a good friend, collaborator, or confidant. Rather, as we have seen, he is aligned with the archons and demons who rule this world. These archons are an army warring against the Father above and wishing to kill Jesus before the Father can implement whatever plan of his own he may have been contriving against the them. As for Judas’ part, the Sethians who wrote this gospel insist that it was more than a simple kiss on the cheek. What Judas did was the most evil thing he could do. He sacrificed the body of Jesus to Saklas (*Gospel of Judas* 56,17–21), taking on an instrumental part in the archonic war.

56,17	ΖΩΒ ΝΙΜ Ε[Υ2]ΟΟΥ ΝΤΟΚ	[..] everything that is evil. You
56,18	ΔΕ ΚΝΑΡ ΖΟΥΟ ΕΡΟΥ ΤΗ	will do worse than all
56,19	ΡΟΥ ΠΡΩΜΕ ΓΑΡ ΕΤΡ ΦΟ	of them, for the man that clothes
56,20	ΡΕΙ ΠΗΟΒΙ ΚΝΑΡ ΘΥCΙΑCΕ	me, you will sacrifice
56,21	ΠΜΟCΙ	him.

In fact, Jesus predicts that Judas will be successful in this: “Already your horn has been raised, and your wrath burned, and your star has ascended, and your heart has [..]” (*Gospel of Judas* 56,21–24).

56,21	ΗΔΗ ΑΠΕΚΤΑΠ ΧΙCΕ	Already your horn has been raised,
56,22	ΑΥΩ ΠΕΚΩΝΤ ΔCΜΟΥ2	and your wrath burned,
56,23	ΑΥΩ ΠΕΚCΙΟΥ ΔCΧΩΒΕ ΑΥ	and your star has ascended,
56,24	Ω ΠΕΚ2ΗΤ Δ[...] <sup>40</sup>	and your heart has [..]

The meaning of the phrase “already your horn has been raised” is particularly telling, since it appears idiomatically in the Psalms to refer to the fact that one has been victorious in battle, has blown his battle horn triumphantly after the defeat of his enemies (Psalm 89:24; 92:10; 112:9). The phrase, “your wrath kindled,” speaks to Judas’ motivation, while the ascendancy of his star is astrological lingo referencing the determination of Judas’ actions, that he no longer has a choice in the matter. His actions will be instrumental in destroying Jesus. Even though, the archonic plan backfires when Jesus’ powerful spirit slips through their hands, and their grip on human souls and destinies is destroyed, this does not lessen Judas’ personal involvement in the evil and traitorous plot nor his alignment with the archons.

This portrayal of Judas is in line with other Gnostic texts that talk about the hidden drama of the passion, particularly the crucifixion when Jesus’ spirit has been separated from his dying body. In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* NHC VII,2 50,11<sup>41</sup> it is described as an event of supernatural proportions. It all began when a great power came forth out of the “house of the Father of Truth” and descended into

<sup>40</sup> R. Kasser and G. Wurst, “Transcription,” have reconstructed this lacunae: Δ[ϞΑΜΑ2]ΓΕ, and have translated it “become strong” (R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 43, n. 138). But this is speculation only, since the word could be reconstructed in a number of ways.

<sup>41</sup> Even though Seth is not mentioned internally, I understand this text to belong to the *Christian Sethian* tradition because its markers are typical of Sethian literature: Ennoia, Sophia, Ialdabaoth, Adonaios are all present as well as reverse exegesis typical of Sethian interpretation of the Genesis story; the story assumes the supernatural war between Ialdabaoth and the Father and the participation of certain human beings in that drama. At least its connection to Sethianism was apparent to the person in the ancient world who gave this text its title.

“a bodily dwelling” as Jesus’ soul (51,20–25). The descent of the power was done in disguise, altering its shape, changing from form to form, assuming the likeness of the beings encountered along the way. In this way, its passage goes unnoticed, and the power remains undefiled by the descent. This means that Jesus has a soul that has not been corrupted by its descent into this world and therefore, upon death, this soul could not be retained by the archons controlling this world. Unlike the souls of other human beings, it could freely ascend back to the Father beyond the universe.

The archons, although not recognizing the descent of this power, appear to recognize that something is up. As the power incarnates, it exchanges place with the original soul, and this process disturbs the archons (*Second Treatise of Great Seth* NHC VII,2 51,25–52,3). In the confusion, Adonaios suggests, “Let us seize him,” while other archons cautioned, “The plan will certainly not materialize” (55,5–6). They did not know what trick the Father was up to and appear confused about what action, if any, they should take. In the end, the archons decided to act before the Father’s plan could be implemented completely. In so doing, they hastily crucified Jesus, an action which they thought, in their ignorance, would put a stop to any trick that the Father had set in motion in Jesus.

