LANCE JENOTT

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Studien und Texte zu
Antike und Christentum
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The *Gospel of Judas*

Coptic Text, Translation, and Historical Interpretation of the 'Betrayer's Gospel'

Mohr Siebeck

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For my Parents,
John Jenott and Sylvia Clarke Riddell

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Princeton, New Jersey, 2011 Lance Jenott

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Introduction

The *Gospel of Judas* was originally written in Greek, probably in the second-century by a Christian author living somewhere in Mediterranean world. We now possess it in a single Coptic translation from a fourth-century papyrus manuscript (Codex Tchacos) which was probably discovered in Egypt in the 1970s, held by antiquities dealers for decades, and only made widely available in April 2006.

Although its title identifies it as a 'Gospel' (*euaggelion*), it differs significantly from the more familiar canonical Gospels in both genre and content. *Judas* purports to be a dialogue between Jesus and his twelve disciples, and sometimes Judas Iscariot alone, in the days just before Jesus went to his crucifixion. In many ways *Judas* assumes a quite different theology and mythology from the canonical Gospels: Jesus condemns his twelve disciples for serving a false god; he tells the disciples that he is not the son of their god, and that they do not know his true identity; he tells them that they belong only to the races of mortal humanity instead of the immortal "holy race" that pre-exists in the heavens.

My goal in this book is to explore the social setting and unique theological views of *Judas*'s author in order to understand how his voice fits into the history and development of the ancient Christian Church. But this book is not only about the *Gospel of Judas*. Although much of it focuses on explaining difficult passages of the text, it is also about controversies over church leadership and ritual practice, sectarian polemics and identity, mythological self-understanding, and how modern scholars conceptualize early Church history.

Methodologically, I analyze the *Gospel of Judas* as a Christian Gospel without relying on Gnosticism as a heuristic device. The pioneering work of Michael Williams and Karen King offers important correctives to the skewed picture of early Christianity that has been reiterated through the idea of Gnosticism. Nevertheless, most researchers were quick to interpret *Judas* as a Gnostic Gospel. As one prominent scholar puts it, "Since [*Judas*] is a Gnostic text, everything has to be constructed from a Gnostic point of

view, not seen through a New Testament lens. This may seem self-evident, but the two kinds of representation are easily confused."[1]

I suggest, however, that even more confusion has been introduced into the discussion of *Judas* by presupposing the very existence of a Gnostic point of view. Given the wide variety of perspectives both within the New Testament itself and among so-called Gnostic texts, I genuinely have no idea what constitutes a Gnostic point of view or a New Testament lens. Nevertheless, many researchers continue to employ these questionable generalizations in the service of historical analysis. In the following chapters, I provide new interpretations of the *Gospel of Judas* that complicate previous scholarly analyses, especially those which have read it through the lens of Gnosticism.

The National Geographic Society (NGS) first revealed the text of the *Gospel of Judas* in April of 2006 with the publication of two books. The first offered an annotated English translation with introductory essays by the editors and translators Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, and Marvin Meyer, along with an additional essay about the history of ancient Christianity and Gnostic heresy by popular church historian Bart Ehrman. The second volume, written by NGS investigative journalist Herbert Krosney, discussed the discovery of the manuscript, its life on the antiquities market (spiced with tales of its time spent in an Ohio freezer a long Island safe deposit box), the story of its acquisition by scholars, and how conservators reconstructed it like a jigsaw puzzle from mere scraps.

The initial NGS publication interpreted Judas Iscariot's figure in the *Gospel of Judas* as Jesus' favorite disciple and friend who, far from betraying his master, faithfully carried out Jesus' request to hand him over for crucifixion. This bold interpretation largely determined the terms of the debate for much subsequent discussion of the new Gospel. Their portrayal of a rehabilitated Judas quickly elicited a critical response from other scholars who saw a much more demonic portrayal of Judas Iscariot. Some even claimed that Judas's Gospel portrays him more demonically than any other Gospel.

One of my objectives in this book is to shift the focus of discussion away from the character of Judas Iscariot and toward what I see as the author's primary preoccupation, the immoral character of Jesus' twelve disciples. *Judas* opens with Jesus laughing when he sees his disciples offering a eucharistic prayer. As the narrative continues, Jesus' criticism of the disciples thickens when he likens them to thoroughly immoral priests who

[1] Gesine Schenke Robinson, "The *Gospel of Judas*: Its Protagonist, its Composition, and its Community," in *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex held at Rice University, Houston Texas, March 13–16, 2008*, ed. April DeConick (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 76.

offer human sacrifice to an angry god. How are we to understand such a critical representation of the Twelve? Because many scholars read *Judas* as a Gnostic gospel that denies any value in the death of Jesus, they see its depiction of the disciples offering sacrifice as a Gnostic criticism of orthodox Christianity's sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death and the Eucharist ritual that reenacts it. Others, including myself, have suggested that *Judas*'s criticism of human sacrifice was directed at church leaders who promoted sacrificial martyrdoms.

