

Understanding the Gospel of Judas

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The discovery and publication of the Gospel of Judas created a sensation in scholarly and popular settings alike. Much of the interest in the new publication grows out of the interpretation that was advanced, in which Judas Iscariot is understood as a hero, more or less, the greatest of the disciples, to whom Jesus entrusted his most important teaching. Ongoing critical study of the Coptic text, however, has raised troubling questions about this interpretation and on what basis it rests. The recent recovery of more fragments of the text also undermines the widely reported interpretation. The present study reviews several recent publications that suggest a very different interpretation.

Key Words: Judas Iscariot, Gospel of Judas, Codex Tchacos, Irenaeus, Cainites, National Geographic Society, Marvin Meyer

Thursday April 6, 2006, the National Geographic Society held a press conference at its Washington, DC, headquarters and announced to some 120 news media the recovery, restoration, and translation of the *Gospel of Judas*. The story appeared as headline news in dozens of major newspapers around the world and was the topic of discussion in a variety of news programs on television that evening and subsequent evenings. A two-hour documentary aired on the National Geographic Channel, Sunday evening, April 9, and has aired several times since.

At the center of the media storm is the claim that the *Gospel of Judas* presents the infamous disciple in a completely new light: Judas is not a villain but a hero, not the worst of the disciples but the greatest. Some have even wondered if the rehabilitated Judas of the *Gospel of Judas* might lead to a new and more collegial dialogue between Christians and Jews. However, not long after the announcement of the find and its publication, Coptic scholars began calling into question the proposed interpretation. Indeed, some have questioned the reconstruction and translation of the *Gospel of Judas*, at the very places in the text where Judas is supposedly placed in a positive light. The purpose of this essay is to review the announcement and initial publication of the new discovery and to assess some of the challenges that have been raised against the much-talked-about interpretation, in which Judas in the *Gospel of Judas* was understood as a sort of hero.



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Offprint from: *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.4 (2010)
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THE DISCOVERY OF THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

As best as investigators can determine, a leather-bound codex (or ancient book), whose pages consist of papyrus, was discovered in the late 1970s, perhaps in 1978, in Egypt, perhaps in a Coptic burial cave.¹ For the next five years, the codex, written in the Coptic language,² was passed around the Egyptian antiquities market. In 1983, Stephen Emmel, a Coptic scholar, acting on behalf of James Robinson, formerly of Claremont Graduate University and well known for his work on the similar Nag Hammadi codices, examined the recently discovered codex in Geneva. Emmel was able to identify four tractates, including one that frequently mentioned Judas in conversation with Jesus. He concluded that the codex was genuine (that is, not a forgery) and that it probably dated to the fourth century. Subsequent scientific tests confirmed Emmel's educated guess.

The seller was unable to obtain his asking price. After that the codex journeyed to the United States, where it ended up in a safe deposit box in Long Island, New York, and where it suffered serious deterioration. Another dealer placed it in a deep freezer, mistakenly thinking that the extreme cold would protect the codex from damaging humidity. Unfortunately, the codex suffered badly, with the papyrus turning dark brown and becoming brittle.

Happily, the codex was eventually acquired by the Maecenas Foundation in Switzerland and, with the assistance of the National Geographic Society, was recovered and partially restored. I say "partially restored" because an unknown number of pages are missing (perhaps more than 40) and only about 85% of the much talked about *Gospel of Judas* has been reconstructed.

The National Geographic Society wisely commissioned a series of tests to be undertaken, including carbon 14, analysis of the ink, and various forms of imaging, to ascertain the age and authenticity of the codex. Carbon 14 dates the codex to A.D. 220–340.³ At the present time, most of the members of the team incline to a date between 300 and 320 (but Emmel prefers a somewhat later date).

In 2005, the Society assembled a team of biblical scholars, in addition to Coptologists Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, and others, to assist with the interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*. These added members included Bart Ehrman, Stephen Emmel, Marvin Meyer (who also assisted in the reconstruction and translation of the codex), Elaine Pagels, Donald Se-

1. In addition to the codex containing the *Gospel of Judas*, three other codices were found. Only fragments of these books survive, preserved in various museums, collections, and libraries. One is a Greek translation of Exodus. Another is a Coptic translation of Paul's letters. The third is a Greek mathematical treatise.

2. Coptic is the Egyptian language that, in the time after Alexander's fourth-century-B.C. conquest of the Middle East, came to adopt the Greek alphabet (along with a few additional letters) as well as a number of Greek words. The Nag Hammadi books are also written in Coptic.

3. The carbon-14 testing was undertaken by Timothy Jull of the Department of Physics, University of Arizona.

nior, and me.⁴ With the exception of Rodolphe Kasser, who is ill, all of the Coptologists and consultants were present and made statements at the aforementioned press release.

THE PUBLICATION OF THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

An English translation of the *Gospel of Judas* has been published by the National Geographic Society in an attractive volume edited by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst.⁵ This volume includes introductory essays by the editors and translators, including one by Bart Ehrman, explaining the condition of the codex and the relationship of the *Gospel of Judas* to early Christian literature, including other Gnostic texts.

