

THE

GOSPEL

OF

JUDAS

THE GOOD NEWS OR THE BAD NEWS?

**WRITTEN BY CHRISTIAN NIELSEN
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**ADVISOR (HISTORY) – BRIAN P. MCGUIRE
ADVISOR (PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE STUDIES) – AKSEL HAANING**

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Introduction

On Easter of 2006 the National Geographic Society launched a website, published a book and held a press conference announcing the publication of the much hyped *Gospel of Judas*, which had been heroically salvaged by the National Geographic Society, the Maecenas Foundation and Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos, a business woman with a fascination of ancient books. The *Gospel of Judas* is one of five texts collected in a book now known as the Codex Tchacos. The National Geographic told a terrible story about the Journey of the codex. It had through the years been handled by people spurred on by greed and with very little knowledge of how to preserve ancient papyrus. This had led to the codex being kept in a bank vault, and even in a freezer because the owner at the time thought it would keep the moisture of the papyri from evaporating, resulting in the tragic crumbling of many of the pages upon thawing the codex, making the reconstruction, analysis and reading of the codex nigh on impossible.¹

The National Geographic Society brought in the assistance of a number of renowned scholars in order to reconstruct as much of this codex as possible, and the work of placing fragments is still ongoing. This is all well and good. However, it is not unproblematic that an organization like National Geographic Society has exclusive access to a find like the Codex Tchacos. The National Geographic Society has a financial interest in the publication of the codex and in the codex generating the largest profit possible. The scholars solicited by the National Geographic Society all had to sign a non-disclosure contract preventing other scholars to study the papyrus and also preventing scholarly discussion and peer-review prior to the publication. This could lead one to be wary of the interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* initially presented by the scholars in question and the sensational hype performed by the National Geographic Society could be suspected to be for financial purposes.

That being said, without the financial strength of the National Geographic and Mrs. Nussberger-Tchacos, the codex might very likely suffered much further damage and

¹ For a detailed account of the journey of the *Gospel of Judas*, see Krosney, Herbert, *The Lost Gospel* Washington D.C. 2006

possibly be lost for us forever. So we should perhaps be thankful and critical at the same time of The National Geographic Society and Mrs. Nussberger-Tchacos. Thanking them for saving this fascinating codex and criticizing them for keeping it away from the scientific community for financial purposes. No doubt, the discussion is a complex one.

The main reason for the immense hype created about the codex is due to its containing the *Gospel of Judas*. Could it be that a whole new perspective on Judas Iscariot was presented in the text? Would we see the life of Jesus through the eyes of Judas? Would we get an account of the life of Jesus and his disciples that would give us insight on the historical Jesus and especially Judas that we had not seen before? According to the hype prior to the publication the world would be surprised, maybe even shocked about the contents of the *Gospel of Judas*.

Immediately following the publication and initial interpretation and translation of the *Gospel of Judas* there was a lot of commotion and discussion in the scientific community. Numerous books saw the light of day very soon, some supporting the National Geographic scholars' stance, others criticizing it vigilantly. This led to the much needed scrutiny of the text by different scholars so that the debate could be on a level and tone that was impartial and matter-of-fact.

I had the great pleasure of attending a conference on the *Gospel of Judas*, hosted by Rice University in Houston, Texas. The Codex Judas Congress, as it was dubbed took place in March of 2008 and was attended by scholars from both sides of the fence, so to speak. Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, who had been hired by the National Geographic Society, were among the attendees and the atmosphere of the congress was one of working together towards a common goal, that is constructive discussion and debating about the Gospel of Judas. In this paper I will take up the scholarly discussions of the *Gospel of Judas*, and provide an interpretation of how I think the text is really saying. I wish to thank all the participants of the Codex Judas Congress for their great forthcoming attitude towards myself and my questions and for the great conversations and discussions I had the opportunity to have at the congress. A very special thank you goes out to Dr. April DeConick for hosting the event and for getting this Danish student out of troublesome situations on his first visit to the United States.

Formulation of the problem

In this paper I want to examine what the *Gospel of Judas* says. I aim to provide an interpretation of the text. I will in the course of discussing the *Gospel of Judas* make use of the scholarly discussion that followed the publishing of the text and that is still ongoing. It is my goal to show through the text itself and other texts written by people belonging to the same school of thought as the author (or authors) of the text, what I think the purpose of writing the *Gospel of Judas* was.

What is the nature of Judas in the *Gospel of Judas*? What does the author (or authors) want to say in the *Gospel of Judas*?

The Gospel of Judas

The Gospel of Judas is spanning twenty-six pages and is the third, and longest, text of the Codex Tchacos. It was written in Coptic, but is in all probability a translation from a Greek original.² The title of the text is found at the end of the text itself, as is the case with *The Letter of Peter to Philip* and *James* which are, along with a text given the provisional title *Book of Allogenes*, also found in the Codex Tchacos. The pages of The Gospel of Judas have suffered substantial damage, but thanks to the painstaking work of Professors Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, Marvin Meyer and others approximately 85% of the text is preserved, and the work of placing new fragments is still ongoing. This means that there in the pages of the Gospel of Judas still are some lacunae. A lacuna is a portion of text that is missing or entirely illegible. Thus are there parts of the text we cannot yet read and may not ever be able to reconstruct. That being said, the majority of the text is available for us to read, translate, interpret and discuss. Many of such translations, interpretations and discussions have been put forth by a wide range of scholars and we will take a closer look at those in later chapters.

That carbon-14 dating of the Codex Tchacos shows that the physical text in hand dates with 90 percent certainty to 280CE +/- 60 years.³ The Codex was then written sometime in the second half of the third century or the first half of the fourth century CE. The earliest testimony we have of a Gospel of Judas is from Irenaeus, a second century Bishop of Lyons. Around 180 CE he wrote a large tome in defence of apostolic Christianity, or maybe rather as an attack on all other variants of Christianity, called *Against Heresies* (*Adversus Haereses*). This testimony bears further witness to the assumption that *The Gospel of Judas* found in Codex Tchacos derives from a Greek original. Irenaeus mentions that he has knowledge of a text bearing the name *Iudae Evangelium*.⁴ This reference appears in a section Irenaeus has designated to refute a form of Christianity called Gnostics. The

² Kasser, Rodolphe et. al., *The Gospel of Judas – Critical Edition*, Washington D.C., 2007, p. 178, proposes linguistic evidence for this.

³ Gathercole, Simon, *The Gospel of Judas*, Oxford, 2007, p. 8

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1 cited in Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 178

subject of the Gnostics will be discussed in the next chapter. In order to make a qualified assumption as to whether the *Gospel of Judas* of Irenaeus is an earlier version of *The Gospel of Judas* found in the Codex Tchacos, we must take a look at what Irenaeus in fact says about the text. In *Adv.Haer. 1.31.1* Irenaeus writes:

They [the Gnostics] declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things [viz. the true role of the Creator God and of Sophia.], and that he alone, knowing the truth as none of the 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 entitle the Gospel of Judas.⁵

We see that Irenaeus is referring to a text in which Judas is taught the truth, as it were, whilst the “others”, presumably the other disciples, were not. Irenaeus’ account also indicates that Judas was fully aware of what he was doing as he betrayed, or handed over, Jesus. These points correlate very well with our version of the *Gospel of Judas* as Judas, in our version, receives private teaching from Jesus, away from the other disciples. Also Jesus tells Judas that he will sacrifice Jesus’ human form.⁶ These correlations make it possible that Irenaeus is referring to our *Gospel of Judas*. On the other hand his account is vague enough to make it possible for it to regard a very different *Gospel of Judas*. A further factor that can count against Irenaeus’ text being a different one from our *Gospel of Judas* is the fact that the section quoted above is included in an account of a school of Gnosticism that regards their members to be descendants of Cain, Esau, Korah and the Sodomites. The version of the *Gospel of Judas* that we find in the Codex Tchacos is attributed to the Sethian (or Classical) Gnostics. Below I will discuss the Sethian characteristics found in *The Gospel of Judas*. However it is not clear whether Irenaeus has actually read the text he is talking about or if his account is based on hearsay. In any case, the only thing that is tying Irenaeus’ account of the *Gospel of Judas* to the Gnostic school he is attempting to refute is the idea

⁵ Quoted from DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, New York, 2007, p. 174

⁶ *The Gospel of Judas* 56,19-20

that they are having notorious villains as main characters in their school of thought, whether it is for Good or Evil. In fact the Sethians did acknowledge that Cain actually was a Power, but he was an Evil Power put onto the Earth by a malevolent Power.⁷ Furthermore we have no knowledge of any other account of a *Gospel of Judas* or other Gospels bearing this title, so it is fair, although not one hundred percent certain, to assume that the text, of whose existence Irenaeus had knowledge, is in fact an earlier version of the text we have to our disposal. Presumably it was written in Greek which was the prevalent language for religious writing in the second century. Thus we can move on in our investigation of *the Gospel of Judas* with the assumption that it was written in the second half of the second century CE, placing it at a very interesting time in the history of Christianity; a time when a wide variety of schools of thought were struggling to be the prevailing form of Christianity. This struggle was ultimately won by the apostolic Christians, who based their authority on apostolic succession, i.e. the teachings and traditions believed to stem from, especially, St. Paul and St. Peter; the latter believed to be the disciple whom Jesus had chosen as the main authority, based on Matthew 16,18-19:

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.

In competition with the apostolic Christians were several other forms of groups that considered themselves as being Christian, some of these designated themselves as “those who know”; Gnostics. Gnostics is derived from the word gnosis, the Greek word for knowledge. In the next chapter we shall have examine some of these Gnostics and try placing them in their temporal and societal contexts.