In Chapter 1, I argue that *Judas* interprets Jesus' sacrificial death in a positive light, as an event which brought salvation to humanity through a triumph over demons and the power of Death. Far from embracing a docetic Christology that denies the reality and value of the crucifixion, *Judas* assumes a Christology of Jesus' two natures that was shared by many early Christians who maintained a distinction between the heavenly savior and his human body, and found positive soteriological meaning in the death of his human nature alone.

I then proceed in Chapter 2 to discuss the target of *Judas*'s criticism. Building upon my argument in Chapter 1, I argue that *Judas*'s author was not concerned with the sacrificial theology of Jesus' death or martyrdom, but rather with the question of who can rightfully claim leadership in the church, preside over church meetings, and administer the Eucharist. The author was angry about the nascent clergy's claim to unique positions of authority in the church, which included the exclusive right to mediate between God and humanity through the administration of the Eucharist. In response, he launched a vituperative smear campaign against the legitimacy of the clergy by attacking the foundation of their authority, the twelve disciples. In direct opposition to the myth that Jesus had chosen the Twelve to evangelize the world, establish churches, and transmit his teachings to their own chosen successors, the bishops, *Judas*'s story claims that the twelve disciples never understood Jesus correctly, were blasphemous disciples, and like wicked priests led people astray in the worship of a false god. By telling the story of the twelve disciples this way, the author hoped to convince his contemporaries that the upstart clergy's claims to leadership were bogus, and that their entire cult was invalid.

Another question scholars continue to debate is how the *Gospel of Judas* relates to so-called Sethian texts. Modern scholars use the term 'Sethian' to refer to a group of ancient religious writings that share unique characters, stories, themes, and interpretations of scripture, and frequently appeal to Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, as the spiritual ancestor of a holy race, 'the seed of Seth.' Although we know little about the people who actually wrote these texts, most scholars believe that they belonged to a group of Christians who understood themselves as the spiritual progeny

of Seth. Just as Seth represented a fresh start for humanity after the tragedy of Cain and Able, these Sethian Christians saw themselves as agents of divine Providence placed in the world for its betterment. They were deeply concerned with the problem of evil and the demonic forces that oppress humanity, and with ways of improving the human condition until the world's final consummation.[2]

Based on the mythological story of creation in the *Gospel of Judas*, scholars agree that its author participated in this variety of early Christianity in one way or another. However, disagreement continues over how to understand the details of *Judas*'s creation story, what it reveals about the development of Sethian theology, and even whether it can be considered 'genuine' Sethian thought. The editors of the initial NGS translation proposed that *Judas*'s myth represents an early form of Sethian theology that had not yet developed into the more complex Sethian thought as found in texts such as the *Apocryphon of John*. Conversely, other scholars maintain that *Judas*'s mythology represents a late, corrupt, and confused blend of theology that only bears superficial affinities to 'genuine' Sethian texts.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the question of how to make sense of the *Gospel of Judas*'s myth of creation. I argue that one need not rely on linear models of development that posit relatively early or late forms of myth. Instead, I propose that we interpret *differences* among Sethian texts in terms of their authors' individual agendas and commitments. In response to interpretations of *Judas*'s myth that stress its confused and corrupt character, I offer explanations for how to read it in a coherent manner, as a creation story tailored to support the author's polemic against the twelve disciples whose cult worship serves a false god.

In Chapter 4, I leave behind questions about the 'original' setting of *Judas*'s author in the second century, and focus on the question of why anyone would have copied it in later generations. What appeal did this Gospel have for later Christians, especially the fourth-century Egyptians who translated it into Coptic and bound it in a book with other Christians writings? Scholars have observed that the various texts in Codex Tchacos reveal a marked interest in stories about persecution and martyrdom. Some have therefore seen it as evidence that "the Gnostic religion" was still

[2] The standard dossier of Sethian texts includes the *Apocryphon of John*, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* (or *Gospel of the Egyptians*), *Apocalypse of Adam*, *Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes*, *Melchizedek*, *Thought of Norea, Allogenes*, *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *Gospel of Judas*, and the untitled treatise in the Bruce Codex. For an introduction to the Sethians, see Michael A. Williams, "Sethianism," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics,"* ed. Antii Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 32–63. For a longer treatment, see John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001).

thriving in third- and fourth-century Egypt, where it suffered persecution at the hands of the Roman government and the orthodox Christian Church.

