

THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS: POLEMIC, POP
CULTURE, FICTIOUS HISTORY

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FICTIOUS HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The following essay is about the polemical nature of *The Gospel of Judas*. So much was initially said about the impact the publication of *The Gospel of Judas* would have upon our understanding of the history of Christianity, that the actual meaning of this text was ignored. In an effort to rush the translation to market for maximum commercial value, the important work of accurately translating the text was compromised. This caused a controversy around the meaning and impact of *The Gospel of Judas* that persists to this day, despite more recent accurate translations. This essay discusses the contradictory translations of the text, as well as the polemical nature of the gospel. We also have herein, a possible explanation as to why the initial translators made the decisions they made. The history of the gospel is also discussed as well as its authorship. Further research about the impact this text has on the overall study of Gnosticism, and its relationship to Christianity, can be achieved with a clearer understanding of the origin, and meaning of The Gospel of Judas.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “The Gospel of Judas: Polemic, Pop Culture, Fictious History,” presented by Kyle Morehead, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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PART 1

Introduction

The 2006 publication of *The Gospel of Judas*, a fourth century Gnostic text discovered in Egypt, caused quite a stir.¹ Media outlets around the world reported on the discovery of a gospel that featured Judas Iscariot in a new light, not as betrayer, but rather as the most trusted disciple of Jesus Christ. This new text was billed as “Christianity turned on its head”², and among the most important archeological discoveries of the last 60 years.³ Judas Iscariot as a trusted confidant who betrayed Jesus at his request was a radical take on a familiar story. This ancient text seemingly echoed the sentiments from more recent works of popular culture like those found in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and the Broadway hit *Jesus Christ Superstar*, that sought to reconsider Judas’ role in the betrayal. This text seemingly offered a new and fresh perspective from Judas’ point of view, that challenged the traditional view of early Christianity and its development. The book and documentary on the discovery, restoration, and translation of the gospel was a huge success for all involved in bringing this text to the public’s attention, and most especially for its publisher, “The National Geographic Society.”

Shortly after the publication, however, it became clear that the claims made about this text were not sustainable. Scholars not associated with National Geographic and the team that

¹ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2006)

² Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2006) P. 77

³ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: Second Edition* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2008) P. 80 paragraph 2.

translated the gospel, discovered that in fact the opposite was true about this text. Judas was not praised above all, he was not the closest disciple of Jesus, he was instead a demon who would be condemned above all for the betrayal.⁴ When the material that was used by The National Geographic was made available, scholars realized that Judas was to be condemned, not praised for the betrayal.

In the years that followed the publication of *The Gospel of Judas*, more fragments of the text were published, and subsequent translations were made available. These have confirmed that what was initially claimed about this text based on the first translation, is not the case. Despite this, owing to the successful media blitz and immense popularity of the National Geographic presentation, discussions of *The Gospel of Judas* by outside specialists and the academy continue to revolve around the initial translation's conclusions.

What is clear from the recent translations is that *The Gospel of Judas* is a polemic against early Christian rituals. This text tells us nothing about early Christianity except that some felt its practices were laughable, and this engendered a desire from an anonymous author to mock them. Jesus, Judas, and the disciples who are featured in the text are used in an ironic and inverted way to criticize the early Church. The relationship between Jesus and Judas in the text, which features the revelation of a seemingly secret Gnostic cosmology, is also strange as it leaves out any soteriological path for the reader. In fact, the text is quite explicit that humanity is condemned simply for being human. In the following investigation,

⁴ April DeConick. "What the Gospel of Judas Really Says." The New York Times, December 2, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/opinion/02iht-edconick.1.8558749.html>. 3rd paragraph.

we will highlight and demonstrate the polemical nature of the *Gospel of Judas*, and also contextualize the efforts throughout the twentieth century to “*Read Judas*”⁵ in a way that rehabilitates the Biblical villain’s image.

To begin, it is necessary to discuss what the *Gospel of Judas* is, how it was discovered, and how it came to the public’s attention. It is also important to discuss the contrasting translations and how they differ in significant ways, and why that matters when coming to grips with the meaning of this text.

Provenance

The *Gospel of Judas* came to public attention when “The National Geographic Society” published a translation and commentary, as well as produced a documentary about the text delivered on prime-time TV. National Geographic was contacted by Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos, the Swiss antiquities dealer who owned the Tchacos Codex, a collection of papyri from Egypt, of which the *Gospel of Judas* was a part. Nussberger-Tchacos employed National Geographic and a team of scholars to restore, translate, and publish the book and produce the documentary.⁶ This arrangement allowed Nussberger-Tchacos and the Maecenas Foundation, an entity created in 1994 by attorney Mario Roberty, to retain ownership of the text, but publish jointly with National Geographic.⁷ Nussberger-

⁵ Elaine Pagels and Karen King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York, Viking, 2007)

⁶ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2006) P. 11-16.

⁷ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: Second Edition* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2008) P.10-11, 17

Tchacos claimed that her interest in publicizing *The Gospel of Judas* was divinely inspired, saying that she felt Judas Iscariot had reached beyond the grave to her, in some kind of other worldly attempt to rehabilitate his image. To maximize the commercial value of this project, Nussberger-Tchacos and National Geographic chose Easter Sunday to reveal to the public a controversial tale that according to this gospel, said Judas was a hero who accomplished the mystery of the betrayal.⁸

Despite how bizarre Nussberger-Tchacos' claim is, if we go back even further in the origin story to when the gospel was still in Egypt, the story gets even stranger. According to Nussberger-Tchacos and National Geographic, *The Gospel of Judas* was discovered in a cave, in what appeared to be an ancient burial chamber in Al-Minya Egypt in 1978. A local farmer wandering around in the Egyptian desert, happened upon the ancient burial chamber, took the gospel from the grave, and then went straight to his friend Am Samiah. The farmer and Am Samiah traveled to Cairo and sold the text to an Egyptian antiquities dealer named Hanna, with whom Am Samiah had a prior relationship. Hanna had the text on display in his private collection in Cairo until this was stolen. We are told in the National Geographic documentary that a team of black-clad thieves, led by an Egyptian woman, lifted the codex from Hanna in the dead of night. Hanna somehow managed to get the codex back, and then shopped it around in Switzerland in the early 1980s to some interested American academics, among them Steven Emmel, who would later assist National Geographic's translation of the

⁸ James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (San Francisco, New York, Harper 2007). This book documents the origin of the gospel from an alternative point of view and is highly critical of the publication and methods of National Geographic and its team.

text. These academics were unable to come to a financial arrangement with Hanna. Hanna then traveled to America and deposited the text into a safe deposit box in a New York bank. Here, it sat until Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos purchased the codex on April 3rd, 2000.⁹

Now, it should be pointed out that there is not a papyrus fragments worth of evidence to back up the Egyptian side of the origin story for *The Gospel of Judas*. The Egyptian farmer is a nameless person; no one ever spoke to him to verify his account of how the text was discovered. Am Samiah, according to Rodolphe Kasser, the principal translator for National Geographic and Nussberger-Tchacos, is a pseudonym.¹⁰ Familiarity with the Arabic language, even at an elementary level, would inform a reader that Am Samiah could approximate a meaning roughly equivalent in English to Samiah's uncle. But as with the farmer, this person was never formally identified and never given the opportunity to verify if what was said by National Geographic and Nussberger-Tchacos was true or not. Had it not been for the meeting in the early 1980s with the American academics and with Nussberger-Tchacos, the same could very well have been said about Hanna. Hanna, known as Hanna Asabil, another pseudonym, was apparently in league with the notorious Nicolas Koutoulakis, who allegedly sold looted artifacts to numerous museums around the United States.¹¹ Once again, despite the meetings with the American academics and Nussberger-Tchacos, Hanna may very well be a created identity to hide the fact that *The Gospel of Judas*