⁷ DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 174-175

The Gnostics and a time of turmoil

In the first centuries of the Common Era the Roman Empire made its mark on the lives of the peoples of the Mediterranean lands. In what was then known as Palestine, the Jewish people felt oppressed and persecuted. Up until the first century CE, the Jewish community had been able to practice their religion in relative peace from Roman interference. In the beginning of his reign as Emperor Caligula (37-41) commanded that a statue of himself be placed in the Temple of Jerusalem. He also commanded that any Jew who would oppose this should be slain.⁸ It is no surprise that this infuriated the Jewish people of Jerusalem. Long had they been under Roman occupation and most Jews obliged to pay the taxes imposed on them from the Empire. But here was an Emperor who thought himself a god and wanted to equal himself to the god of the monotheistic Jews. This started a strain on the relationship between the Jews and their Roman occupants. The strain grew under the reign of Emperor Claudius (41-54) and reached its climax during the reign of Emperor Nero (54-68) with the outbreak of war between the Jews and the Romans in 66-73 called The Great Revolt. The war saw the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 which marked the beginning of the end for the Jewish side that was ultimately defeated in 73.

The Roman rule gave food for a spiritual need for redemption. Thus sprang up a variety of eschatological religious movements. Palestine seemed to be seething with such eschatological movements.⁹ The emergence of Jesus and the tradition surrounding him and his teachings fell like rain in the desert. The young religion of Christianity fulfilled this need for a promise of salvation. But still in its youth Christianity was still struggling to define itself as one orthodox religion, thus a wide variety of movements considering themselves Christian were competing to gain advantage over the others.¹⁰

⁸ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, II, 10,1

⁹ Jonas, Hans, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, 2001, p. 31

¹⁰ Among eschatological movements that were not Christian, was the Qumran community, the knowledge of which we have from the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This community seems to have shared some of the same spiritual views as we see in the New Testament as well as among the Gnostic groups.

Among this variety of Christian thought we find groups that called themselves Gnostics. The word is derived from the Greek word *gnosis* meaning knowledge. The different Gnostic congregations had different ideas about many spiritual and religious topics. But they did also have some ideas in common. So although it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about Gnosticism in general, there are a few commonalities we can ascertain about the various Gnostic groupings. The Gnostic world view was a dualistic view. There was this world, the mundane, physical plane created by a demiurge either out of malice or out of ignorance. The true God was in the Gnostic view without fault, and so could not have been the creator of this world which is ridden with flaws and faults. This world was associated with darkness, evil, temporality and so on. In opposition hereto the Gnostics thought there to be the transcendent world in which the transcendent deity, God, resided. This deity was thought to be pre-existing and the source of all good. The transcendent plane was associated with light, good, eternity and so forth. And thus the Gnostics regarded everything of this world as evil, and were forsaking all physical pleasures. But since they were eschatological in their nature, the Gnostics also had a promise of salvation. They believed that man held a divine spark of the transcendent God within himself, and in order to be saved he needed to attain knowledge of that divinity, from there comes the notion of gnosis.

The Gnostics often lived in more or less isolated groupings, meditating and studying to gain knowledge of their divine spark, so they could receive salvation and return the plane of the transcendent and eternal God. There are, however a few significant exceptions to that rule, one of them being the Valentinians, whose founder and leader, according to Tertullian, nearly was elected Pope. Valentinus had his heydays in the mid second century, right when our text *The Gospel of Judas* is presumed to have been written. This makes as a foundation to speculate that Gnostic thought was gaining foothold in the mainstream church, which again would have called for Irenaeus to write his work *Adversus Haereses*. If Gnostic beliefs were becoming more and more popular in the apostolic church, the foundations of the still young and fragile church and the predominant belief system herein would be threatened. Whether this has had an impact on the emergence of *the Gospel of Judas* is anybody's guess. It could be that the Sethians saw a weakness in the defence of

the apostolic church and produced *the Gospel of Judas* to launch an attack, but that it purely speculation.

The Sethians

The authorship of *The Gospel of Judas* is attributed to the Gnostic group named the Sethians. Scholars agree that the characteristics found in *The Gospel of Judas* correspond very well to the characteristics found in previously discovered Sethian literature. These characteristics have mainly to do with the subjects of cosmogony, cosmology and theology, but also the soteriological issues have points in common.

The Sethians are being called so, because of their veneration of a saviour character by the name of Seth. Seth is understood by the Sethian Gnostics to be the offspring of Adamas, son to the unknowable Father and the divine Mother Barbelo. The Father, the Mother and the Son constitute a divine triad in the Sethian belief system and are only one of a number of characteristics that make up Sethianism. In the following we shall look at the different characteristics of Sethian Gnosticism and compare them to the corresponding characteristics in *The Gospel of Judas* in order to determine whether or not it is plausible that the Sethians authored *The Gospel of Judas*.

Cosmogony and cosmology

Like most religious groups the Sethians speculated as to how the world was created, or rather, how everything came into being and how everything created were related to one another. Analysing and understanding this is not an easy task. The Gnostic cosmos (here used in the broadest term possible) is a complicated one and not always a hundred percent unequivocal and each Sethian text has its own individual features.

For there exists a great and boundless aeon, whose extent no generation of angels could (?) see, [in] which is the great invisible [Spirit] which no eye of an [angel] has ever seen, no thought of the heart has ever comprehended, and it was never called by any name. And a luminous cloud appeared there. And he said, 'Let an angel come into being as my attendant.' And a great angel, the Self-Generated, the god of the light, emerged from the cloud.¹¹

Thus the first act of creation is performed in *the Gospel of Judas*. An array of terms is introduced in this quote. The Sethians believed the whole of cosmos, both this- and otherworldly, to be made up of aeons. Each aeon had its own guardian or supernatural being connected with it. In this, the first aeon, described in the quotation above, we come across a Great Invisible spirit which is utterly incomprehensible. And it is through that spirit the first angel is created. This angel is called the god of light, which instantly makes one think of the god of the Old Testament. But as we shall see later, this is not the case; neither is the Great Invisible spirit the Sethian interpretation of the god of the Old Testament. The god of the Old Testament plays a very different and much more ominous role which we will see later.

In the *Apocryphon of John* the first act of creation is also made by the Invisible Spirit. In this text the Spirit creates the Barbelo figure, also called the Mother-Father, Thrice-male, the Holy Spirit, the first man and several other denominations.¹² And with a spark of light the Invisible Spirit impregnates Barbelo, who then gives birth to their only-

¹¹ *The Gospel of Judas*, 47,5-21 cited from Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 213

¹² *Apocryphon of John*, 4,25-5,10 in Robinson, James M., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Leiden, 1990, p. 107

begotten child, whom the *Apocryphon of John* calls Christ – the divine Autogenes, who resembles the Father (the Invisible Spirit) but does not equal the greatness of the Father. The Autogenes of the *Apocryphon of John* should not be confused with that of the *Gospel of Judas*. The Autogenes of the *Gospel of Judas* is more like the Barbelo of the *Apocryphon of John*. This triad is the highest of entities, without *being* in any sense comprehensible by human thought. We will examine the kind of negative theology presented by the Sethians later. In the *Gospel of Judas* the Self-Generated accordingly creates an angelic being called Adamas a heavenly prototype of the earthly Adam¹³, along with four lesser angels who are but servants to the Great Invisible Spirit, Autogenes and Adamas. Adamas is to take his place in a luminous cloud in the divine world in which the Invisible Spirit and the Self-Generated also reside.¹⁴ The triad of the Sethians is the highest of divinity with the Great Invisible spirit positioned above, and even beyond and transcending Autogenes and Adamas. Again, the nature of this triad will be discussed later, in this chapter we will focus mainly on the cosmogonical aspects of the Sethian world view.

The triad creates a vast number of aeons (eternities) that they each may rule over. In these aeons dwell luminaries or light-beings. These luminaries create even more luminaries to populate the aeons. To serve those aeons a vast number of angels are created. So we have the luminaries who rule over the aeons which in turn are served by an army of angels. The authors of *Gospel of Judas* seem to have found the numbers important. Adamas, who resides in the first cloud of light, is most likely the creator of what the *Gospel of Judas* calls the incorruptible generation¹⁵ of Seth, since it would seem the most likely that the heavenly prototype of the earthly Adam is the creator of a perfect generation that bears the same name as the third-borne of earthly Adam. This generation is, as Adamas, a divine prototype of the Gnostics themselves as they see themselves (or their spirits) as descendants of this incorruptible generation. Adamas also creates six heavens for each of the aeons, which makes it a total of seventy-two. He then creates seventy-two luminaries and they

¹³ Gathercole, Simon, *The Gospel of Judas*, Oxford, 2007, p. 90-91

¹⁴ *Gospel of Judas*, 47,26-48,26 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 213-215

¹⁵ In Sethian texts the term “generation” is used to describe a people, “generated” for a specific destiny, whether it be for salvation or damnation.

create 360 other luminaries. The seventy-two luminaries in the seventy-two heavens receive five firmaments each. The firmaments constitute the separating force between the transcendent world and the physical earth.¹⁶ This leads us to the creation of the earth and the creation of mankind as we find it in the *Gospel of Judas* and the Sethians.

In the *Gospel of Judas* the luminaries and their firmaments are collectively named as ‘Cosmos’, *that is ‘Destruction’*¹⁷ This shows us that this world is perishable. In Simon Gathercole’s translation this world is named “corruption” which has an even more negative connotation. This is indeed very characteristic for the Gnostic dualistic world view: The transcendent “other” world is absolutely good and incorruptible and the place from where our souls originate as opposed to this mundane world which is corrupted and evil in nature. This evil becomes more apparent a little later in the *Gospel of Judas*.