In contrast, I argue that this Codex is best understood as the product of a Christian community at a time when the boundaries of orthodoxy and a limited canon of scripture had not yet been established or widely agreed upon. The Christian character of the Codex is visible in the scribal practices of the person who copied it, especially Christian *nomina sacra* and crucifix iconography. In a world pervaded by hostile spirits that threatened nearly all aspects of daily life, a book like this one would have had broad appeal to Egyptians interested in information about how to combat demons, sought access to divine power that could protect them from harm, and found inspiration in stories about heroes like Jesus and other martyrs who overcame demonic attacks.

Finally, I present a new Coptic edition, English translation, and exegetical commentary of the *Gospel of Judas* (Appendices A–B). I created the new edition because it became apparent in my initial research that many basic text-critical problems remained in the National Geographic's *editio princeps* which obstructed interpretation of this Gospel. In some instances I have improved upon the reading of the NGS transcript in places where only partially visible ink traces remain. In other cases, I have removed problematic reconstructions and suggested alternatives which make greater sense of the text. In the following chapters, I point to many of my new readings as they become relevant for the discussion.

A final word about the date of the *Gospel of Judas* is necessary since scholars hold widely divergent views about when the original composition occurred. As I noted above, the single extant manuscript, a Coptic translation of a now-lost Greek original, dates in all probability to the fourth century. The original composition, then, could theoretically have been composed at any time between the first and fourth centuries.

Because Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, refers to a *Gospel of Judas* around the year 180, many scholars date the original composition to a period slightly before his time in the middle of the second century. Others, however, argue that there may have been more than one *Gospel of Judas* in antiquity, and that the one we possess comes from a time after Irenaeus. Still others suggest that our *Judas* is a composite text, consisting of an original proto-*Judas* known to Irenaeus, to which a later editor added the Sethian mythological section.

I date the original composition of our *Gospel of Judas* to the middle of the second century and believe it was roughly the same text known to Irenaeus. There is no indication that more than one *Gospel of Judas* circulated in antiquity. Those who maintain that multiple Gospels carried this title follow a dubious reasoning based on the evaluation of the character of

Judas Iscariot: while Irenaeus implies that his text portrays Judas positively, ours allegedly portrays him negatively; therefore the two cannot be the same Gospel.

There are, however, a number of other ways to explain this supposed discrepancy. The fact that modern scholars have been so divided over how to interpret the character of Judas in this Gospel could suggest that Irenaeus himself found its portrayal of Judas to be ambiguous. In any event, regardless of how Irenaeus interpreted the text, it would have been in his interest to slander those who wrote it by claiming that it rehabilitates the arch villain.

Furthermore, there is no conclusive evidence of secondary redaction that requires a post-Irenaean date. In the process of transmission texts do of course almost always undergo some degree of alteration. But with only one manuscript of the *Gospel of Judas*, there is no empirical way for us to determine the extent to which it *could* have been altered from its original version. Internal evidence of redaction derived from form criticism and possible literary seams are too speculative to conclude that our Gospel must have undergone various stages of redaction by multiple editors.

Therefore while I recognize the complexities involved with each hypothesis, my own conclusion is that our *Gospel of Judas* is the work of a single author who wrote sometime before Irenaeus, probably around the middle of the second century, and like all authors, was inspired by and drew from various sources in the innovative creation of his own narrative. The author wrote his Gospel the middle of the second century at a time when ecclesiastical offices and the myth of apostolic succession were still new and in debate, when a closed canon of scripture was far from agreed upon, and when orthodox Christian teaching had not yet been determined (if it ever has). Like his more famous contemporary Marcion, the author of *Judas* denies any credibility to the notion that the twelve disciples were a holy group of men chosen by Jesus to lead the Christian church.

Chapter 1

Jesus' Sacrifice 'for the Salvation of Humanity'

A. Introduction: Christus Victor

Many scholars describe the *Gospel of Judas* as a 'bad news' Gospel. They allege that it has no interest in salvation, that its Jesus comes not to save humanity but to condemn it, and that his sacrificial death has no redemptive value. According to Johanna Brankaer and Hans-Gebhart Bethge, *Judas* provides "no alternative to the dreadful description of the reality governed by the archons in which the 'human race' finds itself. For these people there is apparently no salvation, but only condemnation and destruction."[1] Others propose a similarly gloomy interpretation, that *Judas* is an anti-Gospel composed to condemn humanity.[2]

Yet the *Gospel of Judas* begins with a statement to the contrary, that when Jesus appeared upon the earth, "he performed signs and great wonders for the salvation of humanity" (33.6–9). Then again near its narrative climax, Jesus prophesies that after Judas Iscariot offers him as a sacrifice, the demonic world ruler will be destroyed and "the [*fruit*][3] of the great race

[1] Johanna Brankaer and Hans-Gebhard Bethge, *Codex Tchacos: Texte und Analysen.* Berlin-Brandenburgische Akadamie der Wissenschaften. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Band 161 (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 441: "es keine Alternative zur grausamen Schilderung der von den Archonten bestimmten Wirklichkeit gibt, in der sich das 'Menschengeschlecht' befindet. Für diese Menschen gibt es offensichtlich keine Erlösung, sondern nur die Verurteilung und die Vernichtung."