⁹ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: Second Edition* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2008) P.66

¹⁰ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2006) P. 50

¹¹ <https://www.seattlepi.com/national/article/Gospel-of-Judas-discovery-an-adventure-in-itself-1201013.php>
<https://chasingaphrodite.com/tag/nicolas-koutoulakis/>; <https://chasingaphrodite.com/?s=koutoulakis>

and the entire Tchacos Codex was stolen from Egypt and sold illegally in the European antiquities market. As a matter of fact, Freida Nussberger-Tchacos was arrested for antiquities crimes unrelated to *The Gospel of Judas*.¹²

This aspect of how the gospel was discovered is important because it speaks to the people involved in bringing the text to public attention. It also speaks to what motivated National Geographic and the academics involved in the restoration and translation of the text, namely commercial success. The involvement with smugglers who made up an origin story for a text they stole, as well as the rushing of the translation to meet a publisher's deadline to ensure maximum shock value, should have been scrutinized in more detail. This, especially when it became clear that the initial translation was inaccurate.

The Text

The Gospel of Judas features a series of dialogues between Jesus and his disciples, including Judas Iscariot. The text can be divided in two halves: the first section is a dialogue between Jesus and the twelve disciples; the second section is a dialogue between Jesus and Judas Iscariot.

In the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, Jesus tells them they are ignorant of the truth, that they practice rituals which lead people astray and ultimately to their deaths, and that those from their generation will not ascend to the holy realm. The narrative is such

¹² <https://art-crime.blogspot.com/2016/07/once-upon-time-bearded-warrior-wearing.html>

that it begins as a direct discussion between Jesus and the twelve, and then moves to them sharing a dream they collectively had with Jesus. Jesus then interprets the dream for them.

In the second half Jesus speaks to Judas directly and then he interprets a dream Judas has about his fate. The dialogue between Jesus and Judas culminates in the revelation of a gnostic cosmology, revealing to Judas the true nature of reality. Jesus informs Judas that despite the secret revelation, he will not ascend to this heavenly realm. This kindles Judas' wrath, and the text culminates in the betrayal of Jesus. The final lines of the text give us our title, "the Gospel of Judas."¹³

Now turning our attention to the issue of how *The Gospel of Judas* was translated, it can be said that the narrative structure is the same among all the translations. There are three major translations of *The Gospel of Judas*. The first was the 2006 translation published by the National Geographic Society. It should be pointed out that Elaine Pagels and Karen King, of Princeton and Harvard university respectively, also published a translation of the text that essentially agreed with the conclusions of the National Geographic Society.¹⁴ We can therefore add these two together in the category of the first translation. The second translation was done in 2007 by Professor April DeConick of Rice University.¹⁵ Using the same material as National Geographic, DeConick's translation essentially changes the role of Judas in the text from a positive to a negative one. DeConick's translation was well received

¹³ Johanna Brankaer, Bas Van Os, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2019) P. 115.

¹⁴ Elaine Pagels and Karen King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York, Viking, 2007). P. xxi.

¹⁵ Aril DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

by the academic community and put National Geographic in the position of having to publish a 2nd edition of *The Gospel of Judas* which is more in line with her translation.¹⁶ With the addition of previously unknown pages from *The Gospel of Judas* from an American collector¹⁷, restoring 90 to 95% of the text, a third translation was published in 2019 by two European academics: Johanna Brankaer and Bas Van Os.¹⁸ Brankaer and Van Os' translation follows closely with the DeConick translation. Thus, in academic discussions about *The Gospel of Judas*, the first translation gives way to the second and third. Despite the conclusion of more recent scholarship that the National Geographic's translation was inaccurate, the public discourse about the text still follows in line with the first translation. When describing the polemical nature of the text in the present essay, the Brankaer/Van Os and DeConick translations will be used.

The first point of divergence between the two translations is on Judas' ability to reach the immortal realm of Barbelo. More will be said about Barbelo and this realm later on in this essay. Barbelo is the first emanation of the Great Invisible Spirit, who exists in her own realm and is synonymous with wisdom. Judas correctly identifies where Jesus is from, indicating he is familiar with, or has been initiated into gnostic mysteries: "I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you."¹⁹ In response to this, Jesus asks

¹⁶ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: Second Edition* (National Geographic, Washington D.C., 2008).

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2015/03/16/living/finding-jesus-ga-judas/index.html>

¹⁸ Johanna Brankaer, Bas Van Os, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2019).

¹⁹ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C: National Geographic, 2006) P. 21-22.

<https://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/judastxt.pdf> P. 1-2.

Judas to separate himself from the other disciples so he can tell him of the mysteries of the kingdom. Jesus then tells Judas: “It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal.”²⁰ The “it” presumably means the realm of Barbelo from where Jesus has come. Because Judas correctly identifies the elevated realm from where Jesus descends, he and not the other disciples who do not know where Jesus comes from, becomes Jesus’ true initiate. DeConick’s translation of this passage reads much differently: “Separate from them and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that you will go there, but so that you will grieve greatly.”²¹ Judas is still separated from the other disciples, but in this case for no other reason than that he is selected to hear the mysteries so he will “grieve greatly.” The same passage is translated in a contradictory way, not just stylistically, but its fundamental meaning is uncertain.

Another important instance of diverging translations regarding Judas’ ascent is found later in the text. After Jesus interprets a dream Judas has, Judas asks him: “What good is it that I have received it? For you have set me apart for that generation.” Jesus answers: “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].”²² Judas will become the thirteenth disciple who will rule over the twelve and the “other generations.” He will ascend to the holy generation. The DeConick translation

²⁰ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (D.C: National Geographic, 2006) P. 22.

<https://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/judastxt.pdf> P. 2.

²¹ April DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007) P. 73 lines 35.26-35.27.

²² Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C: National Geographic, 2006) P. 32-33; <https://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/judastxt.pdf> P. 4

reads: “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations and will rule over them. And in the last days, they <missing lines> to you. And you will not ascend to the holy [generation].”²³ Once again we have contradictory translations/interpretations of the same passage. In the National Geographic rendering, Judas ascends to the holy generation. According to DeConick, he does not.

A final divergence occurs when discussing Judas’ fate concerning the betrayal of Jesus. National Geographic seems to suggest that the betrayal will exalt Judas: “Truly [I] say to you, Judas, [those who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [...] God [—three lines missing—] everything that is evil. “But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”²⁴ To DeConick, “But you will” has to be interpreted as “Yet you will do worse than all of them. For the man that clothes me, you will sacrifice him.”²⁵

The important thing to remember about the two translations is that they fundamentally contradict one another. In National Geographic’s edition, Judas will reach the heavenly realm because of the betrayal and will be glorified above all for the act. In DeConick’s translation, he will be cursed above all for betraying Jesus and will become the thirteenth demon who rules over the world of the demiurge. In Greek as well as Coptic, the word used for demon is *daimonas* (δαίμονας). The National Geographic team in their first edition rendered this word *spirit*. Judas would become the thirteenth spirit, not a demon, as

²³ April DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007) P. 84-85 lines 46.19-47.1

²⁴ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic, 2006) P. 43;

<https://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/judastxt.pdf> P. 6-7

²⁵ April DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007) P. 94 lines 56.17-56.21.

translated by DeConick and Brankaer/Van Os. Why National Geographic translated *daimon* this way originally is a moot point because they changed it in the second edition. However, if the intention was to rehabilitate Judas no matter what the text actually said, then perhaps it makes more sense.