The *Gospel of Judas* is found on pp. 33–58 of Codex Tchacos, but there are three other tractates (or writings): Pages 1–9 preserve a version of the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, which is approximately the same text as the second tractate of Nag Hammadi's codex VIII. Pages 10–32 preserve a book of *James* that approximates the third tractate of Nag Hammadi's codex V, in which it is entitled the *First Apocalypse of James*. Pages 59–66 preserve an untitled work, in which the figure Allogenes (“Stranger”) appears. This tractate, which is quite fragmentary, does not appear to be related to the third tractate of Nag Hammadi's codex XI, which is entitled *Allogenes*. And finally, a fragment not related to these four tractates has surfaced very recently, on which may appear the page number 108. If so, then we may infer that at least 42 pages of Codex Tchacos are missing.

THE INITIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

The *Gospel of Judas* begins with these words: “The secret account⁶ of the statement⁷ that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot” (33.1–3).

4. The convoluted and fascinating history of the codex, now called Codex Tchacos, is narrated by Herb Krosney, in his richly documented and colorful book *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006). The story is also featured in Andrew Cockburn, “The Judas Gospel,” *National Geographic* 209/9 (2006): 78–95.

5. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006). A second edition has also appeared: Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2008). The Coptic text, plates, and English translation are now available in Rodolphe Kasser and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos: Critical Edition* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2007). For the *Gospel of Judas*, see pp. 184–235. The plates and Coptic text have been arranged and edited by Rodolphe Kasser and Gregor Wurst. Introductions, translations, and notes are by François Gaudard, Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst.

6. The word translated “account” is actually the Greek loan word λογος.

7. Or “declaration.” Here again we have a Greek loan word. ΑΠΟΦΛΑΙΣΙC means either “statement” or “declaration,” if we understand it as the nominal cognate of ἀποφαίνεω (“to set forth” or “declare”) and therefore as a synonym of ἀπόφανσις (see LSJ). However, if it is the nominal cognate of ἀπόφρημι (“to deny” or “refuse”), then ΑΠΟΦΛΑΙΣΙC here in the *Gospel of Judas*

The tractate concludes with the words: “The Gospel⁸ of Judas” (58.28–29).⁹ These lines are stunning enough, but what happens in between is what has given rise to most of the controversy.

In the paragraphs that follow, I shall outline the interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* presented in the initial publication. This interpretation is found principally in the first edition edited by Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst,¹⁰ although my summary also takes into account other preliminary publications and papers presented in scholarly conferences.

According to the interpretation of Meyer et al., in the *Gospel of Judas*, Judas Iscariot (cf. 33.2–3, 35.9, ἸΟΥΔΑΣ ΠΙΣΚΑΡΙΩΤΗΣ) is singled out as Jesus’ greatest disciple. He alone is able to receive Jesus’ most profound teaching and revelation. Jesus laughs at the disciples’ prayers and sacrifices and explains that they do not realize that they are worshipping a false god (33.22–34.11). They do not fully grasp who Jesus really is and from whom and from where he has come. But Judas is able to stand before Jesus (35.8–9), declaring: “I know who you are and from where you have come. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.¹¹ And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you” (35.15–21). After this confession, Jesus teaches Judas in private (35.23–26): “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom.”

At the conclusion of this private teaching, in which Judas is invited to enter the cloud (and be transformed?), Jesus utters his most startling instruction: “You will exceed them all. For you will sacrifice the man who clothes me” (56.18–20). That is, while the other disciples are wasting time in inferior worship and activity (sacrificing animals in the Jewish fashion, presumably, as well as observing the Christian eucharist), Judas will carry out the sacrifice that truly counts, the sacrifice that will result in salvation:

means “denial” or “negation” (again, see LSJ). On this point, see André Gagné, “A Critical Note on the Meaning of apophasis in ‘Gospel of Judas’ 33:1,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 3 (2007): 377–83. Gagné concludes that the latter alternative makes better sense in context. Perhaps. One will want to note the meaning of ἀπόφασις in *Acts of Pilate* 10:2, 16:7, as well as its usage in Philo, *Leg.* 3.208; *Migr.* 162; *Prob.* 97; and Josephus, *J. W.* 1.542; *Ant.* 2.70; *Life* 79.

8. The word translated “Gospel” is the Greek loan word ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ. One should also note that the *explicit* (i.e., the concluding line of the document) reads “Gospel of Judas” (ΠΕΥΔΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΝΙΟΥΔΑΣ), not “Gospel according to Judas” (ΠΕΥΔΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΠΚΑΤΑ ΙΟΥΔΑΣ), in which the preposition *katá* is used, as we have in the *explicit*s of most of the NT Gospel manuscripts and in many of the Gospels outside the NT (as in, e.g., the *explicit* of the *Gospel of Thomas*: ΠΕΥΔΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΠΚΑΤΑ ΘΩΜΑΣ). The composer of the *Gospel of Judas* may be implying that Judas should not be understood as the *author* of the Gospel (as Thomas ostensibly is in the *Gospel of Thomas*); rather, the *Gospel of Judas* is *about* Judas.