[2] See, for example, Gesine Schenke Robinson, "The *Gospel of Judas*: Its Protagonist, its Composition, and its Community," in *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex held at Rice University, Houston Texas, March 13–16, 2008*, ed. April DeConick (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 75–94, esp. 93: "The *Gospel of Judas* evidently shows no interest in redemption and salvation of humankind, since everyone born mortal is under the control of the erroneous stars and thus destined for eternal doom." Cf. John D. Turner, "The Sethian Myth in the *Gospel of Judas*: Soteriology or Demonology?" in *Codex Judas Papers*, 95–133, esp. 96–98; idem, "The Place of the *Gospel of Judas* in Sethian Tradition," in *The Gospel of Judas in Context: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Gospel of Judas*, ed. Madeleine Scopello (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 196.

[3] I reconstruct ⲡ̣[ⲕⲁⲣ]ⲡⲟⲥ, '[*fruit*].' The *Critical Edition* reconstructs ⲡ̣ⲧ̣[ⲩ]ⲡⲟⲥ, 'image.' See below (pp. 33–34) for discussion.

of Adam shall be exalted" (57.9–12). How are we to interpret these passages if *Judas* has no interest in human salvation? What are the signs and great wonders that Jesus accomplishes for the salvation of humanity? How does *Judas* imagine that Jesus brought salvation?

In this chapter, I investigate the soteriology and eschatological vision of the *Gospel of Judas*. As we shall see, this Gospel reflects a conventional Jewish and Christian apocalyptic mythology which assumes that the world has fallen under the domination of apostate angels who victimize humanity, lead people astray into sin and error, and pretend to be gods by receiving sacrifice. Though the majority of the human races unwittingly serve these fallen angels, there remains a minority group, a "holy race," that dwells on earth and transmits from generation to generation the knowledge that God originally gave to Adam in order to resist demonic rule. Despite the power of these apostate angels, their reign will not last indefinitely. God will intervene in human history and execute divine justice by putting to shame both the demons and the unrighteous people who serve them. In this scenario, as in others strands of apocalyptic thought, the righteous among humanity will ultimately be exalted and join God in the eternal realms.

How and when will God execute his justice? In the *Gospel of Judas*'s apocalyptic imagination, Jesus' appearance on earth, his signs and wonders, his teaching and revelations, and, as I will argue, his sacrificial death, mark the beginning of the eschatological sequence. For after Jesus prophesies to Judas that "you shall sacrifice the person who bears me," he continues with eschatological pronouncements of monumental social and cosmic significance: "[*the thrones*] of the realm have been [*defeated*]; the kings have become weak; the races of the angels have mourned; the wickedness they [*sowed* . . .] is obliterated; [*and*] the ruler is wiped out." Jesus then proclaims that "the [*fruit*] of the great race of Adam shall be exalted" (56.17–57.12).

It is clear that Jesus' sacrificial death precipitates this story of salvation. Yet as many scholars have observed, nothing in the *Gospel of Judas* suggests that its author interpreted Jesus' sacrifice as an atonement for sin.[4] Instead, *Judas* shares with many ancient Christians a different understanding of atonement, what Gustaf Aulén calls the 'mythological' and 'dramatic view' of Christ's death.[5] Aulén's study of atonement theology in the

[4] Marvin Meyer, "Interpreting Judas: Ten Passages in the *Gospel of Judas*," in *Gospel of Judas in Context*, 52: "The crucifixion will be, in a way, a sacrifice, but there is no indication that it has any salvific value as, for example, a sacrifice for sins." Cf. April DeConick, *The Thriteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 131.