And look, from the cloud there appeared an [angel] whose face flashed with fire and whose appearance was defiled with blood. His name was Nebro, which means in translation ‘rebel’; others call him Yaldabaoth. And another angel, Saklas, also came from the cloud.¹⁸

Nebro, or Yaldabaoth, is a monstrous being as is apparent from the description provided in the *Gospel of Judas*. His face flashes with fire and his entire appearance is defiled with blood. He is clearly not a pleasant character to behold. Unlike the transcendent invisible Spirit, the appearance of Yaldabaoth is known to man. Indeed in the *Apocryphon of John* the description is very vivid. Here he looks like a lion-faced serpent with eyes flashing with fire.¹⁹ Yaldabaoth is traditionally created by Sophia who, without the consent of her male

¹⁶ Gathercole, Simon, *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 93

¹⁷ *The Gospel of Judas*, 50,13-14 in DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 83. In other translations of the Gospel of Judas the word translated into Destruction here is translated differently. In Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 219, “destruction” is translated as “Perdition”, whilst Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 94 translates it as “corruption” and King, Karen L. and Pagels, Elaine, *Reading Judas*, London 2007, p. 118 translates it as “what perishes”.

¹⁸ *The Gospel of Judas*, 51,8-17

¹⁹ *Apocryphon of John*, 10,9-10

consort, the Great Invisible Spirit, desires to create a likeness herself. This creation becomes a monstrosity because it lacks the perfection that only a unity of the masculine and the feminine can provide. Sophia sees the error of her action then Yaldabaoth removes himself from his mother and goes on to create for himself an army of angles or archons (rulers), among which we find Saklas, whose name derives from the Aramaic word sakla, meaning fool or foolish.²⁰ Yaldabaoth sees that his mother sees him as an abomination and he removes himself from her. Being created by Sophia Yaldabaoth has knowledge of the aeons above and he creates the world according to the likeness of the first aeon. It is apparent here that the Sethian Gnostics were highly influenced by platonic thought. The first aeon translates easily to the world of the Ideas, making the platonic dualism of the mundane and the transcendent play a prominent role in the Gnostic frame of mind. Furthermore in Neo-Platonism numbers play an important role and since Neo-Platonism had its heyday in the first centuries it is very plausible that this is the source of the Sethian preoccupation with numbers.

Yaldabaoth then decides to create a man, viz. Adam. The creation of Adam is in the *Gospel of Judas* attributed to Saklas. However Saklas and Nebro/Yaldabaoth are very closely related and hardly discernable. In *Trimorphic Protennoia* the demon who rules over the underworld and Chaos is named: “Saklas,” that is, “Samael,” or “Yaldabaoth.”²¹ Also in the *Apocryphon of John* it says:

Now the archon who is weak has three names. The first is Yaltabaoth, the second is Saklas, and the third is Samael. And he is impious in his arrogance.²²

So in the *Gospel of Judas* Yaldabaoth is the ruler of this world, he has a host of assisting entities, archons, whom he controls and who are assisting him in keeping mankind from retrieving the *gnosis*, or knowledge, needed to receive salvation. It may seem curious that

²⁰ Gathercole, Simon, *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 98

²¹ *Trimorphic Protennoia*, 38,26-27

²² *Apocryphon of John*, 11,15-19

mankind can be saved since it has been created by an evil entity. To solve this problem the Sethian myth of creation tells us that Sophia saw the error of her actions and repented greatly. And to make up for her wrong-doings, she lures Yaldabaoth into breathing life into the created human, thereby transferring the spark of divinity he has in himself over to the human he had created. This divine spark is what makes mankind a divine creature unlike all other creatures of the earth. And when mankind received this spark of divinity he, in fact, no longer belongs to the mundane world, but has his rightful place in the transcendent world with the divine triad.²³ The action of breathing life into man resembles the story of creation in Genesis 2,7, in which the biblical god breathes life into Adam. Furthermore the *Apocryphon of John* tells us that Yaldabaoth is rebuked by a voice from above telling him that “*The Man exists and the son of Man.*”²⁴ Yaldabaoth thinks it is his mother who speaks, and he catches a glimpse of the transcendent cosmos where the Great Invisible Spirit dwells. Yaldabaoth goes on to tell the archons or angels attending him about the world above and he says:

‘Come, let us create a man according to the image of God and according to our likeness, that his image may become a light for us.’²⁵

And in the *Gospel of Judas*:

Then Saklas said to his angels, ‘Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image.’ And they fashioned Adam and his wife Eve.²⁶

²³ *Apocryphon of John*, 19,21-33

²⁴ *Apocryphon of John*, 14,14-15

²⁵ *Apocryphon of John*, 15,2-4

²⁶ *The Gospel of Judas*, 52,16-19 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 223

The parallel to the Genesis 1:26-27 would not have been lost to the second century readers of the *Apocryphon of John*. This parallel, along with the other parallels to the biblical God, is no coincidence as we shall see in the following chapter on the Sethian theology. Here the characteristics of Nebro/Yaldabaoth/Saklas and the characteristics of the biblical god may shed some light as to how the *Gospel of Judas* is to be interpreted.

This is an outline of how the cosmos, the world and mankind came into being according to the Sethian creation story. The full story, or stories, is much more complicated. The *Apocryphon of John* has a detailed description of which angel or archon is in charge of creating man's fingers and toes and ears and eyeballs and so on. There is also a great emphasis on numbers as we have already seen. A reason for this could be that the reader should be awestruck by the complexity and thereby get a feeling that no man could have written this or at least that there must be a divine truth in the text he is reading. In the next chapter we will go on to look at the theology of the Sethians. We have already hinted at the existence of a negative theology, this will, among other things that make up the Sethian idea of deity, be examined in further detail.

Sethian theology

“He is neither divinity nor blessedness nor perfection. Rather it (...) is an unknowable entity of him, not that which is proper to him; rather he is another one superior to the blessedness and the divinity and the perfection. For he is not perfect but he is another thing that is superior. He is neither boundless, nor is he bounded by another. Rather he is something [superior]. He is not corporeal. He is not incorporeal. He is not great. [He is not] small. He is not a number. He is not a [creature]. Nor is he something that exists, that one can know. But he is something else of himself that is superior, which one cannot know.²⁷

²⁷ *Allogenes*, 62,28-63-13

This is how the Father, the Invisible Spirit or the supreme deity is described in *Allogenes*; a Sethian revelation discourse originally written in the early 300s C.E.²⁸ To actually call it a description may be to stretch it a bit. Because mostly it focuses on what god is *not*. The negative theology is a characteristic feature of the Sethian theology. He is nothing and he is not something. He is not nothing and he is something. This paradoxical nature of god is not a problem for the Gnostics, because what god is is incomprehensible for the human intellect. God is beyond what any human being can fathom. Even angels are not capable of the Great Invisible Spirit according to *Gospel of Judas*.

For there exists a great and boundless aeon, whose extent no generation of angels could (?) see, [in] which is the great invisible [Spirit], which no eye of an [angel] has ever seen, no thought of the heart has ever comprehended, and it was never called by any name.²⁹

So the supreme god of the Sethians is absolutely incomprehensible to any being in the entire cosmos; the mundane as well as the transcendent cosmos. This fits very poorly with the apostolic Christian and Jewish view on the nature of God. In fact it fits so poorly that the Gnostics viewed the biblical God, more specifically the God of the Old Testament, as none other than Yaldabaoth. Let us take a closer look at the *Gospel of Judas* and other Sethian texts to further investigate this.

And when he saw the creation which surrounds him and the multitude of angels around him which had come forth from him, he said to them, 'I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me.' But by announcing this he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?³⁰

This passage from *Apocryphon of John* shows very clearly that the God of the Old Testament is Yaldabaoth. It is here Yaldabaoth who proclaims himself to be a jealous God

²⁸ Wire, Antoinette Clark, "Introduction to *Allogenes*" in Robinson, James M. (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, San Francisco 1988, p. 490-491

²⁹ *The Gospel of Judas*, 47,5-13 in Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 213

³⁰ *Apocryphon of John*, 13,5-12

as well as the only God. The writer even refers to Exodus 20, in which Moses receives the Ten Commandments and God speaks to Moses saying that he (God) is a Jealous God (Exodus 20,4 and Deuteronomy 5,9) and that Moses must not have any other God before Him (Exodus 20,3 and Deuteronomy 5,7). Also the fact that God in Genesis 1,26 speaks in plural “*Let us make man in our image after our likeness*” must have seemed conspicuous to the Sethians, especially in conjunction with the other examples where the Old Testament God looking inferior compared to their idea of the supreme deity that we have looked at. All these occurrences must have given the Gnostics very strong arguments against the apostolic Church and its veneration of the Old Testament God and this could easily be one of the main reasons for heresiologists, like Irenaeus, to go to great lengths to refute the Gnostic schools and their texts in order to counter “heretical” Gnostic beliefs.