Gnostics and Gnosticism

The Gospel of Judas is described as a gnostic text because of the use of certain terminology, and because of the nature of the dialogue between Jesus and Judas found in the gospel. This dialogue takes on the form of a secret revelation Jesus gives to Judas regarding the nature of the created world, and the abode of “great invisible spirit.” To begin a discussion of this gospel, it will be helpful to define and describe a few key terms and concepts used in this text that distinguish it as a gnostic writing.

A gnostic text is one in which the theme of attaining *gnosis*, the Greek word for knowledge is predominant, and is often given to the reader in the form of a dialogue or cosmology. Knowledge of the nature of reality and the nature of oneself, is an important concept throughout the text. This gnosis is often revealed in the text in different ways. In some cases, it comes in the form of sayings that convey teachings to apply to one’s life, as in *The Gospel of Thomas*, a gnostic text from the Nag Hammadi library. In the case of *The Gospel of Judas*, the gnostic revelation comes in the form of a secret dialogue between Jesus and Judas, not the twelve disciples. Secrecy, separateness, and some forms of initiation are important to this revelatory process. Only certain, chosen people are able to receive gnosis. Gnostic groups, and individuals who identified as such, existed in the second and third

centuries, and in various unrelated forms existed throughout history and into the present day. Rather than being a centrally located corporate phenomenon with dogma and creedal statements, Gnostics might more accurately be described as existing in a state of being contingent on inner revelation. This state of being could be described as social as well as psychological, and perhaps as a symptomatic reaction to developments in the world around the individual seeking internal enlightenment. Gnostics were those who looked within to harness their spark of divinity and escape this evil world of suffering. A full discussion of this theme is beyond the scope of this essay, but it seems this need for an inner vision to escape the world of suffering has waxed and waned with groups and individuals throughout history and in various cultures.

Gnosticism as a term is much easier to define, as it was a creation of the seventeenth century. Henry More, a Cambridge Platonist, coined the term, and employed it as a pejorative for the Gnostic systems from the second and third centuries.²⁶ From the beginning of its usage, the terms Gnosticism and Gnosis have been used synonymously and took on its negative connotations from the Church Fathers that described the Gnostics as heretics who deviated away from the Church of the Apostles and their teachings. Later, as more gnostic texts were discovered, Gnostic ideas were able to be read and understood on their own terms apart from the Church Fathers. A colloquium was held in Messina, Italy, in 1966 to arrive at a consensus of the terms Gnosis and Gnosticism. The participants composed a document entitled “Proposal for a Terminological and Conceptual Agreement with regard to the theme

²⁶ W.J. Hanegraff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden, Brill, 2006) P. 403.

of the Colloquium.” Gnosticism was reserved for the movement that began “with a certain group of systems that began in the second century A.D.” and Gnosis was to be defined as, “Knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite, i.e. of an esoteric kind. Gnosticism can be summarized as a divine spark in man, from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth, and death, needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated.”²⁷ This definition was criticized by some and continues to be a topic of debate today. It has been stated by scholars that there never existed a unified system that could be called “Gnosticism.”²⁸ What is clear is that in the second and third centuries, and throughout history, people and possibly certain group identified as seekers of *gnosis*, or *Gnostics*. But a unified ideological system understood as *Gnosticism* is nonexistent from our sources. Given this caveat, both terms will be used in this discussion, but Gnosticism will only be used when discussing specific kinds of Gnostic ideas.

Another important term that needs to be defined for a discussion of *The Gospel of Judas* is “Sethian Gnosticism.” As with the term Gnosticism, there is no agreed upon definition of “Sethianism” nor is there a clear-cut phenomenon that one could call Sethianism. *The Gospel of Judas* has some elements defined as Sethian, and some that are lacking. What we do know from various texts is that certain authors identified Seth, Adam and Eve’s third son, as a revealer of *gnosis*, or an initiate who in various gnostic texts has *gnosis* revealed to him. This allows the reader to experience what is being described by, or to

²⁷ Hanegraff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden, Brill, 2006) P. 404.

²⁸ Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999.)

Seth. The nature of these revelations often has certain themes or certain personalities that appear in the texts, giving them their Sethian character. These themes and personalities appear in certain Sethian texts but are absent in others.²⁹

One term in particular needs to be defined before we move to the polemical nature of *The Gospel of Judas*. This term takes us specifically to the text of that Gospel and is used to separate Judas from the twelve disciples. In the text, Judas identifies a realm from which he says Jesus originates, the realm of Barbelo. Barbelo is the first emanation of the Great Invisible Spirit. It is both male and female and can change forms at will. It is often identified as being synonymous with Sophia, and of existing in his/her own realm. It is from this realm that the Jesus of *The Gospel of Judas* emerges.

A major theme of Sethian Gnosticism, and the essence of the revelation Jesus gives to Judas in the gospel, is the division of reality into two separate spheres. At the top is the Pleroma, a heavenly realm created by a godhead called the spirit, and inhabited by the likes of the previously mentioned Barbelo. This figure is described as the first thought, who is above and beyond the world of matter or the human world. The world of matter was created by an evil demiurge, a term from Plato's *Timaeus*, named in *The Gospel of Judas* as Yaldabaoth. Yaldabaoth was the son of Sophia, an emanation from the pleroma who created him from her own will, independent of the godhead in the pleroma. Sophia was an emanation

²⁹ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston, Beacon, 1958) P. 205. John D. Turner *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Leuven, Peeters 2001); John D. Turner "Sethian Gnosticism: A literary History" Hendrick, *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005). <https://archive.ph/fB1S#selection-13.0-13.38>; James M. Robinson *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco, Harper, 1978).

from this pleroma, and to a lesser extent is also Yaldabaoth who, like Sophia, has a spark of the divine within himself. But because of this act of self-creation, without the permission of the godhead, Yaldabaoth has an evil personality. He then creates a realm of matter called “the twelve Aeons.” In this world, he creates Adam and blows his spirit into him, thus unknowingly giving him the spark of the divine. Yaldabaoth persecutes Adam when he realizes that he has this divine spark. But the Great Spirit pities Adam and sends him a divine “epinoia”, meaning a divine thought to guide him. Yaldabaoth becomes jealous and tries to steal this epinoia and accidentally creates Eve. Yaldabaoth then seduces her to steal her away from Adam, and this leads to the creation of Eloim and Yave, and to the introduction of sexual desire into the world of matter. Eloim and Yave, whose names echo the Hebrew name of the God of Israel, have camouflaged names of Cain and Abel. But Adam, having embraced the epinoia and becoming enlightened, creates Seth. The true holy race of humanity is thus descended from Seth, and gnosis is used to awaken the spark of the divine within them.³⁰

This complicated cosmology is important because the revelation from Jesus to Judas in the gospel is Sethian in character. As Jesus begins to explain to Judas a form of this cosmology, he makes it clear it is to punish him for his betrayal: “but so that you will suffer a lot when you see the kingdom and its whole race”. “Jesus answered and said, ‘you will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the rest of the races, and you will rule over

³⁰ W.J. Hanegraff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden, Brill, 2006) P. 1066-67.

them.”³¹ Jesus then describes to Judas that, “which no human will see.”³² Jesus then describes this vivid and convoluted realm to Judas. The text culminates by Jesus laughing at Judas:

After that Jesus laughed. Judas said,

‘Master, why are you laughing at me?’ Jesus answered and said I am not laughing at you but at the error of the stars... tomorrow the one who bears me will be tortured... But you will do more than them all. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me. Already your horn has been raised, and your wrath kindled, and your star has passed by, and your heart has gone around.³³

Clearly, this alternative cosmology is designed to subvert the creation story found in the Book of Genesis. The Creator God in Genesis is Yaldabaoth in Sethian texts. The serpent in the book of Genesis would be viewed in a positive way for trying to enlighten Adam and Eve. What these texts are saying, *The Gospel of Judas* among them with this convoluted alternative cosmology, is that the God of Israel is evil for creating a world of matter, wherein suffering and death is the norm and ignorance abounds. Gnostics believed that a perfect and holy god could never have created our world. So, the Gnostics created an upside-down allegorical explanation that featuring a division between the heavenly realm, and this world.