9. For the Coptic text, see n. 8 above.

10. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (2006).

11. Barbelo is a deity in Sethian Gnosticism (cf. *Apocryphon of John* [NHC II] 4.36, 5.13; *Zostrianos* [NHC VIII] 14.6, 36.14; *Allogenes* [NHC XI] 51.13, 53.28; *Trimorphic Protennoia* [NHC XIII] 38.9), sometimes likened to the Mother of all (*Gospel of the Egyptians* [NHC III] 42.4, 62.1, 69.2–3): “Barbelo is the divine Mother of all, who often is said to be the Forethought (*pronoia*) of the Father, the infinite One. The name of Barbelo seems to be based on a form of the tetragrammaton, the holy four-letter name of God within Judaism, and it apparently comes from Hebrew—perhaps ‘God (compare *El*) in (b-) four (*arb(a)*).” This quotation is from Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), 23 n. 22.

he will sacrifice the physical body of Jesus, thus allowing Jesus to complete his mission. Thus, Judas becomes the greatest of the disciples.

Accordingly, the narrative concludes with the handing over of Jesus to the ruling priests:

The ruling priests murmured because he (Jesus) had gone into the guest room to pray. But some scribes were there watching carefully, in order to arrest him during the prayer, for they were afraid of the people, for Jesus was regarded by all as a prophet. They approached Judas and said to him, "What are you doing here? You are the disciple of Jesus." Judas answered them as they wished; and Judas received some money and handed him (Jesus) over to them. (58.9–26)¹²

There is no mention of a trial, execution, or resurrection. The *Gospel of Judas* has related what it wanted to relate: the obedience of Judas and how that obedience assisted Jesus in fulfilling his saving mission. Thus, Judas has been transformed from villain to hero, from traitor to saint.

At least this is how the *Gospel of Judas* was interpreted in the first published edition and announced amidst much fanfare at the press release. But is this really what the *Gospel of Judas* is saying? A growing body of scholarly work suggests that the initial interpretation is in error at important points. We shall return to this question shortly.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *GOSPEL OF JUDAS*

Writing in A.D. 180, Irenaeus inveighs against a group he and others call the Cainites, evidently because this group makes heroes out of biblical villains, from Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, to Judas, who handed Jesus to his enemies. Irenaeus has this to say:

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the *Gospel of Judas* [*Judae evangelium*].¹³

In other words, the so-called Cainites identify with the villains of the OT. They do this because they believe that the god of this world (that is, the God of the OT), in stark contrast to the God of Light above, is evil. Accordingly,

12. The translations are based on Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), ad loc.

13. *Against Heresies* 1.31.1. This part of Irenaeus's work is extant only in Latin. The translation is adapted from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (10 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:358.

anyone that the god of this world hates and tries to destroy—such as Cain, Esau, or the people of Sodom—must be good people, people on the side of the God of Light.¹⁴ The *Gospel of Judas* evidently shares this perspective.¹⁵

To be sure, the *Gospel of Judas* makes an important contribution to our understanding of second-century Christianity, especially with regard to the question of divergent interpretations of the mission and achievement of Jesus and his relationship to his disciples. In the case of the *Gospel of Judas*, we have here what may be a very early exemplar of Sethian Gnosticism,¹⁶ a form of Gnosticism that may have roots in Jewish pessimism that emerged in the aftermath of the disastrous wars between Rome and the Jewish people in 66–70 and 115–117.¹⁷ By any reckoning, the recovery and publication of a text from late antiquity, a text debated by leading figures in the early Church, justifies celebration.

It is highly unlikely, however, that the *Gospel of Judas* preserves for us authentic, independent material, material that supplements our knowledge of Judas and his relationship to Jesus. No doubt some popular writers will produce some fanciful stories about the “true story,” but that is all that they will produce—fanciful stories. Aforementioned James Robinson, who is a respected scholar of Gnosticism, dismisses the *Gospel of Judas* as having no value for understanding the historical Judas.¹⁸ This point is hardly debated by competent scholars.¹⁹

14. For more on the Cainites, see Birger A. Pearson, “Cain and the Cainites,” in Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 95–107.

15. What Irenaeus says agrees sufficiently with what has been found in the Tchacos Codex, so that we are relatively confident that the *Gospel of Judas* of Codex Tchacos is indeed the *Gospel of Judas* to which the great church father referred. However, his description is just vague enough, even inaccurate at points, that we doubt Irenaeus actually read the *Gospel of Judas*. On this point, see Uwe-Karsten Plisch, “Das Evangelium des Judas,” *ZAC* 10 (2006): 5–14; Peter Nagel, “Das Evangelium des Judas,” *ZNW* 98 (2007): 213–76; Wilhelm Pratscher, “Judas, der wahre Freund Jesu: Das Judasevangelium,” *Protokolle zur Bibel* 16 (2007): 119–35; Simon J. Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas: Rewriting Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 114–23; Gregor Wurst, “Irenaeus of Lyon and the Gospel of Judas,” in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst; Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2008), 169–79.