This is a point where the Sethians clash with the apostolic church. In the Sethian frame of mind the God who is worshipped by the apostolic church is in fact the evil and monstrous demiurge Yaldabaoth. To the Sethians it is very evident that the God of the Old Testament cannot be the supreme God, the Great Invisible Spirit because he is so incomprehensible that he would not appear as a burning bush (Exodus 3) or even wander around the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3,8). This is emphasised by the fact that in the Sethian myth of Creation it is Yaldabaoth/Saklas who is responsible for creating this world and the Old Testament creator God is therefore again seen as the Evil demiurge. Furthermore the Sethians regarded the Serpent of Genesis as a Good creature, with whom Sophia arranged to make Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree, as it gives them knowledge of the almighty God, viz. the Great Invisible Spirit.³¹

When we, bearing in mind the Sethian view of the Old Testament God, then see, in the *Gospel of Judas*, that Jesus reprimands the twelve for worshipping “their God”³² it becomes clear why he does that. The twelve think they are worshipping the supreme God, when in fact they are worshipping Yaldabaoth the Evil One par excellence. We will in the discussion of interpreting the *Gospel of Judas* examine this in more detail and the

³¹ Pearson, Birger A., *Ancient Gnosticism*, Minneapolis 2007, p. 58

³² *The Gospel of Judas*, 33,22-34,17 in Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 185-187

consequences of this in a later chapter. It also gives us a clue as to why the *Gospel of Judas* may have been written. With the apostolic Church becoming ever more powerful in the second century and thus the notion of the Old Testament God seemingly withholding its status as being the same God as in the New Testament, it was necessary for the Sethian Gnostics to admonish their members and followers that the God of the Sethians, of Jesus and of the New Testament was the true God. The God of the Sethians, being beyond perfect and absolutely unfathomable could not be the vengeful, jealous and angry God of The Old Testament. The Christians who regarded the Old Testament God were, in the eyes of the Sethians doomed and could not be saved unless they achieved the gnosis that would lead them to know the error of their ways.

This leads us on to examine how the Sethians looked at salvation, i.e. the Sethian soteriology. How could a person receive salvation, if they could be saved at all?

Sethian Christology, soteriology and eschatology

[And] Judas said to Jesus, “So what will those generations do?” Jesus said, “Truly I say to you (pl.) above them all, the stars will bring matters to completion. And when Saklas completes the span of time assigned for him, their first star will appear with the generations, and they will finish what has been said (above).³³

Matters will be brought to completion, the text tells us. What are these matters, we may ask. The matters at hand are nothing less than this world. When Saklas, who is one of the creators of this world and one of the creators of human beings, has completed his span of time, there is no longer an archon to rule this world and this world will then perish. When we keep in mind how the mundane world is described in the *Gospel of Judas*, and in Sethian thought in general, viz. As corrupted or what perishes and so forth, it is clear that this world is perishable and will eventually do so. When that happens, the souls of the humans will return to the place from whence they came. When Judas asks about the generations and

³³ *The Gospel of Judas*, 54,13-24 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 227

what they will do he is referring to a previous statement of Jesus saying that some people have received a spirit as a loan that is not theirs to keep and thus they will not receive salvation, whilst others have been granted a spirit that will secure their salvation. The latter Jesus calls *the great generation*,³⁴ the former is the perishable generation which is not endowed with the knowledge or gnosis that the great generation has received with the spirit granted them from the Great Invisible Spirit. This eschatology is clearly rooted in biblical and Jewish thought. The main difference is that in Gnostic thought the soul returns to where it came from, viz. the ineffable aeon of the Great Invisible spirit, while in biblical-Jewish eschatology God's elect will enjoy eternity together in a paradise much like the known world.³⁵

This leaves us with the question of who God's elect are and from what they are being saved. God's elect are those who have achieved gnosis. We see in the Sethian revelation texts that gnosis is the knowledge that the soul is not indigenous to this world, but rather stems from the transcendent eternity of the Great Invisible spirit. This gnosis is achieved through revelation. The saved Gnostic is he who catches a glimpse of the transcendent world beyond our own. Apocalyptic texts like the *Gospel of Judas* and *Apocryphon of John* are means for the Gnostic reader to get ready to achieve gnosis. But it's not enough to read the texts and believe them for the Gnostic to achieve gnosis. The wisdom of the texts must be internalized and this is done by reaching a higher level of consciousness, hence the experience of revelation for the Gnostic. It is an absolutely individual experience that each Gnostic must have to be saved. Meditation was a way for the Sethian Gnostics to get to the higher level of consciousness. This is one of the reasons why C. G. Jung called the Gnostics the first depth psychologists.³⁶

In Gnostic thought a saviour figure is sent to this world to help the Gnostics achieve gnosis. This is the Jesus figure in the *Gospel of Judas*. He is on earth to reveal the "secrets of the kingdom." The Christology of the Sethian Gnosticism is an incarnation Christology. Jesus is divine from before he was born. In fact Jesus is the earthly incarnation

³⁴ *The Gospel of Judas*, 53,24 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 225

³⁵ Pearson, Birger A., *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 19

³⁶ Hoeller, Stephan A., *What is a Gnostic?* <http://www.gnosis.org/whatisgnostic.htm>, seen February 24 2009

of the heavenly Seth whom the Sethians venerated very highly. The Jesus of *Gospel of Judas* is a different one from the Jesus we know from the New Testament. The Jesus of the New Testament is a human being of flesh and blood. The Jesus of the *Gospel of Judas* is seemingly capable of travelling freely back and forth between this world and the transcendent world.

Now, the next morning, after this happened, he [appeared] to his disciples (again). And they said to him, “Master, where did [you] go and what did you do when you left us?” Jesus said to them, “I went to another great and holy generation.”³⁷

Thus the Jesus of the *Gospel of Judas* is truly “out of this world.” He even seems distanced from his earthly body, as he says to Judas:

For you will sacrifice the man that bears me.³⁸

Furthermore Jesus seems to be able to change appearance at will:

But often he does not appear to his disciple (as himself), but you find him among them ...
(?).³⁹

In place of the question mark the translators Marvin Meyer and Francois Gaudard are unsure whether the Coptic text reads “as a child” or “as an apparition.”⁴⁰ But according to their translation Jesus can appear in different forms if he so wishes. April DeConick, however, has a different translation of these lines:

³⁷ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 36,11-17 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 191

³⁸ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 56,19-20 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 231

³⁹ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 33,18-21 in Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 185

⁴⁰ Kasser et al., *Critical Edition*, p. 185, note to line 20

Often he did not appear to his disciples, but when necessary, you would find him in their midst.⁴¹

In the note to this line she argues that the word translated by Meyer and Gaudard as “child” or “apparition,” is in fact a well known Coptic word meaning “necessity.” This position is also held by John Turner.⁴² The implications, of this disagreement of translation, are not insurmountable and do not interfere in a crucial way with the overall interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*. However it does have a slight impact on the analysis of the Christology of the text. In the translation of Dr. DeConick Jesus is not a shape shifter like the Jesus of the Meyer/Gaudard translation. In both versions, on the other hand, there is no doubt about the absolute divinity of Jesus. So as we can see the Christology of the Sethians is very high. Jesus is more God than man; in fact Jesus is exclusively God occupying the body of a man, wearing the body as if it is a garment of sorts.

One thing that might speak against the absolute divinity of Jesus is that he on several occasions is laughing. The first occurrence is when the disciples are offering prayer and thanksgiving on page 33-34 of the codex. To the disciples question as to why Jesus is laughing at them, he replies that he’s not laughing at them, but that their prayer and thanksgiving is for “their” God, thereby implying that “their” God is different from Jesus’ God, the Great Invisible Spirit; the Supreme God. The second time Jesus laughs is on page 36 of the codex, when Jesus returns to the disciples after being with “another great and holy generation.” The disciples cannot believe that there is a generation holier than themselves. Jesus laughs at this asking them why they even bother to think about that holy generation, since the disciples themselves have no chance of becoming a part of that generation. Jesus laughs for the third time on page 44 of the codex. After the disciples have told Jesus about a dream they had and Jesus has interpreted that dream, Judas also wants to tell Jesus about a vision he had. Jesus laughs at Judas’ efforts to compete with the disciples,⁴³ but agrees to

⁴¹ DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 66

⁴² DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 188 n. 7

⁴³ In Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 207, the passage reads: “You thirteenth daimon, why do you try so hard?”, while in DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 77, the passage reads: “Why do you compete

listen to Judas' vision and responds by revealing the mysteries of the kingdom, telling Judas that what he has seen in his vision is the kingdom of the supreme God, only to discourage him by denying him entrance to the kingdom.⁴⁴ Judas seems shocked by the denial and was apparently also told that he and his seed will rule over the archons. In every example of Jesus laughing we see that he laughs, not because he is overcome by amusement, like a human being, rather he laughs at the ridiculousness of the chief archon, Yaldabaoth and his efforts to rule over the humans and lead them to think that he is the true God. But Jesus knows better because he is not of this world but from the supreme God, and he also knows that the true Gnostics belong to the aeon of the supreme God and are therefore beyond the reach of Yaldabaoth. And in reality this fact leaves Yaldabaoth powerless towards the true Gnostics, which is why his and his followers' efforts to convince people that he is the supreme God are pathetic, laughable and ridiculous.

When Jesus is sent to earth to reveal the secrets of the kingdom to the Gnostics, it seems odd that the *Gospel of Judas* tells us that the twelve disciples who follow him are left in the dark and that Judas is the one to whom the secret to salvation is revealed. Could it be that Judas is a hero in the *Gospel of Judas*, and that the discovery of the *Gospel of Judas* forces us to change the way we think Judas was viewed in early Christianity? In the following we will take a closer look at the *Gospel of Judas* and discuss how Judas is portrayed. We shall also discuss the purpose of writing the *Gospel of Judas*.

(with them), O Thirteenth Demon?" This passage has very different connotations depending on which translation we choose to support. In a later chapter I will argue that the correct translation is Dr. DeConick's, thereby rendering Judas to be a demon in the eyes of the Sethians.