Sources and Authorship

Our initial understanding of gnostic texts like *The Gospel of Judas*, comes from the Christian Scripture and the Church Fathers, who began to describe heresies and refute them in the late 1st century. Beginning with the eighth chapter of the Book of Acts in the New

³¹ Johanna Brankaer, Bas Van Os, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2019), P. 91 lines 11-24.

³² Brankaer, Van Os, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2019), P. 93 lines 3-4.

³³ Ibid. P109 lines 15-19 P. 111 lines 20-25.

Testament, composed in the late first century, a figure named Simon, who it is said was a “sorcerer” from Samaria, converted to Christianity. He saw Saints Peter and John baptize the people of Samaria who, according to the text, received the Holy Spirit. Simon was so taken by this act that he asked St. Peter to sell him his apostolic power. St. Peter, of course, does not agree to Simon’s terms and rebukes him for his offer. This act and the man Simon associated with it, along with Valentinus who started his own church after being denied a position as the Bishop of Rome, along with the philosopher Marcion, who taught a form of gnostic dualism, are foundational for the Church Fathers’ writings on the gnostics.

After Holy Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers make up the bulk of our initial understanding of Gnosticism. St. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian were early Church Fathers who wrote against various heresies, including Gnosticism. These early attempts to clearly define Orthodox Christianity shared much in common with each other and would be used to define further debates for centuries. There were other early Christian figures who stand out for their writings on heresy. The first one to mention *The Gospel of Judas* was St. Irenaeus of Lyon. His voluminous *Against the Heresies* was the first systematic work by a bishop in the Church to attempt a simultaneous compilation and explanation of the various heresies confronting Christianity. It is in this work by St. Irenaeus that we first encounter *The Gospel of Judas*. Irenaeus, however, was not alone in writing about the Gospel. Tertullian and St. Epiphanius of Salamis also wrote about the Gospel and the sect they said composed the text.

One of the important aspects to discuss regarding the Gospel of Judas is the authorship of the text. The answer to the question “who wrote the gospel” is easy, we simply

do not know. We do not have the name of an author who literally put pen to papyrus. Nor do we have evidence of widespread usage of this text in any meaningful liturgical way that could relate to a particular historical sect or group within early Christianity. The Egyptian origin of this text, as well as its Coptic composition and gnostic revelation, allow us to connect this gospel to the other discoveries at Nag Hammadi in 1945. But this connection is superficial and in no way leads toward a greater understanding of who wrote this document. The obvious clues, Coptic and Gnostic, are of little help regarding authorship because the Gospel reportedly is from a Greek original, and the Gnostic character of the revelation in the text is different from similar Sethian documents found at Nag Hammadi. We do, however, have an early Christian source that discusses *The Gospel of Judas* and is in fact the first historical mention of the text from the second century, as will be explained shortly.

Obviously, Judas Iscariot did not write this text. Jesus did not give a secret revelation to Judas that was preserved as a sacred tradition before he was crucified. *The Gospel of Judas* is not in any way a historical recounting of a literal dialogue between Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot, and it certainly does not help the reader “eradicate ignorance and lead to an awareness of oneself and God.”³⁴ Nor does the perspective and suggestion taken by National Geographic that the Judas in *The Gospel of Judas* is a role model, contrasted with Judas in the Canonical Gospels, help us understand the nature of the text.³⁵ This gospel, unlike the Christian Gospels, does not purport to be an account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ

³⁴ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic, 2006) P. 7.

³⁵ Ibid. P. 9.

and his disciples. Reading the text in a literal way is misguided, and it will only perpetuate the confusion that arose from the initial translation. Judas and Jesus in this text are obviously literary devices, used by our unknown author allegorically to illustrate larger concepts. Making the claim National Geographic made with the initial publication, that there are teachings of Jesus similar to the Canonical Gospels in *The Gospel of Judas*, or even teachings similar to other Gnostic Christian texts, is misguided.³⁶ We may never learn who composed this text, or for whom it was intended, or most importantly what this text means, if we examine it through the lens of New Testament higher criticism.

Now as previously stated, we do in fact have historical sources that mentioned a Gospel of Judas. St Irenaeus of Lyon writing in 180 A.D., mentions a *Gospel of Judas* in his work *Against the Heresies*. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was the last living disciple of John the Theologian. In addition to writing a compendium of heretical teachings, Irenaeus also made clear how important the concept of Apostolic Succession was in preserving traditional Christian teachings by tracing a line between himself and Polycarp. The role of the bishop in Christianity is important in deciding matters of doctrinal significance. Hence Irenaeus' need to address heresy.

In *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus mentions "others" in addition to Gnostics and heretical groups. These "others," according to him, "declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons are

³⁶ Most of the initial secondary literature takes a literal tone, and they discuss the contents of *The Gospel of Judas* as it relates to the teachings of Jesus. The *Gospel* has more in common with Plato than with Christ, given the narrative structure of the document. To be specific, the works of Elaine Pagels, Karen King, and Bart Ehrman, give *The Gospel of Judas* the standard treatment of higher criticism.

related to themselves.”³⁷ He goes on: “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.”³⁸ So all the villains in the Bible are related and are actually creatures of the “Power above.” And these “others” are hated by the God of Israel, but are protected by Sophia, who is wisdom personified by the serpent in the Book of Genesis, who keeps them safe. St Irenaeus goes on to say: “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.”³⁹ Here we have our first historical mention of *The Gospel of Judas*, with authorship being attributed to people (“others” is plural) who revere, among others, Cain, the first murderer.

Tertullian, the first important Latin Christian apologist, also mentioned the Cainites and their connection to Judas. It seems that this author draws his inspiration to some extent from St. Irenaeus, as their accounts are almost identical, although Tertullian writes more extensively as to the reason the Cainites revere Judas:

They who assert this likewise defend the traitor Judas, telling us that he is admirable and great, because of the advantages he is vaunted to have conferred on mankind; for some of them think that thanksgiving is to be rendered to Judas on this account: viz., Judas, they say, observing that Christ wished to subvert the truth, betrayed Him, in order that there might be no possibility of truth’s being subverted. And others thus dispute against them, and say: Because the powers of this world were unwilling that Christ should suffer, lest through His

³⁷ St. Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies* 180 A.D.) chapter 31 paragraph 1.

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103131.htm>

³⁸ *Against the Heresies* 31.1 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103131.htm>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

death salvation should be prepared for mankind, he, consulting for the salvation of mankind, betrayed Christ, in order that there might be no possibility at all of the salvation being impeded, which *was* being impeded through the Virtues which were opposing Christ's passion; and thus, through the passion of Christ, there might be no possibility of the salvation of mankind being retarded.⁴⁰

Tertullian does not mention a *Gospel of Judas*, but the association between Cain and Judas and the betrayal is important. Tertullian's writings are important because they show an emerging discussion among the Fathers both East and West, about the ideas surrounding the betrayal that informs the discourse about *The Gospel of Judas*.