[5] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: MacMillan, 1956), 4.

early Church, focused on the writings now included in the New Testament and the Church Fathers, stresses that early Christians did not understand Jesus' death exclusively as an atonement sacrifice for human sin. This was only one popular interpretation formulated by his early followers (e.g., Paul, the Synoptic Gospels, John). Many early Christians also understood his death as the climactic event in a mythological drama, an act of cosmic significance which broke the dominion of demons, annihilated Satan, and liberated humanity from Sin and Death. As Aulén observes,

> This type of view may be described provisionally as the "dramatic." Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the "tyrants" under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.[6]

The Epistle to the Hebrews exemplifies the dramatic view of atonement as a victory over demonic power: "Since therefore the children share flesh and blood, [Christ] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the Devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (2:14–15).[7]

Aulén argues that although the dramatic view of atonement predominated among early Christians, it was largely repressed by such medieval theologians as Anselm and Abelard who sought to rationalize redemption theology away from its more irrational, mythological roots.[8] According to Aulén, subsequent Christian theologians came to regard the dramatic view

> as representing a lower theological level and as being able to contribute only images and symbolical expressions, not a clearly worked-out theological scheme. There lies behind this criticism a particular view of the nature of theology: an implied demand that the Christian faith must be clearly expressed in the form of a rational doctrine . . . They disliked intensely the "mythological" language of the early Church about Christ's redemptive work, and the realistic, often undeniably grotesque imagery, in which the victory of Christ over the devil, or the deception of the devil, was depicted in lurid colours. Thus the whole dramatic view was branded as "mythological." The matter was settled. The patristic teaching was of inferior value, and could be summarily relegated to the nursery or the lumber-room of theology.[9]

The soteriological narrative of the *Gospel of Judas* – including the sacrifice of Jesus' body, the obliteration of the demonic world ruler, and the exaltation of the great race of Adam – is wholly intelligible in terms of the *Christus Victor* mythology which, as Aulén reminds us, was so popular

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[6] Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 4.

[7] See similarly Colossians 2:13–15; Romans 6:1–14; Galatians 1:4; John 12:31–33, 16:8–11; 1 Timothy 2:9–10; 2 Timothy 1:20; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 5:5, 12:22.

[8] Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 1–15.

[9] Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 9–10.

among early Christians. And not only the *Gospel of Judas*, but as we shall see, other Sethian, or so-called 'classic Gnostic' texts depict the messiah as a figure who brought salvation by descending into the human person of Jesus, undergoing crucifixion, and conquering over demons and the power of Death. To be sure, not all Sethian texts refer to the death of Jesus; but those that do, like *Judas*, interpret his passion through the dramatic view of redemption.

However, many scholars overlook this interpretation of Jesus' sacrificial death in *Gospel of Judas* because they read it in terms of Gnosticism and the various clichés associated with that idea. The cliché of Docetism – the denial of the reality of Jesus' incarnation, suffering, and death – has led many scholars to blur the connection *Judas* makes between Jesus' sacrifice and salvation. As we shall see, interpreters who see a docetic Christology in *Judas* maintain that it denies the redemptive power of Jesus' sacrifice because, they assert, he did not really die.

Furthermore, interpretations of the *Gospel of Judas*'s attitude toward sacrifice have been influenced by another cliché about Gnosticism, that Gnostics rejected ritual in exchange for salvation through esoteric knowledge. According to Kurt Rudolph, this alleged Gnostic disapproval of ritual "stems from the nature of Gnosis itself":

> In its very conception of the world [Gnosis] is really anti-cultic: All "hylic" (material) institutions are disqualified and regarded as futile for redemption. Strictly speaking this is true also of the cultic domain. Sacraments like baptism and the last supper (eucharist) cannot effect salvation and therefore do not possess those qualities that are "necessary for salvation".[10]

Yet because of the rich evidence for cultic practices revealed in the Nag Hammadi sources, Rudolph immediately qualifies his description by pointing out that in practice "only a very few branches. . . adopted this radical standpoint." The fact that Rudolph maintains the old cliché instead of abandoning it altogether only reinforces the impression of how pervasive it is in scholarly formulations about Gnosticism.

The idea that Gnostics regarded ritual as ineffective also lurks in the background of interpretations of the *Gospel of Judas*. Many scholars have argued that *Judas* contains a wholesale rejection of ritual, including sacrifice, baptism, and Eucharist. Accordingly, when Jesus predicts that Judas Iscariot will sacrifice him, it must be understood as a Gnostic criticism of

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[10] Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. McLaughlin Wilson (SanFrancisco: Harper & Row, 1987; reprinted from Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 218.

Christian atonement theology and the Eucharist which ritually commemorates it.[11]

In this chapter, I interpret the Christology and soteriology of the *Gospel of Judas* without relying on presuppositions informed by the traditional clichés associated with Gnosticism. I will first discuss the question of what Christology *Judas* assumes and the difficulties involved with interpreting it as docetic. I argue that *Judas*'s Christology is best understood as a variation of the two-natures Christology which one finds throughout the writings of many early Christian theologians who maintained a distinction between Jesus' human body and the divine being that descended into it. This discussion will pave the way for my interpretation of *Judas* in terms of a Christian soteriology which maintained that the suffering of the savior's human nature alone effected salvation.