⁴⁴ Again, there are translational differences between Dr. DeConick and the translators of the National Geographic Society, but both agree that Jesus tells Judas that he has been let astray by his star. There are lacunae on page 46 of the codex that make it impossible to know precisely what Jesus says to Judas, however it is clear in both translation that Judas is surprised by what Jesus tells him.

The Gospel of Judas

The *Gospel of Judas* is an ancient text originally written in Greek. The text we have available from the Codex Tchacos is almost certainly a Coptic translation of the Greek original.⁴⁵ As we have seen above the *Gospel of Judas* is a Sethian Gnostic text bearing the trademarks of Sethian Gnosticism. When the National Geographic Society unveiled their research on the *Gospel of Judas*, it was done on Easter, the most important time in the Christian calendar. It was done with all the dramatics of the premiere of a major blockbuster movie. The scholars who had worked on the ancient book, now known as Codex Tchacos, had been sworn to secrecy by the National Geographic Society, a secrecy which again led to much anxious anticipation. What could this hitherto lost Gospel tell us? What could it tell us about Judas? About Jesus? About early Christianity? About Gnosticism? What would we learn of the historic Judas and Jesus? The National Geographic Society did not underplay the significance of the “new” Gospel. It presents a whole new way of looking at Judas Iscariot, they said in their press release and even on the front page of the National Geographic website to this day.⁴⁶ To the scholars working for National Geographic *Gospel of Judas* portrayed Judas as the hero, Jesus’ initiate and the ultimate Gnostic.

After the unveiling of the Codex Tchacos numerous books on the *Gospel of Judas* soon followed. Some of these books supported the National Geographic interpretation that Judas is the hero in the text, others read the text as portraying Judas as evil as ever. In the following we will examine the nature of Judas in the *Gospel of Judas* and explore what the text is really saying. We will get to answer the question whether Judas is the hero or the villain. To this end we will put to use what we learned in the previous chapter as well as bringing into play the text itself and the various interpretations given by renowned scholars.

Translation issues

⁴⁵ Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 178

⁴⁶ <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/index.html> seen February 24 2009

Before we take a closer look at the Judas of the *Gospel of Judas* we must first address the issue of translating a text from Coptic into English, as it has a big impact on how to make our interpretation of the text. A big part of the disagreement in interpreting the *Gospel of Judas* amounts to differences in the translation. Translation of a text is clearly an important issue when interpreting the text. Any translation is in itself subjected to interpretative action. Whenever one translates a text from one language to another, one makes a choice as to how the translation reflects the original. And hence the work of translating a text is also a work of interpreting what the original author might have meant by using the words he did. And thus a fully objective translation of a text is not possible for the translator no matter what precautions the translator takes in order to avoid a biased translation. For instance the translators of *Gospel of Judas* put footnotes containing different ways to translate words and phrases in the text. This is the case in the Critical Edition which is cited several times in this paper. One example of difference in translating is the translation of the word *daimon*.⁴⁷ Originally the translators of the National Geographic Society's version of the text had a translation reading:

“You thirteenth spirit, why do you try so hard?...”⁴⁸

In the critical edition it has been changed to:

“You thirteenth daimon, why do you try so hard?...”⁴⁹

We see that originally the translators had made a choice to translate the word *daimon* to “spirit.” This is in accordance with the Platonic use of the word *daimon*. This gave them a lot of criticism on their hands among others from Dr. DeConick who pointed out that the text was from the second century and produced by a group with profound knowledge of the New Testament, and at that time the word “*daimon*” was exclusively used to describe an

⁴⁷ *Gospel of Judas*, 44,21

⁴⁸ <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf> p. 4 see also supplement #

⁴⁹ Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 207

evil spirit, that is a devil or a demon. In the Critical Edition, the National Geographic team made a compromise, as we see, by not translating the word at all. But in her critique, Dr. DeConick goes further, citing numerous Sethian texts in which the word “daimon” is used solely to describe evil spirits like Saklas, Nebruel (Nebro), Yaldabaoth and so on.⁵⁰ This is clearly important when we are discussing how the *Gospel of Judas* portrays Judas. Is he a “Spirit” or a “demon”? In this instance I am fully convinced that Dr. DeConick is right in her criticism of the National Geographic team and also she is right in her own translation. In the New Testament “daimon” is always, without exception, used as a negative word describing a devil or demon.⁵¹

Keeping these issues in mind, we will in our examination make use of different translations of the text. This way it is possible to discuss what implications the different translations may have on our interpretation as well as discussing what translation seems more reasonable to make use of. That being said I have no illusions of being totally unbiased neither in choice of translation nor in interpretation, although I shall keep an open mind and take all options into consideration.

⁵⁰ DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 109-113

⁵¹ <http://www.greekbiblestudy.org/gnt/greekWordStudy.do?lemma=true&id=89> seen February 24 2009.

Judas in the Gospel of Judas

[Let] any one of you who is [strong enough] among human beings bring out the perfect human and stand before my face.” And they all said, “We have the strength.” But their spirits could not find the courage to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes, and he turned his face away. Judas [said] to him, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you.”⁵²

This scene is played out just after Jesus appears to his disciples and sees them performing a ritual of worship. Jesus laughs at their action and admonishes them that they are not worshipping the supreme deity through their ritual, but are only paying homage to their own God. With what we have learned earlier, there is no doubt that Jesus here is hinting that the disciples are worshipping the biblical God and thereby the Demiurge who created the earth, the evil entity Yaldabaoth. They don't understand at first what Jesus is talking about and say that Jesus is the son of God. But Jesus tells them that they do not know him and have no chance of ever knowing who he really is. This is, not surprisingly, infuriating for the disciples who get angry with Jesus, who in turn says to them that they are angry because they have their own God in their souls and together with him their anger emerges. This whole scene reminds us of the New Testament confession stories, but in these it is Peter who gets it right, recognizing Jesus as the true Messiah.

Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they told him, “John the Baptist. And others say Elijah. And others, one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”⁵³

⁵² *Gospel of Judas*, p. 35,2-20 in Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 189

⁵³ Mark 8,27-30

The stories of Matthew and Luke are parallel to the Markan story of Peter's confession. These stories are the ones we have come to know through the New Testament and have come to take as an integral part of the Christian account of the life of Jesus and his disciples. With the discoveries of the Nag Hammadi codices a new and different story of confession came to our knowledge. The findings of the Nag Hammadi codices led us to realize that the history of early Christianity is more complex than previously thought. The story of confession that we saw in the Nag Hammadi findings was that of the hitherto unknown *Gospel of Thomas*. In this text the confessions of Matthew and Peter are overridden by Thomas' confession, in which he states: "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like."⁵⁴ Then Jesus takes Thomas away from the others and tells him three words, which Thomas cannot repeat to the other disciples as he fears they might stone him.

The *Gospel of Judas* presents us with a third story of confession, which in some respects resembles the *Gospel of Thomas* the most. In both gospels we see that a different disciple from Peter is the one who gets it right when it comes to knowing the true identity of Jesus. And in both gospels Jesus takes the confessing disciple away from the others and reveals to him secret knowledge.

We see that in both the New Testament and in the *Gospel of Thomas* that it is the favored disciple who recognizes Jesus' true messianic identity, and in the latter he is even let in on secrets that the other disciples are not ready to learn as is also the case in the *Gospel of Judas*. Looking at this isolated could indicate that Judas is the hero of our text, just as the scholars hired by the National Geographic Society imply in their interpretation. Later in this and the following chapters we will discuss this taking into account the *Gospel of Judas* in its entirety and its context.

Throughout the *Gospel of Judas* Jesus reveals secret knowledge to Judas in private without letting the other disciples in on these secrets. But this is not necessarily a good thing for Judas.

⁵⁴ *Gospel of Thomas*, 13

“Separate from them. I shall tell you the mysteries of the Kingdom. Not so that you will go there, but so that you will grieve greatly. For someone else will take your place so that the twelve [disciples] will still be complete before their god.”⁵⁵

This is taken from Dr. DeConick’s translation of the text. The translations of Dr. Gathercole and Drs. Meyer and Gaudard are similar. Karen L. King, however, suggests a different translation that is similar to the translation initially suggested by professors Kasser, Meyer and Wurst in their first edition of the *Gospel of Judas*.

“Separate from them. I will tell you the mysteries of the kingdom. It is possible for you to reach that place, but you will suffer much grief. For another will take your place, so that the twelve di[sciples] might again be complete in their ‘God’”⁵⁶

The translation of Karen L. King and the initial translation in the National Geographic publication have been subjected to criticism, which has led the authors of the first book from National Geographic to release a second translation in the Critical Edition publicized in 2007 frequently cited in this paper.⁵⁷ On this background I deem it safe to take the translation of DeConick to be more accurate than that of King.

So, as we see, Jesus separates Judas from the rest of the disciples and promises to reveal to him the mysteries of the kingdom. But why does he promise this to Judas we

⁵⁵ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 35,24-36,4 in DeConick, April D. *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 68-69

⁵⁶ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 35,24-36,4 in Pagels, Elaine and King, Karen L., *Reading Judas*, p. 111. The first edition of Kasser, Rodolphe, Meyer, Marvin and Wurst, Gregor, *The Gospel of Judas*, Washington DC 2006, p. 23 also has a translation saying that it is possible for Judas to reach the kingdom. In the Critical Edition, however the translation has been changed to reflect the translations of DeConick and Gathercole.