Like Irenaeus and Tertullian, St. Epiphanius of Salamis wrote in the fourth century about the Cainites and *The Gospel of Judas*, comprising the final word from the ear of the Church Fathers about the nature of this sect. Epiphanius' exhaustive work entitled the *Panarion* (breadbasket), follows the same narrative structure in his description about the Cainites, which would indicate he was familiar with one or both of Irenaeus' and Tertullian's works. He writes:

Cainites say that Cain is the scion of the stronger power and the authority above; so, moreover, are Esau, Korah and his companions, and the Sodomites. But Abel is the scion of the weaker power. They acknowledge all of these as worthy of their praise and kin to themselves. For they take pride in their kinship with Cain, the Sodomites, Esau and Korah. And these, they say, represent the perfect knowledge from on high. Therefore, they say, though the maker of this world made it his business to destroy them, he could do them no harm; they were hidden from him and translated to the aeon on high, from which the stronger power comes. For Wisdom allowed them to approach her because they were her own. And they say that because of this Judas had found out all about them. For they claim him too as kin and regard him as possessed of superior knowledge, so that they even cite a short work in his name which they call a Gospel of Judas.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Against Marcion*, Chapter 2 "Chapter II—Ophites, Cainites, Sethites." https://st-takla.org/books/en/ecf/003/0030699.html#fn_8369

⁴¹ Epiphanius of Salamis: *Panarion Against the Cainites. Part 38*. Lines 1:1-1:5 https://web.archive.org/web/20170916133936/http://www.masseiana.org/panarion_bk1.htm#38.

Epiphanius goes on to write about what he has heard was the motivation for why Judas betrayed Christ. He writes, “For some say that Christ was betrayed by Judas because Christ was wicked, and wanted to pervert the provisions of the Law.”⁴² In the next line Epiphanius tells us a conflicting motivation for the role of Judas in the Gospel: “But others say, ‘No, he betrayed him even though he was good, in accordance with the heavenly knowledge. For the archons knew,’ they say, ‘that if Christ were surrendered to the cross the weaker power would be drained’.”⁴³ The use of the word *archons* is important, because in the text we have the secret Gnostic revelation mentioning the “archons” and their relationship to Judas. Epiphanius’ text goes on to give a very interesting accounting of the relationship between Jesus and Judas regarding the infamous eighth chapter of *The Gospel of St. John*, a chapter often cited as foundational to Christian Anti-Semitism.

How organized and affiliated these Cainites were with likeminded individuals, we do not know. Outside the writing of the Church Fathers, little is said about this sect. If the so-called Cainites existed as an identifiable group, if they had places of worship, rituals, and texts outside *The Gospel of Judas*, we do not know. But from Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius’ comments about whom they revered, Cain and Esau, Korah and the inhabitants of Sodom, and “all such persons,” what can indeed be deduced is that there existed, and as a matter of fact continue to exist people and ideas of a countercultural stripe with an admiration for a non-traditional way of being in the world. The Cainites and *The Gospel of*

⁴² Epiphanius of Salamis: *Panarion Against the Cainites. Part 38. Line 3:3.*

https://web.archive.org/web/20170916133936/http://www.masseiana.org/panarion_bk1.htm#38.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Line 3:4

Judas can be best understood not from a literalistic historicizing point of view, but more accurately by examining the ideas found in their texts. Ideas that travel through time, and continuously inform human consciousness. Ideas that wax and wane depending on the historical epoch. One such idea, found in *The Gospel of Judas*, is that of condemnation. How does humanity respond to a sense of being condemned by a powerful force? *The Gospel of Judas* can tell us.

It has been pointed out, not without merit, that Christian Scripture and the Tradition of the Church are not reliable scholarly sources that discuss what Gnosticism stood for, owing to the polemical nature of those sources. The discovery and publication of actual Gnostic texts has been most helpful for a less theological and polemical perspective, and for a more historical understanding of the phenomenon.

To provide examples, fragments of Gnostic works were published in the writings of the Fathers and come down to us unblemished in this way. There are also Gnostics texts that survived the polemical attacks and efforts at censorship from the Church. Among these are *The Acts of John*.⁴⁴ English historian and theosophist, G.R.S. Mead was also instrumental in bringing Gnostic texts to the public in the late 19th and early 20th century. Among his works are *The Hymn of Jesus* and *The Mystery of the Cross*. Mead was also the first to bring to light the first Gnostic Gospel entitled *The Pistis Sophia*. Meade was also the first scholar to raise the issue that the Church Fathers have shaped the thinking on Gnosticism. He termed publication of *The Pistis Sophia*, “ ‘The Gnosis according to its Friends,’ in distinction from

⁴⁴ The text is edited and translated by M.R. James: <http://gnosis.org/library/actjohn.htm>

what previously used to be our only sources, the polemical writings of the heresiological Fathers, which set forth 'The Gnosis according to its Foes'."⁴⁵ Mead and M.R. James' texts, and many others have been termed classic Gnostic texts. It is also important to point out that Manichean sources from antiquity were also published around the same time as the classic Gnostic texts. It is also worth noting that the Mandaeans of present-day Iraq and Iran represent Gnosticism as a living tradition. The Mandaeans venerate John the Baptist, practice ritual baptism, and maintains a worldview that has many of the critical inputs of Gnosticism. Manda, the word the Mandaeans take their name from, is the Aramaic word for wisdom and is thus a cognate of the Greek word *Gnosis*.

Modern Revival

Another very important and less examined source for the modern revival of Gnostic ideas (a source that helped popularize the study and conceptualization of Gnosticism during the twentieth century) are the writings of Carl Jung. Jung, along with Sigmund Freud, revolutionized the study of the human consciousness and they stand out as two of the most titanic figures of twentieth century intellectual history. Less well known, is Jung's inspiration from, and affinity for Gnosticism. Beginning in 1913, Jung reported that he began to have visions, and experience strange dreams. These visions and dreams deeply affected Jung. He recorded them in his journal and they would influence his intellectual development and

⁴⁵ <http://gnosis.org/library/psophint.htm> "We have in the contents of the Askew, Bruce and Berlin Codices a rich material which hands on to us valuable direct information concerning what I have called 'The Gnosis according to its Friends,' in distinction from what previously used to be our only sources, the polemical writings of the heresiological Fathers, which set forth 'The Gnosis according to its Foes.'"

inspire him for the rest of his life. His *Red Book*, published in full in 2009, tells of his visions and the impact they had on his development. Jung's recounting of his subconscious experiences is titled "Seven Sermons to the Dead" and they are published in the *Red Book*. Jung composed the Seven Sermons under the name Basilides of Alexandria, a Gnostic figure from the second century known to the Church Fathers. A detailed description of the highly esoteric and symbolic work is well beyond the scope of this essay. But what is important to note is that Gnosticism was key in the intellectual development of a figure that would both help shape and contribute to the academic study of Gnosticism, and also have a profound impact on our understanding of the human psyche in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁴⁶

In addition to the texts and figures mentioned above, which were highly influential in the development of the theosophical society, the New Age movement later in the twentieth century, and modern psychotherapy, it was the discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi library that fundamentally changed our understanding of Gnosticism. In a peculiar way, the Nag Hammadi texts also changed the popular and academic understanding of Christianity as a whole. Discovered in Egypt in 1945, and finally translated in the 1970s, this collection of over 50 texts contained numerous Gnostic Gospels. Influential texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Philip*, as well as *The Gospel of Truth*, are a part of the

⁴⁶ See Carl Jung, *Seven Sermons to the Dead* authored by Jung in the name of the famous gnostic Basilides of Alexandria, as well as Jung's *Red Book*. Giovanni Filoramo, an Italian scholar, observed: "*Jung's reflections had long been immersed in the thought of the ancient Gnostics to such an extent that he considered them the virtual discoverers of 'depth psychology' . . . ancient Gnosis, albeit in its form of universal religion, in a certain sense prefigured, and at the same time helped to clarify, the nature of Jungian spiritual therapy*"; <http://gnosis.org/gnostic-jung/>; <http://www.gnosis.org/library/7Sermons.htm>

Nag Hammadi library. The discovery and publication of this collection has been highly influential in not just academic circles, but also in popular culture as well. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library rank as the two major discoveries of the twentieth century that inform our understanding of the world in which Jesus Christ lived and how his movement developed.