I will then turn to the question of how *Judas* interprets the sacrificial death of Jesus. Previous scholarship notwithstanding, I argue that we need not understand this Gospel's evaluation of sacrifice as altogether negative. Jesus' sacrificial death may be understood as a positive soteriological event in *Judas* if we read this Gospel's rhetoric on sacrifice in continuity with a broader Christian supersessionist ideology which denigrated animal sacrifices of Jews and pagans while simultaneously upheld the sacrifice of Jesus as the watershed act of salvation. Far from advocating a docetic denial of the passion, *Judas* assumes that the sacrificial death of Jesus' body precipitated the salvation of humanity according to the mythology of *Christus Victor.* By destroying the curse of death placed upon humanity by the demonic world ruler, Jesus allows "the great race of Adam" to be exalted.

B. Docetic or Two-Natures Christology?

Docetic interpretations of the *Gospel of Judas* perpetuate a long-standing scholarly tradition of associating Gnosticism with Docetism. One often reads that Gnostics believed in a docetic Jesus whose death had no importance for human salvation.[12] Indeed, as Elaine Pagels has pointed out, "For

[11] See Louis Painchaud, "À propos de la (re)découverte de l'Évangile de Judas," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 62.3 (2006): 553–568; idem, "Polemical Aspects of the *Gospel of Judas*," in *Gospel of Judas in Context*, 171–186; Frank Williams, "The *Gospel of Judas*: Its Polemic, its Exegesis, and its Place in Church History," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008), 372.

[12] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (2nd edition, revised; Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 78: "the suffering and death they [i.e., the archons] are able to inflict upon him are not real at all." Jonas admits in a footnote, however, that *The Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3) evaluates Jesus' suffering and death with "a religious significance far surpassing what is

many, gnosticism is virtually synonymous with docetism."[13] J. N. D. Kelly exemplifies the traditional view in his classic study of early Christian doctrines:

> Known as Docetism, the distinctive thesis which gave it its name (*dokein* = 'to seem') was that Christ's manhood, and hence His sufferings, were unreal, phantasmal . . . Docetism was not a simple heresy on its own; it was an attitude which infected a number of heresies, particularly Marcionism and Gnosticism.[14]

According to Kelly, Docetism naturally appealed to Gnostics because of their contempt for material existence: "Because in general they disparaged matter and were disinterested in history, the Gnostics . . . were prevented from giving full value to the fundamental Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Word."[15] One finds similar generalizations throughout scholarship on Gnosticism.

Because the first commentators on the *Gospel of Judas* read it as a Gnostic Gospel, they naturally found a docetic interpretation of Jesus' incarnation and death. In Bart Ehrman's estimation, "Jesus only appears to have a real flesh-and-blood body for his time here on earth in human form. He needs to escape this mortal coil to return to his heavenly home." His death has no significance for the salvation of humanity, but only benefits Jesus as "his own escape" from a bodily prison.[16] According to Ehrman,

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usual in so-called Christian Gnosticism." Such an admission of variety on this point is telling since Jonas had so few documents from Nag Hammadi at his disposal (his other chief "gnostic" sources were the heresiological reports, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, W. Till's edition of the *Apocryphon of John* [BG 8502], and the Mandaean *Ginza* and *Johannesbuch*). One wonders if Jonas's analysis would have been significantly different had he known the variety of perspectives on Jesus' suffering and crucifixion represented among the Nag Hammadi writings.

[13] Elaine Pagels, "Gnostic and Orthodox views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian Response to Persecution," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), vol. 1, 262–283, citation from 262. For a critical discussion of Docetism in so-called Gnostic texts, see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism*? (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 208–217; Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 122.

[14] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (revised edition; San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 141.

[15] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 28.

[16] Bart Ehrman, "Christianity Turned on Its Head," in *The Gospel of Judas*, ed. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 109–110. Cf. Wilhelm Pratscher, "Judas Iskariot im Neuen Testament und im Judasevangelium," *Novum Testamentum* 52 (2010), 4n15: "Die Christologie (inkl. Soteriologie) entspricht in der Vorstellung der Sendung Jesu aus der himmlischen Welt und der Rückkehr in sie der traditionellen kirchlichen Präexistenz- und Sendungschristologie (vgl. Phil 2:5–11; Joh 1:1–18; Kol 1:15–16 u.ö.), sie ist aber betont doketisch orientiert."