⁵⁷ At the Codex Judas Congress hosted by April DeConick at Rice University on March 13-16th, 2008 professors Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst circulated a draft for a third translation for the participating scholars to review in order to provide feedback for the final publication. This publication is forthcoming. Also a work of the papers presented at the congress is underway edited by April DeConick. Among the discussions on the Codex Judas Congress was the discussion of whether or not the passage in question makes it possible for Judas to enter the Kingdom or not. And the majority of the scholars present agreed with the translations of the Critical Edition, DeConick and Gathercole.

may ask. It is clearly not in order for Judas to receive saving gnosis. He will not even answer Judas when he asks when these mysteries will be revealed to him; instead Jesus leaves without another word. Jesus returns the next day, and the disciples are eager for him to interpret a dream they all have had the night before. This dream will be examined further in a later chapter. After Jesus interprets their dream and instructs them what they ought to learn from it, Judas also wishes to tell Jesus about a vision he has had. Jesus agrees to listen, after initially laughing at Judas and asking him why he tries so hard to compete with the other disciples and referring to Judas as the “thirteenth demon.” This is not a term the Sethians would have Jesus use about a person if he is to be the hero of the story. As we have seen earlier the word “daimon” was at least since the emergence of the New Testament, solely used about evil spirits with the same connotations as the modern day word “demon.” So Judas is off to a bad start when he wants Jesus to listen to his vision.

In his vision Judas has seen the other disciples stoning him, which was the penalty for blasphemy at the time. He also saw a house the size of which he could not comprehend perhaps with a roof of a greenery or grass.⁵⁸ The house is in Judas’ vision surrounded by great people and in the middle of the house there was a crowd. After telling Jesus about his vision, he then asks Jesus to let him into the house, but Jesus refuses, telling him that his star has led him astray and nobody of mortal birth will enter that house because it is reserved for the great and holy generation, viz. the generation that receives salvation.⁵⁹ Jesus goes on to tell Judas something that is unfortunately lost in lacunae, but it prompts a reaction from Judas. Again different translations propose different reactions from Judas. In the *Critical Edition* from National Geographic:

Judas said, “Master, could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers?”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ In the note to this verse, Kasser et. al., *Critical Edition*, p. 209 discusses the possibility the sentence as reading “And the house had a broad roof.” Consensus, however seems to be that the image of the greenery or grass is the correct one.

⁵⁹ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 44,15-45,26 in Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 207-209

⁶⁰ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 46,5-7 in Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 211

And in *The Thirteenth Apostle* by April DeConick:

Judas said, “Teacher, enough! At no time may my seed control the archons!”⁶¹

DeConick admits in the note for this passage that the translation could read “be controlled by” because of the peculiar use of the Coptic verb *hypotasse*, meaning “to control”.⁶² But maybe we can determine the most plausible translation if we take a look at the context.

Jesus asks Judas to come with him; presumably offering to show Judas the kingdom.

Jesus answered, saying to him, “Come, let me [tell] you that [...] [...] [...] but that you will grieve much more, seeing the Kingdom and all its generation.” When Judas heard this, he said, “What is the advantage I received, since you have separated me from that generation?” Jesus answered, saying, “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations and will rule over them.”⁶³

This passage shows us how Judas is fundamentally viewed in the *Gospel of Judas*. Jesus offers to show Judas the kingdom of the Great Invisible Spirit, reserved for the generation that is to receive salvation. Earlier Judas was told that he would be told the secrets of the kingdom, not so that he would enter it, but so that he would grieve a great deal. Not surprisingly Judas is puzzled as to why he should see the kingdom, since he cannot enter it, if it is not just to mock him. Jesus called Judas the “thirteenth demon” earlier, and again he calls him the thirteenth, and furthermore Judas is to rule over “the other generations,” which are the generations of the twelve disciples who are to curse Judas. This will make Judas the chief archon Yaldabaoth; this is additionally confirmed by the fact that Yaldabaoth, in his acts of creation, brought forth twelve archons to assist him in ruling the twelve realms and

⁶¹ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 46,5-7 in DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 79

⁶² DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 188 n. 9

⁶³ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 46,7-46,24 in DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 79. Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 211 has “set me apart for that generation,” but states that the translation can also read “... from that generation.”

the earth. As we have seen earlier in this paper, Yaldabaoth is the demiurge that rules over the people who have not achieved gnosis, and who believes that the demiurge is the true God, which we have seen is the case with the other disciples. Furthermore Judas is told that the generations he is to rule over will curse him. So by becoming the thirteenth, the one above the twelve assisting archons, Yaldabaoth, the evil one par excellence, Judas will come to be the exact opposite of what he had hoped to become by following Jesus.

After this Jesus goes on to tell Judas about the creation of the entire cosmos, the transcendent and the mundane, ending the revelatory dialogue by telling Judas that his (Judas') star will rule over the thirteenth aeon, a confirmation of Judas' ultimate fate. Jesus goes even further by (presumably) telling Judas about the falseness of the apostolic Christian rituals of baptizing and sacrificing. Unfortunately a large portion of this passage is lost in lacunae, but from what is legible, we can see that Jesus talks about sacrificing to Saklas and evil-doing. And Jesus says to Judas:

“[...] everything that is evil. But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me.”⁶⁴

Some have read this to be a positive statement to Judas, saying that he will be better than all of them, because he will release Jesus from his earthly body.⁶⁵ There are a few problems with that interpretation. It is true that the Sethian Gnostics regarded the earthly body as a prison for the divine soul. However, in this case, Jesus has just been talking about “everything that is evil” and it is in the nature of the following sentence that Judas will exceed them all in evil-doing. Furthermore Jesus admonishes Judas and the disciples that they should not sacrifice in any way, because it only serves Yaldabaoth/Saklas, the evil demiurge, so by the act of sacrificing Jesus' earthly body, Judas will serve the evil demiurge, whose place Judas ultimately will take as the thirteenth demon. Also it seems unnecessary for Jesus to be released from any earthly prison, since he is able to travel freely

⁶⁴ *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 56,17-20 in Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 231

⁶⁵ See for example Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas*, p. 105, which also suggests a very different translation, and Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*, 163

from the earthly realm to the realm of the Great Invisible spirit, rendering any earthly sacrifice redundant.

The passion of Jesus and Judas' role herein is mentioned only in very few words in the *Gospel of Judas*. It is only mentioned that Judas received money and handed over Jesus. So the familiar passion narrative that we know from the New Testament is almost completely absent from the story. This is because the passion does not have any consequence for Jesus. He belongs to the upper realm of the Great Invisible Spirit, and thus he is beyond any earthly torture he might be put through. Therefore the narrative serves no purpose in the *Gospel of Judas* and is omitted from the text altogether.

From my perspective there is no “new and heroic” Judas in the *Gospel of Judas*. Judas is as evil as ever, actually he is more evil than ever. In the following chapter we will take a look at Judas as he is portrayed in the New Testament to be able to make a comparison in order to determine what the *Gospel of Judas* can tell us that we did not already know from the New Testament gospels.

Judas in the New Testament

It seems to be common knowledge that Judas throughout the New Testament is portrayed as the evil disciple who maliciously betrays Jesus in Gethsemane. But Judas' betrayal is described differently in the four New Testament gospels.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.⁶⁶

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.⁶⁷

Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.⁶⁸

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.⁶⁹

"Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table

⁶⁶ Mark 14,10-11

⁶⁷ Matthew 26,14-16

⁶⁸ Luke 22,3-6

⁶⁹ John 13,1-6

close to Jesus, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly."⁷⁰

So we clearly see a difference in how Judas is presented in the gospels of the New Testament. Mark is most likely the oldest gospel, and here we see just a very short statement that Judas went to the chief priests to betray Jesus. Matthew gives Judas a more active role in which he negotiates a price for handing Jesus over. In Luke Satan enters Judas making him more evil than in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. In John which is the youngest of the gospels, the devil has entered Judas prior to the last supper and entering him again during the supper. This could suggest that either the author of *John* was unaware of this slight mistake or that the devil is an integral part of Judas' person, making him more evil than all the other gospels. The latter option seems to be the most likely interpretation taking into account that the gospel of John is the gospel in the New Testament that seems to be the most literary and most thoroughly worked through and it is unlikely that the author would make the devil enter Judas when he apparently already was in there. So we see in the New Testament a Judas who progressively becomes more and more demonized. This demonizing process can be seen as a sign of the new religion trying to set itself apart from its mother-religion, Judaism. In the Gospel of John we see a clear distancing from the Jewish community. In this gospel there are numerous references to "the Jews" and it is "the Jews" who are responsible for the death of Jesus in the gospel of John. Caiaphas, the High Priest had instructed "the Jews" that it was best if Jesus died and therefore Jesus was arrested.⁷¹ Later on it seems that Pilate wants to release Jesus, but "the Jews" urges him to kill Jesus and the judgment of Jesus' crucifixion is ultimately passed.⁷² Also very interesting is the statement of Jesus to the high priest in John 18,20:

⁷⁰ John 13,21-27

⁷¹ John 18,12-14

⁷² John 18,29-19,13

Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret."⁷³

This goes against what we are being told by several Gnostic texts, including the *Gospel of Judas* which in the opening tells us that what we are about to read is an account of what Jesus has told Judas in secrecy. However it seems that one of the agendas of the gospel of John is to distance the young Christianity from Judaism and to manifest itself as the apostolic Christianity that so vigilantly fought against the Gnostic Christians in order to become the "true" Christianity.

In chapter 19 of the Gospel of John we can also see a very important comment by Jesus, regarding the Jews and Judas.