Polemic

The Gospel of Judas is in its essence, a polemic against the rituals of early Christianity. Despite what has previously been said about this text, and despite the overall public perception, a careful reading, separated from the initial framing, clearly shows the author was an opponent of the earliest rituals and traditions of Christianity. This is important because despite claims to the contrary from the National Geographic team and others who wrote about the Gospel after it was published, all we can reasonably deduce from *The Gospel of Judas*, is that early Christianity had enemies eager to unleash a rhetorical attack against the developing practice of the religion. Three examples from the text demonstrate the polemical nature of *The Gospel of Judas*:

- 1) The first occurs in the opening lines of the text, when Jesus laughs as the disciples are performing the Eucharist.
- 2) The second example occurs when the disciples ask Jesus to interpret their dream.
- 3) And the third is the gnostic revelation Jesus gives to Judas.

Why these three examples demonstrate the polemical nature of *The Gospel of Judas* can be briefly summed up by saying that the author of the text is attacking the most important

Christian ritual, that of the Eucharist, as well as the most important source of authority for Christian teaching, apostolic succession. And finally, the gnostic revelation from Jesus to Judas undermines the Christian notion of one God who created the universe.

The most important ritual in Christianity, throughout the ages, is the Eucharist. Eucharist, from Greek meaning “thanksgiving,” was used in the earliest Christian texts when discussing the Passover meal Christ and the apostles had before the Crucifixion. The synoptic Gospels, as well as St. Paul all use this word when describing what has been called, The Lord’s Supper, The Last Supper, or Holy Communion. In traditional Christian liturgies, in the East and the West, the Eucharist is the central and final act of the worship service. The faithful engage in the ritual to consume the literal body and blood of Christ. The earliest Christians, as well as Christians in the present who engage in sacramental worship, participate in this practice in one form or another. To attack this practice, as *The Gospel of Judas* does, is to attack a fundamental practice of the religion.⁴⁷

“When he (Jesus) observed his disciples gathered together, seated, performing the Eucharist over the bread, he laughed.”⁴⁸ This laughter seems to confuse and anger the disciples: “Master, why are you laughing at our Eucharist? Or what have we done? This is

⁴⁷ See, 1st Corinthians 11:23-27. Matthew 26:26-28. Didache (1st Century A.D.) Chapters 9-10; <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm> St. Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.) First Apology Chapters 65-66; <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm> St. Irenaeus (130-202 A.D.) Against the Heresies Book V Chapter 2; <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103502.htm>. These sources, arranged chronologically, pre-date or are contemporaneous with the assumed Greek original of *The Gospel of Judas* mentioned by St. Irenaeus. They demonstrate the importance of the Eucharist and show from the earliest days of the faith this ritual was practiced by Christians.

⁴⁸ Johanna Brankaer, Bas Van Os, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2019) P. 66-67 33-25 to 34-5.

what is right?”⁴⁹ Jesus answers them, and He says: “I am not laughing at you. And you are not doing this by your will. Rather it is through this that your God will receive praise. They said, Master, you really are the son of our God. Jesus said to them, how do you know me? Truly I say to you, no race of the humans among you will know me.”⁵⁰ The text indicates that the Eucharist is a practice the disciples engage in, to worship, “their God”. The Jesus of *The Gospel of Judas* suggests the Eucharistic practice of the disciples keeps them from knowing who He really is. The textual metaphor used by the author is clear, the Eucharistic practice of the proto-orthodox church is silly. Jesus laughs at it, and it prevents knowledge of who Jesus is and clarity regarding his mission. Since the author offers nothing in the text in terms of what the disciples should be doing, in a ritualistic sense, to bring them closer to Jesus or the real god, we can conclude the purpose of this section is simply to criticize the central Christian ritual of the Eucharist.

The second example from the text to demonstrate the polemical nature of *The Gospel of Judas*, ties into the first. Whereas in the first example the ritual was criticized, in the second those offering the ritual are the author’s target. The “disciples” mentioned in the text, seem to be confused about exactly whom their rituals are honoring. The Eucharist it seems, separates the disciples from Jesus: “It is through this that your God will receive praise. Master, you are the son of our God. Jesus said to them, how do you know me? Truly I say to you, no race of the humans among you will know me.”⁵¹ We can see that the author,

⁴⁹ Brankaer, Van Os, *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019) P. 67 34.5.

⁵⁰ Ibid. P. 67 34.15.

⁵¹ Ibid. P. 67 34.5-15.

speaking through Jesus in the text, views their offering as vain and misguided. This contempt from Jesus angers the disciples, which leads to Judas being separated from them: “Why has this confusion lead to this anger?... Let the one who is strong among you, humans, bring forward the perfect human and stand before my face...But their spirits could not dare to stand before him, except Judas Iscariot.”⁵² We are thus told that the disciples are unworthy because of their humanity, and misguided about the truth because of their rituals.

Once separated, the text tells us that:

Jesus came to them another day. They said to him, Master, we have seen you in a dream... they said we have seen a great house with a great altar in it and twelve men, whom we say are priests, and a name. And a crowd stood devotedly at that altar until the priests finished receiving the offerings. We too stood in devotion. Jesus said, what are the people like? And they said some fast for two weeks; others sacrifice their own children, others their wives... Others sleep with men, others committed works of murder, still others commit a multitude of lawlessness. And the people who stand over the altar invoke your name. And as they are involved in all their sacrificial works, that altar is filled. And after they said this, they were silent, because they were confused.⁵³

Jesus then interprets the dream, to the detriment of the disciples. He is baffled by the disciple’s confusion about the dream. He thinks they should know what the dream means:

Truly I say to you, all the priests who stand over the altar are invoking my name. And again I say to you, my name was written on that house of the races of the stars by the human races. And they have planted in my name, fruitless trees in a shameful manner. Jesus said to them ‘It is you who receive the offerings for the altar that you have seen. That is the God you serve. And the twelve people that you have seen, they are you. And the beasts that were brought in are the sacrifices that you have seen, that is, the crowd you lead astray... Behold, God has received your sacrifice from the hands of a priest, that is, the minister of error. But the Lord who commands is the one who is the Lord over the all’.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid. P.67-68 34.25-35.10.

⁵³ Ibid. P. 75-77 38.5-39.5.

⁵⁴ Ibid. P. 77-77 39.5-40.25.

We have here, very clearly and bluntly, the figure of Jesus being used to condemn the twelve disciples. Or, more accurately the church of the twelve disciples.