But their plan turned out to be their downfall. Jesus’ spirit did not succumb to them as they had planned because, being incorruptible and without error, it could not die like others. “I did not die in reality but in appearance” (*Second Treatise of Great Seth* NHC VII,2 55,19–20). His spirit says that “I was about to succumb to fear” but did not, so “my death which they think happened, (happened) to them in their error and blindness, since they nailed their man to their death” (ΜΠΕΥΡΩΜΕ Ε2ΟΥΝ ΕΠΕΥΜΟΥ) (55,30–35).<sup>42</sup> That is, everything that they did to Jesus – the punishments and beatings, forcing him to drink gall and vinegar, crowning him with thorns – in reality they did to themselves. Even Jesus’ cross was not carried by him, but by Simon the Cyrene “who bore the cross on his shoulder” (56,10).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> NHC VII,2: see B.A. Pearson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 30 (Leiden/New-York/Köln: Brill), 1996, p. 164.

<sup>43</sup> This teaching about the crucifixion was probably Basilides’ teaching as well, a teaching that I think he picked up from the Sethian Gnostics and which became perverted in the testimony of the Church Fathers to suggest that Simon and Jesus exchanged places.

At Jesus' death, his spirit leaves him, and rejoices "in the height" over the ignorance and error of the archons. The spirit says, "I was laughing at their ignorance. And I subjected all their powers" (*Second Treatise of Great Seth* NHC VII,2 56,20). By nailing Jesus' body to the tree, and fixing his hands and feet with four nails of brass, they were really condemning themselves (58,25–59,18). Why? Because Jesus' spirit could not be fettered by the archons. It was released from his body, "their man," (ἄππευρωμε), and broke out of the cosmic girdle. A great trembling seized the earth and the souls of the dead were released. They rose resurrected and united with Jesus' spirit which had opened up a path for them to the world above (58,28–59,14).

This Gnostic interpretation of the passion is referenced in other texts like the *Apocalypse of Peter* which states that, although the archons crucified Jesus' body – which is called "a clay vessel" (πικαπιῶνι) in which demons dwell! – they were unable to hold unto "the living Savior" who stands joyfully watching and laughing at their blindness and lack of perception.<sup>44</sup> Jesus' body in reality was Jesus' substitute and, by killing it, the archons released "my incorporeal body" (πασωμα πᾶτσωμα) for "I am the intellectual Spirit filled with radiant light" (*Apocalypse of Peter* NHC VII,3 82,5–83,10).<sup>45</sup>

What about Judas' role? The best window into his role in Gnostic texts is found in the *Concept of Our Great Power* NHC VI,4 41,14–11. According to this text, Jesus' earthly ministry and teaching disturbed the archons. They became angry and decided to try to catch him and hand him over to the angel who rules Hades, Sasabek. So these archons sought out one of Jesus' disciples, Judas, and they possessed him, as the text relates, "a fire took hold of his soul." So Judas betrays Jesus and he is delivered to the ruler of Hades by the demonic angels themselves for nine bronze coins. The demonic Sasabek tries to seize Jesus, but cannot because "he found that the nature of his flesh (πτροπος ἄτεφραραξ) could not be seized." He shouted, "Who is this? What is it? His word abolished the Law of the aeon. He is from the Logos of the power of life!" (*Concept of Our Great Power* NHC VI,4 42,1–8).<sup>46</sup> And so Jesus was victorious over the ruling archons, carving out the passage upward out of the cosmic girdle. His ascent opens the way for other souls to follow

<sup>44</sup> See B.A. Pearson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, p. 244.

<sup>45</sup> See B.A. Pearson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, p. 244.

<sup>46</sup> D.M. Parrott (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 5502, 1 and 4*, *Nag Hammadi Studies 11* (Leiden: Brill) 1979, p. 308.

suit. So his defeat of the archons begins the eschatological process of the dissolution of the cosmos and the archons' control over human destinies and souls.

The *Gospel of Judas* assumes this type of Gnostic interpretation of Jesus' passion and Judas' involvement in his betrayal. His action is not understood as a straightforward this-worldly affair, but as an action with a supernatural cast and agenda. Judas is aligned with the archons and demons who rule this world, an evil host battling the Father and his aeons. Judas' spirit is the thirteenth demon, carrying out the plan of Ialdabaoth and his cronies either as their leader or as their minion (*Gospel of Judas* 46,6–7). By betraying Jesus, Judas has offered Jesus' body as a sacrifice to Ialdabaoth, a sacrifice more evil than any the other apostles would ever make (56,17–21).