So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."⁷⁴

Here we see a direct statement from Jesus, that Judas has committed the greater sin, and since it is "the Jews" who want Jesus dead, they too are accomplices of Judas. The nature of "the Jews" in the Gospel of John has throughout history been used for anti-Semitic purposes and Judas has been portrayed as the evil Jew par excellence. But that is a very different discussion which we will not delve further into in this paper, just mention that Sethian Gnosticism contains many traits of Jewish apocalyptic thought.⁷⁵

So in the New Testament we see a Judas who becomes progressively more evil, culminating in the Gospel of John in which he seems to have the devil as an integral part of his personality. This progression is continued in the *Gospel of Judas* where Judas is a

⁷³ John 18,20

⁷⁴ John 19,10-11

⁷⁵ Pearson, Birger A., *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 11-19

demon, and upon his earthly death, he will take the place of Yaldabaoth. In the New Testament we see Judas as a human, in the gospel of Mark, who is weak and who is tempted by the money he can get from handing over Jesus progressively getting more evil ending with having the devil in his heart in the gospel of John, betraying Jesus out of malice.

The 'stupid' disciples and those who know

In the *Gospel of Judas* we see Jesus correcting the disciples and laughing at the error of their ways on several occasions. The disciples being wrong or oblivious to the true teachings of Jesus is not something “new” invented by the Sethians to portray the apostolic Christians as clueless and stupid. It is doubtlessly the purpose of the Sethians to convey that image of the disciples in the *Gospel of Judas*, but their inspiration comes directly from the New Testament. In the following we shall take a look at the Gospel of Mark to see how the Sethians use the writings also venerated by the apostolic church to launch an attack on the church and to point out why the apostolic church must be wrong in the eyes of the Sethian Gnostics.

And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"⁷⁶

In this passage the disciples look utterly oblivious to the fact that Jesus can perform miracles. Even though they on two separate occasions have witnessed how Jesus provided food for several thousand people with only a few loaves of bread, they still worry about not having food for themselves. Jesus clearly seems frustrated with them and their lack of understanding. Earlier in the gospel they seem to follow Jesus without any idea about whom he is, thereby making them look like they are just following him mindlessly without any thought as to why they are. Jesus and his disciples are on a boat and the weather is hard threatening to sink the boat:

⁷⁶ Mark 8,16-21

But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"⁷⁷

The disciples apparently do not know that Jesus is the Messiah and capable of performing miracles. They are asking each other who he is, because they do not realize that he is the savior figure that their sacred texts have prophesized. It is not surprising that the Sethian Gnostics found it odd that the apostolic church took the disciples and mainly Peter to be authorities, when they apparently were oblivious to the identity of Jesus and that they seemingly were neither believing nor understanding Jesus and his teachings properly.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."⁷⁸

This passage must have made the Sethians wary of the apostolic church venerating Peter when Jesus rebukes him and calls him Satan. How can the disciples be authorities on the teachings of Jesus, when they are neither believing nor understanding and when the main disciple of the apostolic church is even called Satan? The Sethians were very familiar with the gospel of Mark and these questions are sure to have been a big part of their opposition to the apostolic church.⁷⁹ And doubtlessly the Sethians were very much opposed to the apostolic church. Much of the *Gospel of Judas* and Sethian texts in general are written to

⁷⁷ Mark 4,38-41

⁷⁸ Mark 8,31-33

⁷⁹ DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 20-21

point out that the disciples, and through them the apostolic church, were ignorant and without faith.

We saw earlier that Peter eventually seems to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and we saw that in the *Gospel of Judas*, it is Judas who recognizes Jesus' true identity. It may seem strange, however, that Judas, whom I argue, is more evil than ever in the *Gospel of Judas* is the one who is able to recognize Jesus' messianic identity. Usually it is assumed that the confessor in a gospel is the protagonist of the text, as is the case for instance in the *Gospel of Thomas*, where Thomas is the disciple who recognizes Jesus' true identity. In the *Gospel of Judas* the case seems to be the opposite, the one who is the most evil is the one who knows Jesus, namely Judas. In the following I will argue that those who know Jesus' true identity, in the New Testament are the demons and unclean spirits that Jesus encounters.

And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.⁸⁰

And later:

"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many."⁸¹

Also the gospel of Luke has the demons knowing Jesus' identity:

And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying,

⁸⁰ Mark 1,34

⁸¹ Mark 5,7-9

"Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.⁸²

Thus, Judas knows Jesus' identity, not despite being a demon, but because he is a demon. Judas belongs to the aeon of Yaldabaoth who refers to himself as being "a jealous God", as we did see earlier on in this paper, and therefore he is able to know who Jesus is and therefore he is not able to look at Jesus, being of an inferior aeon to that of Jesus who is from the highest of aeons, the aeon of Barbelo and the Great Invisible Spirit.

⁸² Luke 4,33-35

The stars and the thirteenth

We shall now return to the *Gospel of Judas* itself, to examine some of the other topics of the text. During the revelation dialogue, several different features of Sethian belief come into play. These features seem somewhat obscure and are regarding the stars and the number thirteen, the latter we did briefly address earlier on. In this chapter we will examine these topics to see what they could mean to our interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*.

The stars seem to play some part in the text. Each of the disciples has his own star Jesus says.⁸³ And he tells Judas that his star has led him astray and teaches him about the error of the stars.⁸⁴ Jesus tells Judas that his star will rule over the thirteenth aeon and that this world will perish along with the stars and he laughs at the error of the stars.⁸⁵ What does this mean? Clearly the stars are able to lead people away from the path to true knowledge, gnosis. Also Judas' star will rule over the thirteenth aeon, the aeon of Yaldabaoth. This means that the stars are actively controlling people as well as aeons, like generals controlling their troops from a distance. Perhaps the stars in the *Gospel of Judas* are the twelve angels Yaldabaoth creates to rule over the twelve realms of the lower cosmos. This would make perfect sense because Judas' star is to rule over the thirteenth aeon, to which Judas will ultimately end. So the stars in the *Gospel of Judas* are not associated with anything good. They belong to the lower cosmos and are able to lead the disciples and Judas astray; trick them into believing that Yaldabaoth is the true God.

Already your horn has been raised, and your wrath has been kindled and your star has ascended (...)⁸⁶

⁸³ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 42,7-8

⁸⁴ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 45,13 and 46,1

⁸⁵ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 54,16-55,20

⁸⁶ Or passed by. *Gospel of Judas*, p. 56,21-23. DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 89 translates the passage "and your star ascended", whilst Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 231 translates the passage "and your star passed by."

Judas fate is sealed. He has no chance of escaping it. His star has already set the things to happen into motion.

It has been proposed by the National Geographic team, that thirteen was Judas' lucky number, hence their interpretation of Judas as being the hero of the gospel.⁸⁷ DeConick argues, however, that the number 13 in Sethian thought is always associated with the evil entities Yaldabaoth, Nebruel and Saklas. In *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* the demonic archons Nebruel and Saklas collaborate to create twelve realms that surround the earth, while they themselves, together with Yaldabaoth inhabit the thirteenth realm above. Also the *Apocalypse of Adam* and *Zostrianos* are Sethian texts in which the cosmology of thirteen realms ruled by evil archons preventing the uninitiated from passing through to the upper realm of the Great Invisible Spirit. Only those who have achieved Gnosis can pass through and enjoy eternity in the upper realm together with the other Gnostics and the supreme God.⁸⁸

I very quickly and very gladly went up with him to a great light cloud. I cast my body upon the earth to be guarded by glories. I was rescued from the whole world and the thirteen aeons in it and their angelic beings.⁸⁹

As we have seen several times, Judas belongs to the thirteenth aeon and in Sethian thought this aeon is always associated with the demiurge Yaldabaoth. Thus, we have confirmed what we have assumed earlier, that Judas' fate is to take his place with Yaldabaoth or even becoming one with him and Judas is thereby associated with the most evil of all evil beings in the cosmology of the *Gospel of Judas*.

⁸⁷ Kasser et.al., *The Gospel of Judas*, 2006, p.164-165

⁸⁸ DeConick, April D., *The Thirteenth Apostle*, p. 110-111

⁸⁹ *Zostrianos*, p. 4,21-28

Sacrificing

There is still one passage in the *Gospel of Judas* that we have not touched upon in this paper. It is regarding the collective vision of the disciples. Their vision and, not least, Jesus' interpretation can help us shed some light on how the *Gospel of Judas* views the apostolic Christians and the rituals of the apostolic church.

And they [said, "We have] seen a great house [with a] large altar [in it, and] twelve men – they are priests, we would say; and a name <--->; and a crowd of people is waiting at that altar, [until] the priests [finished] [presenting] the offerings. We [also] kept waiting." [Jesus said], "what are [---] like?" and they [said], "Some [---] for two weeks; [others sacrifice their own children, others their wives, in praise [and] in humility with each other; others sleep with men; others are involved in slaugh[ter]; still others commit a multitude of sins and deeds of lawlessness. [And] the men who stand [before] the altar invoke your [name]. And while they are involved in all the deeds of their sacrifice, that [altar] is filled."⁹⁰

This vision is puzzling and troubling for the disciples and they are quiet after telling about their vision. Jesus asks them why they are troubled. The priests in their dream are themselves. It is the disciples themselves who are offering the sacrifices and the multitudes of sins the disciples saw in their vision. Jesus tells them that his name has been written on something and that the human generation, that is the generation that will not receive salvation because it belongs to the lower cosmos, has "planted trees without fruit" in his name, in a shameful manner. Jesus goes on by telling them that they are not serving the supreme God in their vision and the cattle they have seen brought in for sacrifice are the people they lead astray. He goes further and tells them that the human generation will approve of the sacrifices performed by priests, but the priests are "ministers of error" according to Jesus' interpretation. "Stop sacrificing", Jesus then says.⁹¹

Most of the rest of the page is missing, so we do not know what Jesus says further or if the disciples say anything in response. But we can see that the Sethians are

⁹⁰ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 38,1-39,3, in Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 195-197

⁹¹ *Gospel of Judas*, p. 39,6-41,2, in Kasser et.al., *Critical Edition*, p. 197-201

launching a fierce attack on the apostolic Christians and the rituals of sacrifice they have inherited from Judaism. The Sethians are directly referring to the apostolic Christians as fornicators who are sacrificing their own children and wives to Yaldabaoth. There is no doubt here whatsoever, that the Sethians regarded the apostolic Christians as servants of Yaldabaoth and the people that they think they save, they in actuality condemn. To the Sethians the apostolic church are not saving people when they are preaching to people, they are in fact sacrificing them to Yaldabaoth, Nebruel and Saklas and so the apostolic Christians, who regard themselves as pious and servants of God are actually servants of Yaldabaoth. If we keep in mind that Judas is to take the place of, or merge with, Yaldabaoth in the thirteenth aeon, it is clear that the apostolic Christians are viewed, by the Sethians, as actual servants of Judas, whom they have cursed. And the fact that they curse the one they actually serve makes them even more ignorant than if they were only blissfully oblivious to the fact that they serve Yaldabaoth and not the Great Invisible Spirit.