"salvation comes not through the death and resurrection of Jesus, but through the revelation of secret knowledge that he provides."[17]

Relying on the same cliché about Gnostic liberation from the body, James Robinson asserts that "the ultimate point" of this Gospel is that "with Judas' help Jesus, or more exactly, the divine part trapped in Jesus' human body, is escaping back to heaven"; that Gnostics were fond of "twisting" the passion narrative, so that "the crucifixion is what liberates Jesus' divine self to escape from his human body"; that "orthodox Christianity worships the crucified Jesus, but Gnostics worship the divine spark of the divine liberated by the crucifixion from imprisonment in the body of flesh"; and finally that this Gospel explains how "the divine spark imprisoned in Jesus escaped back to heaven."[18] Others see Judas Iscariot as "a kind of true Gnostic priest" who helps Jesus "presumably by releasing Jesus' spirit from its bodily imprisonment."[19]

Ehrman develops a docetic interpretation even further in his book *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (2006). According to his analysis, there are in fact two kinds of Docetism: a 'phantasmal' type, which posits that Jesus did not have a regular flesh-and-blood body, but merely appeared to people in human form like a ghost; and second, a 'separationist' type, which affirms the reality of Jesus' incarnation, but maintains that he evaded suffering by abandoning his body before the passion.[20]

According to Ehrman, the *Gospel of Judas* offers a double dose of docetism by the inclusion of both types. The phantasmal type, he maintains, is visible in *Judas*'s opening comment that Jesus would often appear to his disciples "as a child" (ⲛ̅ϩ̅ⲣ̅ⲟⲧ 33.19–20). Ehrman extrapolates from this passage that "Jesus was polymorphous, able to change his appearance at will, not a real flesh-and-blood human . . . Jesus was not really human but only appeared to be."[21] In addition, he and other scholars find a form of separationist docetism in Jesus' language about "the person who bears me" (ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲉⲧⲣ̅ⲫⲟⲣⲉⲓ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲓ 56.20–21). I shall treat both of these interpretations in turn.

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[17] Ehrman, "Christianity Turned on Its Head," 102.

[18] James Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and his Lost Gospel* (2nd edition; New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 228, 230, 231, 232, 234 respectively.

[19] Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas: Rewriting Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106.

[20] Bart Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107–110.

[21] Ehrman, *Lost Gospel*, 108.

I. Phantasmal Docetism

Ehrman's argument for phantasmal Docetism in the *Gospel of Judas* is complicated first and foremost by the fact that the meaning of the Coptic word ϩⲣⲟⲧ, which underlies the translation 'child,' remains highly ambiguous. Some scholars suggest that the Coptic phrase in question (ⲛ̄ϩⲣⲟⲧ) does not at all mean "as a child," but should be understood adverbially as "he appeared to his disciples *when necessary*."[22]

Yet even if we accept the reading that Jesus sometimes appeared to his disciples as a child, such an idea need not be understood in terms of a docetic Christology. In the canonical Gospels, Jesus disappears like a ghost, though Luke emphatically says he is not one (24:31–43), and eerily enters securely locked rooms as if walking through walls (John 20:19–26). In Mark and Matthew's Gospels Jesus has the power to transform into other forms (μεταμορφώθη Matthew 17:2, Mark 9:2), while Luke (9:29) says that the appearance of his face changed into something else (ἐγένετο … τὸ εἶδος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἕτερον). If, therefore, *Judas*'s Jesus has the miraculous power to appear to his disciples in forms other than himself, then there is no reason to assume that it is because his body is an apparition. Such power would be no more docetic than the Christology of the canonical Gospels.

Indeed, commenting on the transfiguration of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, Origen recounts a similar understanding of Jesus' ability to appear to people in different ways:

> A tradition about him has come down to us that not only did two forms co-exist in him – the first in which everyone would see him, and another as he was transfigured openly before his disciples on the mountain when his visage shone like the sun – but that he would also appear to each person in the way they deserved. And although he was himself, he would not seem as himself to everyone . . . This tradition does not seem incredible to me, whether (the transformations happened) corporeally on account of Jesus himself, so that he appeared to people in this way or that; or whether it was on account of the Word's nature that he did not appear in the same way to everyone.[23]

As Origen says, he believes the tradition even though he does not precisely understand how Jesus accomplished the transformations. He proposes that

[22] For discussion of the lexical difficulties and different suggestions as to the term's meaning, see the note on 33.20 in Appendix B.

[23] Origen, *In Matthaeum commentariorum series* 100 (Migne, PG vol. 13, 1750b–c): Venit ergo traditio talis ad nos de eo, quoniam non solum duae formae in cofuerunt, una quidem secundum quam omnes cum videbant, altera autem secundum quam transfiguratus est coram discipulis suis in monte, quando et resplenduit facies eius tanquam sol, sed etiam unicuique apparebat secundum quod fuerat dignus. Et cum fuisset ipse, quasi non ipse omnibus videbatur. . . Et non mihi videtur incredibilis esse traditio haec, sive corporaliter propter ipsum Jesum, ut alio et alio modo videretur hominibus; sive propter ipsam Verbi naturam, quod non similiter cunctis apparet.