The beginning and middle portions of this gospel are concerned with criticizing the disciples and their rituals. There is a historical reason for it, and it relates to how traditional Christianity developed. “In like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as the Sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the apostles. Apart from these, there is no Church.”⁵⁵ This pronouncement attributed to Ignatius of Antioch — a second century bishop who we are told by Christian Tradition that he was a disciple of Polycarp, who according to the same Tradition was himself a disciple of John the Theologian —⁵⁶ demonstrates at an early stage in the development of Christian theology the centrality of the bishop and church hierarchy. The source from which the hierarchy gets its authority rests upon a concept called Apostolic succession. From the earliest Christian Scriptures, it is stated that Jesus taught and instructed the twelve apostles. Christ’s apostles, had disciples, those disciples instructed other disciples, and so on. St. Paul’s writings also demonstrate this process of establishing churches in various locations, and then designating individuals within a hierarchy to instruct the faithful. Within this process, over the centuries, there developed the Holy Tradition of the church. Tradition in this case, being used in the sense of giving a teaching or passing along instructions from one person to another, perhaps over a long period of time. The Church

⁵⁵ St. Ignatius of Antioch. Epistle to the Trallians Chapter 3. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0106.htm>

⁵⁶ St. John the Theologian (circa 6-90- A.D.) is the John who eponymously composed *The Gospel of John*, *The Epistles of John*, and *The Apocalypse of John in the New Testament*.

developed this sense of tradition, and it continues in the Sacramental Churches in the present day. St. Ignatius' episcopacy occurred at the same time the Greek original of *The Gospel of Judas* was composed. The metaphorical attack on the "disciples" in the text of *The Gospel of Judas* should not be overlooked, because the contemporaneous historical development of the administrative structure of the Church was occurring at the same time.

The third example of the polemical nature of *The Gospel of Judas* is the gnostic revelation Jesus gives to Judas. In this section of the text, Judas has been separated from the twelve disciples after he correctly identified the aeon where Jesus was from. Judas tells Jesus: "I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of Barbelo."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid. P.69 35.15-20.

PART 2

Judas Goes to Rehab

It should come as no surprise that the National Geographic team, as well as the first writers who produced secondary works on *The Gospel of Judas*, translated and framed a discourse around the text in the way that they did. Sensationalism was used throughout the twentieth century to drum up interest in other archaeological discoveries, namely the Qumran Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts. These are indeed major historical discoveries, as is *The Gospel of Judas*. Our knowledge of Roman Judea, early rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, as well as Gnosticism, are enhanced by the discoveries. But some of the highly speculative claims from the National Geographic team as well as fantastic pronouncements in the documentary about the impact of the gospel on the study of early Christianity, are simply hype. Hype that was used very effectively in order to sell books and gain an audience. *The Gospel of Judas* was a big financial success for those initially involved in bringing the text to the public's attention. It remains that the legendary thirty pieces of silver, albeit dramatically adjusted for inflation, are still an important part of any discussion related to Judas Iscariot.

In addition to the financial incentive that motivated the publication of *The Gospel of Judas*, we can rightly assume that there were also other considerations for how the text would be presented to the public. During the twentieth century, numerous authors, artists, and filmmakers created works that featured an alternative narrative, or hermeneutical discussion that featured Judas front and center in a new way. Jorge Luis Borges, G.I. Gurdjieff, Nikos Kazantzakis, the Broadway hit *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and Martin Scorsese's film version of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, sought to portray Judas differently from the Biblical account,

and even as an enlightened disciple who was the closest to Jesus. These alternative accounts of Judas no doubt influenced the translators and the public and helped foster an intellectual environment where alternative versions of familiar stories, true or not, could be easily and to a certain extent, unquestionably digested.

The 1944 short story, “Three Versions of Judas,” featured in *Ficciones* by Jorge Luis Borges, presents the Biblical villain in an almost identical way to National Geographic’s *Gospel of Judas*. The story begins by mentioning how Nils Runeberg, Borges’s protagonist in the fictional story, was similar to the Gnostic hero Carpocrates, and could have directed a “Gnostic Conventicle” had Runeberg not had the misfortune of being born in the twentieth century.⁵⁸ In “Three Version of Judas” Runeberg composes two works entitled Kristus Och Judas and Dem hemlige Fraulsaren. The story says that following the criticism from his conclusions in *Kristus Och Judas*, Runeberg felt the need to clarify what he had meant regarding Judas’ role in the betrayal. In his works, Runeberg concludes that “Not one thing, but everything tradition attributes to Judas Iscariot is false.”⁵⁹ Runeberg goes on to write that for Jesus, not realizing Judas would betray him could not have been a scriptural error. It could not just have been happenstance. Therefore, “the treachery of Judas was not accidental; it was a predestined deed which has its mysterious place in the economy of the redemption.”⁶⁰ Runeberg goes on to say that “The Word, when it was made flesh, passed from ubiquity into space, from maternity into history, from blessedness without limit to

⁵⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*- Part 2 Artifices *Three Versions of Judas* (New York, Grove Press, 1962) P. 151.

⁵⁹ Borges, *Ficciones* P. 152.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* P. 152.

mutation and death; in order to correspond to such a sacrifice, it was necessary that a man, as representative of all men, make a suitable sacrifice. Judas Iscariot was that man.”⁶¹ And he also states: “Judas, alone among the apostles, intuited the secret divinity and the terrible purpose of Jesus.”⁶²

It is likely Borges was familiar with St. Irenaeus’ chapter in *Against the Heresies*, in which the author describes the Cainites. In fact, *Against the Heresies* is mentioned in opening paragraph of *Three Versions of Judas*.⁶³ This would explain the similarities between Borges’ work and National Geographic’s *The Gospel of Judas*. But in an unexpected way, Borges’ story presages the National Geographic rendition of the gospel. The influence of Borges, described as possibly “the most important writer of the twentieth century”, and “Three Versions of Judas” should not be overlooked in any discussion on the modern cultural reevaluation of Judas Iscariot.⁶⁴ To make the link to *The Gospel of Judas* even stronger, it needs to be stated that Marvin Meyer, one of the National Geographic translators, gave a talk specifically about Borges’ story and its similarity to the Gospel. According to this scholar, “If Borges were alive today, writing in light of the discovery and publication of *The Gospel of Judas*, he might substitute one or more of our names in the place of that of Nils Runeberg.”⁶⁵

Another influential voice in the chorus of the twentieth century Judas reform movement was G.I. Gurdjieff. It could be said that Gurdjieff was more important than Borges

⁶¹ Ibid. P. 152.

⁶² Ibid. p. 152-153.

⁶³ Ibid. P. 151

⁶⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140902-the-20th-centurys-best-writer>

⁶⁵ https://www.chapman.edu/Wilkinson/religious-studies/_files/marv-meyer/after-borges-nov2008.pdf

in reevaluating Judas in the cultural sphere. This is because Gurdjieff's student, P.D. Ouspensky influenced the English scholar G.R.S Mead. Mead's work helped to popularize Gnostic texts such as *The Pistis Sophia*, early in the twentieth century, well before the publication of the Nag Hammadi library. Be that as it may, Gurdjieff himself attempted to develop a synthesis between eastern and western esoteric spirituality. This synthesis focused on Gurdjieff's idea that humanity needed to wake up from a spiritual sleep. He called his concept, the fourth way. Gurdjieff regarded traditional religious movements as aiding in humanity's sleep state. His ideas seeded the theosophical societies spirituality in the early twentieth century and paved the way for many of the new religious movements that gained popularity after the countercultural revolution in the 1960s.