By framing Judas' sacrifice of Jesus alongside that of the other apostles who sin by also offering Ialdabaoth evil sacrifices (cf. *Gospel of Judas* 56,11–13; 39,18–40,1), the gospel goes a long way to critique and mock mainstream interpretations of Jesus' death in sacrificial terms. This criticism and mockery includes a strong condemnation of eucharist theology. When the twelve make a eucharist offering in the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus' laughter echoes loudly, as well as the apostles' insistence that "we have done what is right" (33,26–34,6).

33,26	ΝΤΕΡΕΩ	When he
33,27	Τ[ΩΝ]Τ ΕΝΕΦΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ	[approached] his disciples,
34,1	ΕΥΣΟΟΥΣ ΕΥΖΗΟΟΣ [Ε]ΥΡ ΕΥΧΑ	they were gathered together
		and seated,
34,2	ΡΙΣΤΙ ΕΧΗ ΠΑΡΤΟΣ [Α]ΩΒΕ	giving thanks over the bread.
		[He] laughed.
34,3	ἸΜΑΘΗΤ[Η]Σ ΔΕ ΠΕΧΑΥ ΝΑΩ [ΧΕ]	The disciples said to him,
34,4	ΠΟΞΩ ΕΤΒΕ ΟΥ ΚΩΒΕ ΝΩΑ Τ[ΕΝ]	"Teacher, why are you
		laughing at [our]
34,5	ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΙΑ ΠΝΤΑΝΡ ΟΥ Π[ΑΙ]	eucharist. What we have done
34,6	ΠΕΤΕΩ	is right."

Jesus' laughter is the laughter of the Gnostic Christian. The disciples' assertion is the assertion of mainstream Christian. Jesus informs the apostles that when they partake of the elements, what they are really doing is worshipping Ialdabaoth, the god to whom Judas offered Jesus as a sacrifice (*Gospel of Judas* 34,6–11).

34,6	ΑΔΟΥΩΩΩ Π[Ε]	He answered
34,7	ΧΑΩ ΝΑΥ ΕΒΙΩΒΕ ΝΩΩΤῆ	and said to them, "I am not
		laughing at you.

34,8	ΑΝ [ΟΥ]ΔΕ ΕΤΗΕΙΡΕ ΝΠΑΕΙ ΑΝ	You do not do this
34,9	ΖΗ [ΠΕ]ΤΗΝΟΥΦΩ ΑΛΛΑ ΖΗ ΠΑΙ	by your own will, but by this
34,10	Ε[Ι]ΝΑΧ;Ι ΣΗΟΥ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΤΗΝΟΥ	your god [will] be worshiped."
34,11	ΤΕ	

### Judas' Tragedy

The tragedy of Judas (from the perspective of Judas), according to this gospel, is the fact that Judas got involved in the archonic war, and found himself caught in the crossfire. Somehow, his soul became corrupted, linked to the demon belonging to the thirteenth archon, Ialdabaoth. And now there appears to be nothing he could do to change this fact, nor its consequence – his involvement in the archonic battle against Jesus. He is taught personally by Jesus the cosmic mysteries (*Gospel of Judas* 43,6–44,14; 47,1–54,26), he receives visions of the upper aeon in the form of a heavenly Temple (44,23–45,26), but this is not enough to alter his destiny. Judas even laments this fact, demanding to know what is so great about the fact that he has received secret teaching from Jesus since he has been “separated from” the generation of the Kingdom and its holy aeons (46,11–18).

Why does Judas become locked into this fate? This is the real mystery of this gospel in my opinion. Although the gospel is fragmentary, I think the manuscript hints at the importance of Gnostic baptism in overcoming fate. This appears to me to be the tenor of the discourse on pages 42 and 43. Jesus tells the disciples that each one has his own star (*Gospel of Judas* 42,7–8). The text breaks here, but the coherent fragments that follow the break suggest that his speech included a discussion of the everlasting generation which is not defiled because it has been baptized in a spring that waters God's Paradise (43,1–11).