16. For studies on Sethian Gnosticism by a recognized authority, see John D. Turner, “Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History,” in Charles W. Hedrick (ed.), *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 55–86; idem, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi: Section Études 6; Leuven: Peeters / Laval: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2001).

17. On this interesting hypothesis, see Carl B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004). On the general problem of identifying and defining Gnosticism and Gnostic groups in late antiquity, see Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

18. See James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). The book has also appeared in French and German translations. In media interviews, Robinson has described the *Gospel of Judas* as a “dud.”

19. Several scholars have made this point, including Simon J. Gathercole, “The Gospel of Judas,” *ExpTim* 118 (2007): 209–15; Heinz-Dieter Knigge, “Die Rehabilitierung des Judas:

Not only will the *Gospel of Judas* have no impact on serious scholarship concerned with the historical Jesus and his disciples but the newly published text will also have no impact on Christian theology or on Christian understanding of the gospel story, as Father Donald Senior, a Roman Catholic priest and NT scholar, stated during the press conference. I have no doubt that he is correct. Other scholars have expressed similar opinions.²⁰

The issue that has academic merit and truly vexes interpreters concerns the meaning of the *Gospel of Judas*. What is this book's message and how does it truly understand Jesus and the notorious disciple? The initial interpretation, in which Judas is understood as a hero or ideal disciple, has come under increasing fire.

THE MEANING OF THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS REVISITED

In the wake of the press release, a number of books on the *Gospel of Judas* appeared, some of them written by members of the National Geographic team. Among these were books by Bart Ehrman, Marvin Meyer, and Elaine Pagels and Karen King.²¹ These books understand the *Gospel of Judas* essentially as presented in the first edition edited by Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, which was summarized above. Other books appeared that in one way or another attempted to put matters in context and assure the Church and public alike that the *Gospel of Judas* offers no real challenge to Christian theology and history.²² But even these books did not dispute the reading and interpretation found in the initial edition.

Some scholars have been critical of the media hype, complaining that far too much importance had been attached to a text written almost one

Eine historisch-kritische Beurteilung des 'Judasevangeliums,' *Deutsches Pfarrernetz* 107 (2007): 665–67; Wilhelm Pratscher, "Das Judasevangelium und der historische Judas," *Amt und Gemeinde* 59 (2008): 186–88.

20. For a few examples, see Bernhard Blankenhorn, "The Claims of the Gospel of Judas," *Catholic World Report* 16/5 (2006): 32–36; Édouard Cothenet, "L'Évangile de Judas," *Esprit & Vie* 116/159 (2006): 12–13; Hal Taussig, "The Significance of the Gospel of Judas," *Fourth R* 19/4 (2006): 9; Paul Foster, "The Rediscovered Gospel of Judas," *ExpTim* 118 (2006): 26–27. Some popular, ecclesiastical periodicals devoted entire issues to the announcement and publication of the *Gospel of Judas*. These include *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 45/3 (2007) and *Bibel Heute* 42/165 (2006), among others. In *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* the most important essay is Madeleine Scopello, "Vom Verräter zum wahren Jünger Jesu: Das Evangelium nach Judas," 32–35. In *Bibel Heute*, two brief essays that should be mentioned are by Dieter Bauer, "Der 'wahre Jünger Jesu': Zum Evangelium des Judas," 4–5, and Hans-Josef Klauck, "Was wir von Judas wissen: Die ernüchternden Fakten," 17–18.

21. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Marvin Meyer, *Judas: The Definitive Collection of Gospels and Legends about the Infamous Apostle of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2007); Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007). See also Horacio E. Lona, *Judas Iscariot—Legende und Wahrheit: Judas in den Evangelien und das Evangelium des Judas* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007).

22. In addition to the items cited in nn. 19–20 above, see N. Thomas Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth about Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Stanley E. Porter and Gordon L. Heath, *The Lost Gospel of Judas: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

century after the writing of the NT Gospels.²³ Others complained of the secrecy and exclusivity of the project. But the most serious complaint centered on the interpretation of the newly published text.

Months after the publication of the Coptic text of the *Gospel of Judas*, as well as English, French, and German translations,²⁴ a number of scholars began to express serious reservations about the reconstruction, translation, and interpretation offered by Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst. The scholars raising these concerns were not clergy and laity but scholars with expertise in Coptic Gnostic texts. These scholars include, among others, April DeConick, Louis Painchaud, Birger Pearson, Gesine Robinson, and John Turner. All of these scholars observed doubtful reconstructions, inaccurate translations, and highly questionable interpretations.²⁵ DeConick was the first to publish a full-length treatment in which these errors are clearly and systematically identified.²⁶ We may expect more major studies to follow.

DeConick has identified several errors of translation that have great implications for how the *Gospel of Judas* should be interpreted. I review four that I think are the most important.²⁷

Spirit or Demon?