Gurdjieff's work, *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, published in 1950, features a chapter where the narrator, Beelzebub, recounts a teaching concerning "This devoted and favorite Apostle initiated by Jesus Christ himself,"⁶⁶ who is of course Judas. Beelzebub goes on to say:

and it was just here that this Judas, now a saint and formerly the inseparable and devoted helper of Jesus Christ and who is 'hated' and 'cursed' owing to the naive nonreasonableness of the peculiar three-brain beings of your planet, manifested himself and rendered his great objective service for which terrestrial three-brain beings of all subsequent generations should be grateful.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* Book II, Chapter 38, P. 739-742. 2nd paragraph. <https://pelicandiaris.wordpress.com/pelican-blog/nest/g-i-gurdjieff-%E2%80%9Cbeelzebubs-tales-to-his-grandson%E2%80%9D/>

⁶⁷ Gurdjieff *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* Book II, Chapter 38, P. 739-742 9th paragraph. <https://pelicandiaris.wordpress.com/pelican-blog/nest/g-i-gurdjieff-%E2%80%9Cbeelzebubs-tales-to-his-grandson%E2%80%9D/>

Gurdjieff was a science fiction writer as much as he was a spiritualist. The “three brained-beings” we can assume is a metaphorical turn of phrase for humanity asleep. He goes on: “that about this Judas now a saint- thanks to whom alone such a blessed hearth of tranquility from their desolate existence had arisen and existed for them for twenty centuries- there has been crystallized in the presences of the beings of all subsequent generations such an unprecedented unjust representation.”⁶⁸

In addition to Borges and Gurdjieff, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* was another attempt to portray Judas in a fashion that was different from that of the Gospels and Christian tradition. Although not as inverted as Borges and Gurdjieff’s Judas, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was innovative in that the play and film used Judas as a narrator, and gave the character a motivation not as nefarious as the accusations in the Canonical Gospels. Judas is featured prominently in the plot of *Jesus Christ Superstar* as he questions Jesus and tries to focus his attention on the Roman occupation. Judas tries to come to grips, and understand what Jesus was really about. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a huge financial success and a project that changed cultural attitudes about the role of Judas Iscariot.

Similar to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, though more somber and certainly much less melodic, were the book and subsequent movie adaptation of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis’ 1955 novel, adapted for the screen by Martin Scorsese, is about Jesus Christ and emphasizes his psychological struggles, as he realizes he is the Messiah. The movie also features an ongoing dialogue between Jesus and Judas Iscariot, and

⁶⁸ Ibid. paragraph 13.

shows the special relationship they have during the lead up to Jesus' crucifixion. A pivotal moment in the film happens when Jesus, played by Willem Dafoe, enters Jerusalem with his disciples and begins to purge the temple. This story is briefly related in the Bible, but the film uses it to show the choice Jesus has between launching a violent revolution against the Roman occupiers, or dying on the cross as a sacrifice to save humanity. As Jesus and his followers are about to enter the temple, he stops and sees blood flowing out of his hands. He turns from his advance to the temple and realizes he must die on the cross. His closest follower, Judas Iscariot, played in the film by Harvey Keitel, confronts him about why he turned from the path of revolution against the Romans. When Jesus explains to him that he must endure the cross, he then tells Judas that he too has role to play in this choice, he must betray him. Jesus tells him that his role, given from God, is a more difficult choice than what Jesus must endure, Judas has to sacrifice his friend. This sequence occurs away from the other apostles, who are depicted in the movie as truly clueless about Christ's purpose, and who also do not realize what Judas' mission really was. Judas in the movie is shown as insightful, closer to Jesus than anyone, and in the know about the divine drama playing out around him. This popular and controversial film, more than anything else, helped lay the groundwork for National Geographic's *Gospel of Judas*, down to the similar ways in which Harvey Keitel's red headed Judas echoed the red headed one in the documentary. Historically Judas has unquestionably been depicted this way several times, but this similar detail between the Scorsese film and the documentary should not be overlooked in a critical evaluation of the gospel.

The Last Temptation of Christ, like “Three Versions of Judas”, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, helped to rehabilitate the image of Judas Iscariot in the twentieth century and fostered speculation as to some hidden esoteric meaning behind Judas’ betrayal. These works and others also influenced the National Geographic team that initially translated and publicized *The Gospel of Judas* in 2006. We know this because in the introduction to the first edition, the author Marvin Meyer tells us so. Meyer names among others *Three Versions of Judas* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, noting that “The literature on Judas is rich” and that in *Jesus Christ Superstar* “Judas Iscariot nearly steals the show, and his presence and music provide a more sympathetic view of the depth of his devotion to Jesus”⁶⁹. This aspect of *The Gospel of Judas* is important because it speaks to the obvious fact that certain members of the National Geographic team’s minds were already made up about how this text would be translated and presented to the public. This sentiment is echoed by Professor April DeConick who said in a question-and-answer session cited in *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*:

I have been truly amazed at the number of people who have jumped on this bandwagon. One of my colleagues upon hearing my concerns at a conference stood up and said, ‘I just don’t see why Judas can’t be good. We need a good Judas.’ This really stopped me in my tracks and took this discourse to an entirely new level for me.⁷⁰

The initial translation of *The Gospel of Judas* was shocking. Equally important in describing how *The Gospel of Judas* came to the public, is the existence of a prior intellectual

⁶⁹ Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C., National Geographic, 2006) P. 3.

⁷⁰ April DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York, Continuum, 2007) P. 231.

and cultural project to rehabilitate Judas. Most interestingly, for one reason or another, the public unquestioningly accepted this inaccurate description of *The Gospel of Judas*. For their part, members of the team who are still alive all these years later, despite overwhelming evidence that their conclusions are not correct, have refused to accept the fact that their translation is not accepted, and that they overstated their case regarding the meaning of the text. Perhaps they are still too busy with other projects to trouble themselves with a mea culpa. In his defense, Judas at least had the decency to repent for his misdeeds.

Conclusion

What is clear from *The Gospel of Judas* is that the author, speaking through the Jesus character, is voicing his hatred of the rituals of the emerging orthodox church. The text also makes clear that the Disciples of Christ, meaning the twelve Apostles, are condemned and leading people astray. Try as hard as they might, commit as many acts of asceticism and worship as they will, and believe they're doing it in the name of Jesus, the author of *The Gospel of Judas* wants the reader to know that the emerging Church, and those who follow it, are condemned. In addition to the anti-Christian polemic, what is clear from the text is that because the disciples are “from the race of the humans,”⁷¹ they, and therefore humanity, are condemned.

The author of *The Gospel of Judas* is not just a critic of the emerging Church, its rituals, and hierarchy. He is a critic of humanity as a whole. Jesus in the text could be

⁷¹ Johanna Brankaer, Bas Van Os *The Gospel of Judas* (Oxford, Oxford University press, 2019) P. 67 line 16.

speaking with the disciples or Judas separately. Yet a constant refrain from Jesus is that human beings cannot avoid condemnation: “The souls of the human race will die.”⁷² “Jesus answered and said, your star has led you astray, Judas. For indeed no one of human mortal birth is worthy to enter the house that you have seen.”⁷³ Also: “Come (Judas) and I will teach you about... which no human will see.”⁷⁴ What exactly the good news is, this remains unclear in *The Gospel of Judas*. After all, *The Gospel of Judas* is not really a gospel, that is, a text bearing good news. It is in fact a polemic designed to scoff at Christianity. Historically, this text was an allegorical critique which creatively, and cynically, used the familiar figures in Christianity to lampoon the religion from the inside. When this text was published in 2006, it also took on another meaning.

The story of the publication of *The Gospel of Judas* is an example of what happens when scholarship takes a backseat to hype. For the sake of that hype, a text was rushed to print before an academic consensus could be reached on the translation, a text which we would do well to keep in mind was most likely stolen, and is to this day in Switzerland, despite being the rightful property of the Egyptian people. This text tells us nothing new about the historical development of Christianity, except that it had fourth century enemies with creative imaginations. Rather, it tells us much more about the current state of scholarship on the history of Christianity. In the end, the way this text came to light,

⁷² Ibid. P. 85 Lines 15-16.

⁷³ Ibid. P 89 Lines 12-15.

⁷⁴ Ibid. P 93 Lines 2-4.

ironically seems to align with what St. Irenaeus said about it back in the second century:

“They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ St. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Book 1 chapter 31
<https://archive.org/details/SaintIrenaeusAgainstHeresiesComplete/page/n65/mode/2up>

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