43,1	ΖΗ Τ[.]ΑΝΑΤ[.]ΗΤΑΙ	[...] he who has
43,2	ΕΙ ΑΝ ΕΤ[.]ΗΓΗ ΗΠ	come to those who have [... the
		spring] of
43,3	ΩΗΝ Ν[.] Ι	the tree [...]
43,4	ΡΟΣ ΜΠΕΒΙΑΩΝ [...]	[the time] of this age [...]
43,5	ΣΑ ΟΥΘΕΙΩ [...]	for a while [...]
43,6	ΑΛΛΑ ΝΤΑΙΕΙ ΕΤΩ Ο ΝΠΠΑ[ΡΑ]ΔΕΙ	But he came to water God's
		Paradise,
43,7	ΣΟΣ ΜΠΠΟΥΤΕ ΑΥΩ Π[ΓΕ]ΝΟΣ	and the [generation]
43,8	ΕΤΝΑΜΟΥΝ ΕΒ[Ο]Λ ΧΕ [ΝΚΗ]Α	that will endure because [he
		will] not

43,9	ΧΩΖΗ ΑΝ ΗΤ[.]ΤΗΕ <sup>47</sup>	defile the [...] of that
43,10	ΝΕΑ ΕΤΗΜΑΥ ΑΛ[ΑΔ...]	generation but [...]
43,11	ΠΕ ΧΗ ΕΝΕΖ ΝΩΑ Ε[ΝΕΖ]	for all eternity.

I think it is quite likely (given the criticism of the sacramental practices of mainstream Christianity throughout the gospel as well as the immediate context which aligns each disciple with a star), that the seventeen missing lines on page 42 addressed the ineffectiveness of ordinary Christian baptism in overcoming fate and one's connection with one's star.

The same discussion appears to have taken place on pages 55 and 56 of the gospel as well, although it too is fragmentary. Jesus tells Judas that he is not laughing at him, but at the deceitfulness of the stars and how they and their creations will all perish (*Gospel of Judas* 55,15–20). Then Judas asks a question about baptism, wanting to know what good comes of being baptized in Jesus' name (as the mainstream churches do) if they will all perish anyway (55,21–23)?

55,21	ΙΟΥΔΑΣ ΔΕ ΠΕΧΑΙ ΝΗΤΟ ΧΕ ΖΙ ΕΥ	Then Judas said to Jesus, “So
55,22	ΝΑΡ ΟΥ ΝΒΙ ΝΕΝΤΑΥΧΩΚΗ	what will those who are
		baptized
55,23	ΖΗ ΠΕΚΡΑΝ	in your name do?”

Jesus responds, “Truly I say to you, this baptism [...]” (*Gospel of Judas* 55,24–25). This phrase is at the bottom of the page. The top of the next page contains ten fragmentary lines, five of which are missing altogether. The first comprehensible line is in the center of the page, 56,11–13, a discussion that appears to criticize mainstream sacramental practices.

56,11	ΑΛΗΘΩΣ [ΤΧ]Ω ΝΗΝΟΣ ΝΑΚ' ΙΟΥ	“Truly [I say] to you, Judas,
56,12	ΔΑ ΧΕ Η[ΕΤΤ]ΑΛΕ ΘΥΟΙΑ ΕΖΡΑΪ	[those who] offer sacrifices
56,13	ΝΣΑΚΛΑ[Σ...Η]ΟΥΤ[Ε...]	to Saklas [...] god [...].

<sup>47</sup> R. Kasser and G. Wurst, “Transcription,” reconstruct this passage: ΝΤΩΝΝ[ΟΩΦΕ Ν]ΤΓΕ and translate it “the [walk of life of] that generation” (R. Kasser, *et al.*, p. 29). This appears to me to be incorrect given the context which demands a reading about the descender's action, perhaps involving the verb *cō* from line 6, or the noun *ΠΗΓΗ* from line 2. It will be necessary for me to examine the manuscript before I can offer my own reconstruction.

So again, I find it very likely that the missing portion of the page included a discussion of the ineffectiveness of mainstream baptism in overcoming fate, while Gnostic baptism the opposite.

Clearly Judas has not undergone Gnostic baptism because he remains connected to his star. What we do know from the manuscript is that Judas was separated from the everlasting generation and his soul was connected with the archons and the fate of his star. Judas' tragedy is used by the Sethian author to criticize and mock mainstream Christians who do not themselves realize that the demonic disciple they curse is in fact the one who made possible their atonement, a criticism I find frighteningly profound. Judas emerges from the midrashic corners of his Sethian story as a figure who not only knows the future and his own role in it, but also the secrets of "the Kingdom." But none of this can bring a halt to the fate of his star, Ialdabaoth's star, to which he remains indelibly connected (perhaps because he did not undergo Gnostic baptism). There appears to be nothing that he can do now to alter his destiny, which is to offer Jesus as a sacrifice to the archons. Judas emerges from the contours of this gospel as the embodiment of human corruption and human tragedy, as a man who wishes to know God, but a man who cannot fully embrace the Gnostic mysteries.

#### THEMATICAL APPROACHES