At the end of p. 44 of Codex Tchacos, Jesus laughs and says to Judas, according to the translation by Meyer and his colleagues: "You thirteenth spirit, why do you try so hard?" (44.21). In a footnote it is admitted that the word underlying "spirit" is the Greek loanword ΔΑΙΜΩΝ, or demon. However, we are told that Judas is called a *daimon* "because his true iden-

23. Jack Miles, "Judas & Jesus: What Did the Gnostics Really Believe?" *Commonweal* 133/11 (2006): 7–8; Pheme Perkins, "Good News From Judas?" *America* 194/19 (2006): 8–11; Luke T. Johnson, "The Lost Judas," *The Christian Century* 123/10 (2006): 34–36.

24. The English translation has already been noted. For French and German editions, see R. Kasser, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst, eds., *L'Évangile de Judas: Traduction intégrale et commentaires* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion and National Geographic, 2006); idem, *Das Evangelium des Judas* (Wiesbaden: White Star Verlag and National Geographic Society, 2006); Johanna Brankaer and Hans-Gebhard Bethge, eds., *Codex Tchacos: Texte und Analysen* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2007). See also Plisch, "Das Evangelium des Judas." Plisch's German translation follows the Coptic text, with a few exceptions, as restored by Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst.

25. Louis Painchaud, "À Propos de la (re)découverte de l'Évangile de Judas," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 62 (2006): 553–68; Birger A. Pearson, "Judas Iscariot among the Gnostics: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says," *BAR* 34/3 (2008): 52–57; Gesine Schenke Robinson, "Jesus, a Hero or a Villain?" in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst; Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2008), 155–68; John D. Turner, "The Place of the Gospel of Judas in Sethian Tradition," in *L'Évangile de Judas: Le contexte historique et littéraire d'un nouvel apocryphe / The Gospel of Judas: The Historical and Literary Context of a New Apocryphal Text* (ed. M. Scopello; Leiden: Brill), forthcoming. Prior to the appearance of these publications, the authors read learned papers and engaged at various national and international conferences, as early as the summer of 2006. Among the most recent is Birger Pearson's 2009 Society of Biblical Literature paper, "The Figure of Seth in the Gospel of Judas." Pearson argues that in the *Gospel of Judas* the infamous disciple is portrayed as the "arch-villain."

26. April D. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007).

27. *Ibid.*, 48–60.

tity is spiritual." Appeal is then made to Plato's usage of the word, where "spirit" or "god" is a fair rendering of *daimon* and cognates.²⁸ Therefore, the translators feel justified in rendering the word "spirit." The impression one gains is that being a *daimon* is a good thing for Judas. But is it?

The problem here is that whereas *daimon* in Plato and other non-Jewish and non-Christian literature can mean spirit or god, in either a neutral or even positive sense,²⁹ it never has this meaning in Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic Christian texts.³⁰ In Jewish and Christian texts, including Gnostic Christian texts, demons are always seen as enemies of God and his righteous people. The translation "spirit" here in the *Gospel of Judas* and the rationale given for it are misleading. DeConick rightly translates: "Why do you compete (with them), O Thirteenth Demon?"³¹ Birger Pearson and Gesine Robinson wonder if Judas is called a demon because, like the demons in the NT Gospels who immediately recognized who Jesus truly was (cf. Mark 3:11 "You are the Son of God!"), Judas alone recognizes who Jesus truly is.³²

In the second edition, Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst revise their translation to read: "You thirteenth daimon, why do you try so hard?"³³ Clearly, they have heard the criticism. But they still try to maintain the ambiguity, leaving readers who have little or no expertise with the impression that, here in the *Gospel of Judas*, "daimon" is not necessarily negative. This is seen not only in the translation "daimon," instead of the more familiar "demon" (as in DeConick's translation) but in a footnote (where, by the way, the translation possibility "demon" is acknowledged), where they say

28. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), 31 and n. 74. Indeed, Karen King (in Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*, 115) translates: "Why are you getting all worked up, thirteenth god?" Gathercole (*Gospel of Judas*, 83) also translates "spirit."

29. Cf. LJS: δαίμων is defined as "god," "goddess," "deity," "divine power," "soul."

30. Cf. LJS: "in N. T. an evil spirit, a demon, devil"; BAG: "demon, evil spirit" (in reference to Matt 8:31, the only occurrence of the word in the NT). The more than 60 occurrences of δαίμων in the NT have the same meaning. For further discussion, see E. C. E. Owen, "Δαίμων and Cognate Words," *JTS* 32 (1931): 133–53; W. Foerster, "δαίμων, κ.τ.λ.," *TDNT* 2:1–20; G. J. Riley, "Demon," *DDD* 235–40; Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "The Notion of Demon: Open Questions to a Diffuse Concept," in *Die Dämonen: Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt / The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in the Context of Their Environment* (ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K. F. Diethard Röhmed; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 23–41. For lexical data that relate δαίμων and cognates to their Coptic equivalents, see W. E. Crum (ed.), *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 89, 170, 583–84, 720.

31. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 48. See the discussion in Painchaud, "À propos de la (re)découverte de l'Évangile de Judas," 558–59. Painchaud calls attention to the appearance of demons in another Gnostic text: "Sophia Zoe . . . chased the ruler from [their] heavens, and she cast them down to the sinful world so that they might become there like the evil demons upon the earth" (*On the Origin of the World* [NHC II] 121.27–35).