Concluding

We may ask ourselves why the Sethians chose to spend the time and the energy to write the *Gospel of Judas* and entitle it so, if not to make Judas the protagonist of the text. It could seem like redundant to do so if it does not bring a “new” Judas to the table. In some ways it does show us a “new” Judas. The Judas presented to us in this text is more evil than he is in the New Testament. He is much more closely related to the evil entity, the adversary of the supreme God, the “Lord of Destruction,” Yaldabaoth; the demiurge responsible for the creation of the perishable cosmos. Judas is mocked by Jesus, when Jesus reveals to him the secrets of the kingdom only to tell Judas that this is impossible for him to enter. Jesus tells Judas about salvation only to deny him salvation. And as if this was not enough Jesus tells Judas that he will come to rule over the thirteenth aeon, associating Judas with Yaldabaoth, maybe even suggesting that Judas takes the place of Yaldabaoth or becoming one with the demiurge. It gets even worse for Judas because not only will he become the pinnacle of all that is evil, he will be cursed by the generations of the other disciples, whom, we are told, worships Yaldabaoth. So even if Judas becomes one with Yaldabaoth, which would make Judas, in the guise of Yaldabaoth, the object of the misguided people’s worship, he would still be cursed by the very same people who are worshipping him. Indeed this is a terrible fate for Judas, and there is nothing Judas can do about it, because his star has already ascended or passed by, and thereby sealing his fate.

Another reason for the Sethians to write the *Gospel of Judas* was to ridicule the apostolic church. By pointing out the problems of the biblical God and portraying the disciples as feeble-minded and ignorant, using the very same references as the apostolic church, the Sethians made a strong argument about the apostolic authority being a fallacy; so much so that heresiologists like Irenaeus dedicated their whole lives to rebuttals of the Gnostic schools of thought.

So what kind of gospel is this? What is the “good news” of this text? It seems that at the time of writing the *Gospel of Judas* the term “Gospel” had already become a technical term about a religious text that told a story about Jesus. April DeConick has

suggested that the *Gospel of Judas* was a parody, written to mock and ridicule the apostolic Christians. This standpoint has by many been categorically refused with the argument that no such thing as a parody was known at the time of writing the *Gospel of Judas*.⁹² However, on her blog Dr. DeConick argues that parodies have been known since Aristotle, who refers to Hegemon of Thasos as a writer who takes known songs and changes some of the words, giving the songs a whole new and amusing meaning. Parody, means “against a song”, she states, and the Gnostics did something similar. They took a well known story and changed it a little to show how wrong and ridiculous the apostolic Christians were. She mentions several other Sethian texts that she regards parodies, for example *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* and *The Acts of John*.⁹³ There is no doubt in my mind that the author *Gospel of Judas* finds the apostolic Christianity laughable and ludicrous with regard to the veneration of the Old Testament God who is clearly inferior to the Great Invisible Spirit of the Sethians and of the authority given to the disciples who are seemingly ignorant and unable to understand who Jesus really is. The leap from this to saying that the *Gospel of Judas* is a parody is in my mind, not a very big one and seeing as parodies and ironic editing of well known songs have been known since at least the time of Aristotle it is definitely plausible that the Sethians chose to attack the apostolic church by using parodies as one of the weapons. And when we take into account that the Gnostics were familiar with Greek philosophy it seems even more likely that this could be the case with the *Gospel of Judas*.

The usage of ridiculing the apostolic Christians in the *Gospel of Judas* could also have served a more sociological purpose. We all know the feeling of coming together when you're a group of people laughing at something funny. Especially laughing at someone else's expense serves a purpose when you are a group of people laughing at another group of people's follies. It can give you a feeling of being together in that group, at least being together in not-belonging to the group of people you are laughing at. This may not be the most positive character trait in a human being, but I think that it is a quite universal way of determining which group you belong to and definitely which group you do

⁹² This was the case at the Codex Judas Congress, where several of the participants rejected the possibility of the *Gospel of Judas* being a parody, on the grounds of parodies were not “invented” until much later.

⁹³ <http://forbiddengospels.blogspot.com/2008/10/parody-and-gospel-of-judas.html>

not belong to. And if we take it that the *Gospel of Judas* was indeed written as a parody it could have served the purpose of uniting the group reading the text and definitely setting themselves apart from the apostolic Christianity. This is not the only purpose that this text would serve, because it is also a revelatory text written to educate the Sethians in the cosmology and cosmogony of the world and of the error of apostolic Christianity and the true nature of Judas as the chief archon Yaldabaoth. Furthermore the divinity of Jesus is confirmed in the text making him a divine being and the son in the triad of the Great Invisible spirit, Barbelo and the son. Interesting is also that the *Gospel of Judas* lack any account of the passion story. The text only mentions that Judas receives money and hand Jesus over. This is because the *Gospel of Judas* is not interested in the passion of Jesus. First of all it has no impact on Jesus, because he is not of this world, but from the upper realm of the Great Invisible Spirit and second of all the nature of the text is that it is a revelation discourse and is not an account of the life of Jesus. So it would serve very little purpose to the rest of the text to include the passion story.

So what can we learn from the *Gospel of Judas* that we did not already know about the Gnostics of the second century? For one we can learn, or confirm, that they found apostolic Christianity ludicrous and used parodies to distance themselves from it. One very important aspect of the whole staging of making the *Gospel of Judas* public is that the awareness of early Christianity outside the academic world has risen dramatically. From one day to the next the whole world wanted to know about this gospel. And for many people the *Gospel of Judas* was their first experience with Christian texts outside the Bible. For this reason the *Gospel of Judas* is an immensely important text for the study of early Christianity. It could help getting the study out to a larger audience letting people get a more nuanced image of Christianity in the early years. This is important because in the western world have built our culture upon Christian values, apostolic Christian values actually, which is why it is important to also tell the story of the various Christianities competing to gain the upper hand. Knowing this is key in understanding our cultural inheritance. However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the way the National Geographic Society and the team working with the *Codex Tchacos* is not by any means black and white. There are good as well as bad consequences about the way it was done. And it leaves behind

more questions than answers when we are discussing whether or not organizations that have to make a profit should be given the rights for an ancient book that has not yet been subjected to scholarly scrutiny and peer-review.

Epilogue

One thing that has really struck me in all my studies of early Christianity, and the texts hereof, is the apparent circulation of texts and books on the black market. I find it very sad and disturbing that ancient texts are circulating in the hands of people who may not have the knowledge to handle these ancient books. These books are suffering a perilous life and are in danger of being lost to us forever without ever being known to the scientific community. Who knows what precious and fascinating literature is out there? These texts and books belong in the hands of people who know how to handle them, they need to be studied, analyzed, translated and discussed by the scholarly community in order to shed more light on our common cultural ancestry.

Michael Baigent, who is best known for his contribution to the controversial book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the source of much of the commotion of *The Da Vinci Code*, the less said about this book, the better, explores in his most recent book *The Jesus Papers*, the underworld of the black market trading of ancient texts. He gives, in his book, an account of his experiences. And his version of the black market of ancient books is as colorful as any Hollywood movie. He reports being allowed to look at some old book, but only at gunpoint. The climax of his book is when he presents us with the report of him seeing the texts from which his book got its name, *The Jesus Papers*. These papers are allegedly written by Jesus himself and should contain his own version of the story of his life. This is of course highly unlikely, but we cannot know for sure until these papers have been properly studied and examined. At the very least they are hitherto unknown texts that in any case will enrich our knowledge of early Christian literature.

This brings us back to the subject of the National Geographic Society salvaging the *Gospel of Judas* from the black market and (eventually) allowing the scientific community to properly study this fascinating text. We should, no doubt, be thankful for the National Geographic Society's monetary ability to purchase the codex of which the *Gospel of Judas* is a part. On the other hand the way the society handled the study and publishing of the codex, leaves much to be desired. It is never a good thing when only a select few are allowed to study a text and even less so when these select few are sworn to secrecy,

especially when the motive for these precautions are for the purpose of creating the greatest hype and thereby the greatest profit.

The question is if there is any way around this. When important and interesting ancient texts are in the possession of unscrupulous black market business people, who may not care about the scientific importance of these books, but may be willing to let them deteriorate more and more until either the books are destroyed altogether or somebody is willing to pay the right price, is organizations like the National Geographic Society our only hope of getting a hold of these books and texts? And is non-disclosure contracts and secrecy not a price we should be willing to pay? I do not have the answer to these questions, but I think they are important points of discussion that the scientific community has to deal with eventually.

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