32. Robinson, "Jesus, a Hero or a Villain?" 159; Pearson, "Judas Iscariot among the Gnostics," 56.

33. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2008), 39. See also the critical edition of the Coptic text, along with English translation, in Kasser and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas, together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos*, 207.

the “word *daimon* can mean ‘demon’ in a thoroughly negative sense of the term, as in Jewish and Christian literature,” but it “can also be used in a more neutral, or even positive sense, in Platonic, Middle Platonic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and magical texts.”³⁴ This is true enough, but in the context of the *Gospel of Judas*, which the translators regard as Christian in a very broad sense, the word δαίμων is surely not positive. It never is in Jewish, Christian, and (semi-Christian) Gnostic texts. This is DeConick’s point. To be sure, Platonic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and magical texts were of interest to various Christian groups, especially some Gnostic groups, but the mere fact of interest in these texts does not override the uniformity of the evidence for the negative understanding of δαίμων in Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic literature.

Set Apart For or Separated From?

On p. 46 of the Coptic text, Judas asks Jesus, according to the 2006 translation by Meyer and colleagues: “What is the advantage that I have received? For you have set me apart for that generation.” The impression is that Judas has been destined for the holy generation, which is a good thing. (We know that it is the “holy” generation because of the wider context; see the bottom of p. 46 and top of p. 47.) However, once again, this is not what the Coptic text actually says. What is rendered “set me apart for,” implying access to the holy generation, should be rendered “separated me from that generation,” clearly implying *failure to gain access* to the holy generation.³⁵ The true sense of the Coptic text is the exact opposite of what Meyer and colleagues have translated.³⁶ Judas Iscariot has recognized that he has gained no advantage (“What is the advantage that I have received?”), but has been separated from the holy generation.

A point needs to be made about the “mysteries of the kingdom” (45.25–26), which Jesus has taught Judas. Being taught these mysteries has not benefited Judas in any way. This kingdom is related to the “error of the stars” (46.1–2).³⁷ Judas will grieve when he sees it (46.11–13).³⁸ This is why Judas asks Jesus what advantage he has received, because he has been

34. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2008), 39–40 n. 76. In the critical edition of the Coptic text, which includes an English translation, δαίμων is rendered “daimon,” without a footnote suggesting either a positive or negative sense. See also the discussion in Silke Petersen, “Warum und inwiefern ist Judas ein ‘Daimon’? Überlegungen zum Evangelium des Judas (Codex Tchacos 44,21),” *ZAC* 3 (2009) 108–26. Petersen understands δαίμων in the passage under consideration in a neutral sense. I do not think the uniform evidence of usage of this word in Judeo-Christian literature has been sufficiently appreciated.

35. King (in Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*, 116) translates “What benefit have I received because you separated me for that race?” This is somewhat better, but it is still inaccurate in that it translates “for” instead of “from.” Gathercole (*Gospel of Judas*, 85) translates “setting me apart for that generation.”

36. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*, 32; DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 51–53; Painchaud, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangiles de Judas,” 560–63.

37. In fact, Judas been led astray by his star (45.13–14). See Painchaud, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangiles de Judas,” 559–60.

38. Pearson, “Judas Iscariot among the Gnostics,” 56.

“separated from that (holy) generation” (46.16–18). His only advantage is that Judas will be ranked at the top, the thirteenth, of the generations that will in the end be destroyed (46.19–25, 55.10–20).³⁹

To Ascend or Not to Ascend

At the end of p. 46 and beginning of p. 47, Jesus tells Judas, according to the translation by Meyer and colleagues: “They will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].”⁴⁰ However, in the Coptic text there is no word “curse.”⁴¹ But there is a negative particle (“no” or “not”), which has been obscured by a very questionable and unnecessary emendation. The text actually reads, according to DeConick: “And you will not ascend to the holy [generation].” The text does not say that Judas will ascend to the holy generation and be cursed for it. The text in fact says he will *not* ascend! The faulty reconstruction and questionable mistranslation create a very misleading impression of what had been promised Judas.⁴² This error more than any other gave rise to the idea of Judas as hero or true Gnostic.⁴³

To Exceed Them All or to Do Worse Than All

Another serious misreading is found on p. 56. Because paragraph indentation and context play an important role, I shall present the material more formally. Jesus says to Judas, according to the translation and paragraphing of Meyer and colleagues:

Truly [I] say to you, Judas, [those who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [. . .]
 God [three lines missing] everything is evil.
 But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that
 clothes me. (56.11–20)⁴⁴

39. See the very important discussion in Painchaud, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas,” 559–60; Robinson, “Judas, a Hero or a Villain?” 161–62; Pearson, “The Figure of Seth in the Gospel of Judas.”

40. Likewise, King (in Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*, 116) translates “and you will go up to the holy ra[ce].” Similarly in Gathercole (*Gospel of Judas*, 85), but with some hesitation: “you might not (?) ascend to the holy generation.” See also his comment on p. 86.

41. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), 33. In n. 85, it is admitted that the “translation is tentative.” However, no alternative translation is offered. The note goes on to discuss transformation and ascension traditions, adverting to “Judas 57 (the transfiguration of Judas) or 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 (the esoteric ascent of a man—Paul—to the third heaven).” The discussion in this note lends support to the unwarranted positive understanding of the text. As we shall see, there is little support for the idea of the transfiguration of Judas.

42. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 54–57; Pearson, “Judas Iscariot among the Gnostics,” 56.

43. In Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2008), 41, the text is now rendered: “In the last days they will . . . to you, and you will not ascend on high to the holy [generation].” One should also see n. 89, which appears on pp. 41–42. The new, nonascend reading is also found in Kasser and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas, together with the Letter*, 211, 213. See also n. 25 on p. 211.

44. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), 43; so also Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2008), 51. The rendering is almost identical in Kasser and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas, together with the Letter*, 231.

The paragraphing and translation are inaccurate and misleading. There is no reason to introduce a new paragraph with “But you will exceed all of them.” There is a comparative in this line that is linked to what precedes. Moreover, “exceed” does not capture the true sense of the language. DeConick recommends this translation:

Truly [I] say to you, Judas, those [who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [several lines missing] everything that is evil. Yet you will do worse than all of them. For the man that clothes me, you will sacrifice him.⁴⁵

Judas does not *exceed* the other disciples, in some positive, effectual sense; he is *worse* than the other disciples.⁴⁶ Whereas the other disciples are fools, worshiping the prince of the rulers of the physical world (that is, Saklas)⁴⁷ and offering sacrifices the way the Jews do, Judas, Jesus foretells, will be far worse, for he will sacrifice the very man in whom the spirit of Jesus dwells. The sacrifice of this man is not a good thing, something that enables Jesus to escape and return to the God of light above. It is an evil and foolish sacrifice to the evil rulers of this fallen world.⁴⁸ Jesus is not giving Judas instructions; he is prophesying what Judas will do.⁴⁹

The four errors considered thus far are egregious. Combined, they create a very false impression of the role that Judas Iscariot plays in the Gospel named after him. It is this false impression that encourages Meyer and his colleagues to find in the narrative a “transfiguration of Judas.” They translate the final lines of p. 57:

Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. Those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying. . . . (57.21–26)⁵⁰

There are two important caveats. First, it is not clear that Judas is the one who enters the luminous cloud. Meyer and his colleagues assume it is and,

45. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 58; Pearson, “Judas Iscariot among the Gnostics,” 56–57. To appreciate the point of the Coptic grammar and context of this passage in the *Gospel of Judas*, one must consult DeConick’s full discussion on pp. 57–59. The faulty translation is followed by Kasser and Wurst (p. 231), but not the misleading paragraphing.

46. This point is also missed in King’s translation (in Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*, 121): “As for you, you will surpass them all.” Gathercole (*Gospel of Judas*, 105) reads: “But you will be greater than them all.” At this point, Gathercole (*Gospel of Judas*, 106) completely follows the erroneous interpretation of Meyer et al., saying that “Judas is the ideal priest who acts” and that, with respect to sacrificing Jesus, “there is little doubt that this is pictured as a positive thing for Judas to accomplish.” There is, in fact, a great deal of doubt.

47. Sakla(s), another name for the god who created the world or one of his princes, appears many times in Gnostic literature, e.g., according to *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II) 95.5–8: “And Zoe, the daughter of Pistis Sophia, cried out and said to him, ‘You are mistaken, Sakla!’—for which the alternate name is Yaltabaoth.” Yaltabaoth (also Yaldabaoth or Ialtabaoth) are corruptions of Yahweh Zebaoth (“Yahweh of Hosts”). See T. N. D. Mettinger, “Yahweh Zebaoth,” *DDD* 920–24, esp. p. 924.

48. Painchaud, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas,” 557–58.

49. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 57–59.

50. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), 44. So also Kasser and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas, together with the Letter*, 233.

in a footnote, explain that the passage “may be described as the transfiguration of Judas.”⁵¹ If so, this places Judas almost on the level of Jesus himself, who experienced a transfiguration involving light, a cloud, and a voice (cf. Mark 9:2–7 and parallels). However, the text is probably speaking of Jesus, not Judas. That is, Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and *Jesus* entered it.⁵²

Second, even if it is Judas who entered the cloud, comparison with the tradition of the transfiguration of Jesus is unwarranted. In Gnostic cosmology and myth, the cloud, surrounded by stars (see *Gospel of Judas* 57.18), is part of the fallen cosmos, the very place where the evil God of darkness (that is, Ialdaboath) dwells, along with his several princes, including Saklas. There is nothing about this scene that should make us think that Judas has entered heaven along with the ascended Jesus.⁵³

The most likely interpretation is that Jesus (or, better, the spirit of Jesus) has entered the cloud,⁵⁴ and in entering the cloud, Jesus has departed. All that is left behind, on earth, is the human whom Jesus had inhabited (“the man who bears me”). This man Judas will sacrifice, by handing him over to the authorities, as Jesus foretold, not commanded (56.19–20, 58.25–26). Judas has not assisted Jesus in fulfilling his mission. He is no “ideal priest.” Far from it, Jesus entered the cloud (or ascended) without the assistance of Judas.⁵⁵ All Judas did was surpass his fellow disciples in folly by sacrificing to Saklas not animals but the very human whom Jesus had possessed.

CONCLUSION

When the *Gospel of Judas* is properly translated and interpreted, we do not find in Judas Iscariot a hero, the wisest of the disciples who assists Jesus and then enters glory. On the contrary, Judas is a tragic figure in a dramatic retelling and reinterpretation of the Passion of Jesus, a retelling

51. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (2006), 44 n. 143. See also n. 145. King and Pagels (*Reading Judas*, 164) also think it is Judas who enters the cloud and comes to know God. So also Gathercole, *Gospel of Judas*, 108.

52. In the second edition, this option is now acknowledged; cf. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst (eds.), *The Gospel of Judas* (2008), 52 n. 155. Robinson (“Jesus, a Hero or a Villain?” 162) believes the pronoun *he* refers to Jesus, not to Judas. She remarks: “It is hardly conceivable, however, that Judas would ascend and then immediately reappear in order to betray Jesus in the next scene.” She is quite correct. Jesus entered the cloud, leaving behind Judas and the man whom Jesus had inhabited. See also Painchaud, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas,” 563–67.

53. See the discussion in DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 116–20.

54. This is now conceded by Meyer, who at the 2009 Society of Biblical Literature meeting in New Orleans announced the recovery of several more fragments of the Tchacos Codex, including fragments of the *Gospel of Judas*. One of these fragments confirms that it is indeed Jesus who entered the cloud. See Marvin A. Meyer, “A Report on Newly Discovered Fragments of Codex Tchacos.”

55. Robinson, “Jesus, a Hero or a Villain?” 168: Judas’s “betrayal had no effect on the true Jesus since, by then, his spiritual self, the Christ, was already gone.”

that is marked by anti-Semitism and a mockery of the apostolic Church.⁵⁶ The disciples have failed to understand who Jesus really is. Even the one who came closest to this truth—Judas Iscariot—in the end was the worst of a bad lot, sacrificing a human being to the rulers of this fallen earth. He, like the other disciples, will not escape the corrupt world of darkness that eventually will be destroyed.

Meyer and his colleagues have not ignored the criticisms leveled against the first edition of the translation. At several points in the second edition, one can see some backtracking and correcting, though there are still attempts to salvage the original faulty interpretation. The scholarly discussion will no doubt continue, but many are still asking how the initial translation and interpretation could have been so wrong.⁵⁷

56. This point is underscored by Painchaud, "À Propos de la (re)découverte de l'Évangile de Judas," 567–68; Pearson, "Judas Iscariot among the Gnostics," 57; idem, "The Figure of Seth in the Gospel of Judas"; Robinson, "Judas, a Hero or a Villain?" 158, 164; idem, "The Gospel of Judas in Light of the New Testament and Early Christianity," *ZAC* 13 (2009): 98–107; Frank Williams, "The Gospel of Judas: Its Polemic, its Exegesis, and Its Place in Church History," *VC* 62 (2008): 371–403. See also Ferdinand Hahn, "Judas und das wiederentdeckte Judasevangelium," *Kerygma und Dogma* 54 (2008): 2–13. Hahn is right to see in the *Gospel of Judas* opposition to the apostolic understanding of the role played by Judas, but to speak of Judas as a "privileged disciple" requires careful qualification. For a review of the brief but prolific history of scholarship concerned with the *Gospel of Judas*, see Peter Nagel, "Das Evangelium des Judas—zwei Jahre später," *ZNW* 100 (2009): 101–38, as well as the already-mentioned 2009 Society of Biblical Literature papers.

57. This is one of the major points in the report by Thomas Bartlett, "The Betrayal of Judas," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (30 May 2008). It has not escaped the notice of critics of the first edition of the *Gospel of Judas* that all of the significant errors provide important, even essential support to the Judas-as-hero interpretation. When the errors of translation, emendation, and reconstruction are taken out of the equation, the portrait of Judas as hero or true Gnostic, who ascends with Jesus, collapses. That said, it is not clear where Marvin Meyer now stands. In his *Judas: The Definitive Collection of Gospels and Legends about the Infamous Apostle of Jesus* (see n. 21 above), as well as in various conference settings where he has read papers and given lectures, he has continued to defend his positive interpretation of Judas. However, with his announcement of the recently recovered fragments and his concession that it is indeed Jesus who enters the luminous cloud, Meyer may in time abandon the positive interpretation of Judas. In any case, the new fragments will have to be carefully studied. In my opinion, the criticisms that have been offered and continue to be offered by a veritable phalanx of reputable Coptic Gnostic scholars will in the end assign the Judas-as-hero interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* to the dust bin of scholarly curiosities and media hype.