Jesus either transformed himself physically, or that people saw Jesus differently according to each one's ability to perceive the Word. Either way, Origen expresses no concern that the story could be misconstrued as 'phantasmal' Docetism.

The idea that Jesus could change into different forms or appear to people in different ways has nothing to do with Docetism. Christians who genuinely advocated 'phantasmal' Docetism (e.g., the opponents of 1 and 2 John and Ignatius; Saturninus *apud* Irenaeus; and Marcion *apud* Tertullian) evidently did not teach that Jesus changed his shape, but simply maintained that he did not truly appear in human flesh.

What, then, does the *Gospel of Judas* mean when it describes Jesus appearing to his disciples "as a child"? Karen King observes that among other qualities such as innocence and divine wisdom, the image of a child points to the "hidden or unexpected presence of the divine."[24] Following King's observation, I suggest that *Judas* deliberately echoes the beginning of Isaiah's famous Suffering Servant discourse (53:1–12 LXX) where the prophet declares that "he was like a child (ὡς παιδίον), like a root in thirsty ground, with neither beauty nor honor" (53:2). Indeed, τὸ παιδίον is among the Greek words to which *Judas*'s Coptic term ϩⲢⲞⲨ (ⲥⲢⲞ†) corresponds.[25]

Representing Jesus through the imagery of the Suffering Servant highlights his lowly character in human form and the fact that he was misunderstood by those who should have received him. 1 Clement quotes the same passage (ὡς παιδίον) to emphasize how Jesus appeared on earth in humility and servitude, "and in this form was despised" (16:3). *Judas*'s author may have intended a similar meaning: that Jesus often appeared among his disciples as a child signifies that they saw him as crude and insignificant, not in his true heavenly glory. The disciples' perception of Jesus in this way thus anticipates their misapprehension of his real nature and origin in the eternal realm later in the dialogue (34.11–35.21).

II. Separationist Docetism

The *Gospel of Judas* maintains a distinction between Jesus' human body and true self, that is, his divine being which came from the immortal realm (35.17–19). In this Gospel, Jesus refers to his human body by speaking of "the person who bears (φορεῖν) me." He asserts that only his body will suffer, while his true self will remain unharmed: "tomorrow he who bears me will be tortured. Yet indeed I [*say*] to you, no hand of a dying mortal

[24] Elaine Pagels and Karen King, *Reading Judas: the Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007), 126–127.

[25] Walter Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, 631b.

[*will fall*] upon me . . . The person who bears me, you shall sacrifice him" (56.7–21).

Ehrman and other scholars interpret Jesus' words as a strand of 'separationist' Docetism – the idea that the spiritual Jesus evaded suffering by fleeing his body before the crucifixion. According to Ehrman, *Judas*'s Christology implies that "Jesus himself was a man in whom the divine aeon, Christ, made his temporary residence. This understanding also claimed that Christ himself did not really suffer . . . because Christ had departed from the man Jesus prior to his death."[26]

In support of this interpretation, other scholars point to a climactic scene near the end of the *Gospel of Judas* in which someone – either Judas or Jesus – enters a luminous cloud while a revelatory voice speaks to those who remain on the ground below:

> Judas raised his eyes; saw the luminous cloud; and he entered it (ⲓ̈ⲟⲩⲇⲁⲥ ⲇⲉ ⲁϥϥⲓⲁⲧ̄ϥ̄ ⲉϩ̄ⲣ̄ⲁⲉⲓ ⲁϥⲛⲁⲩ ⲉⲧϭⲏⲡⲉ ⲛ̄ⲟⲩⲟⲓⲛ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲁϥϥⲱⲕ ⲉϩ̄ⲟ̄ⲩⲛ ⲉⲣⲟⲥ). Then the people standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying "[. . .] great race [. . . *(3 missing lines)*]." Then Judas stopped looking at Jesus. (57.22–58.6)

According to Gesine Schenke Robinson, this scene depicts "the final departure" of the spiritual Jesus from the earth before Judas Iscariot hands his body over for crucifixion.[27] Key to her interpretation is a nuanced reading of the first sentence: "Judas raised his eyes; saw the luminous cloud; and he (Jesus) entered it." Schenke Robinson stresses that while the first two clauses are grammatically connected by asyndeton (appositional linkage which does not require a conjunction), the third clause could form an independent unit due to the preceding conjunction ⲁⲩⲱ. While she understands Judas as the subject of the first two verbs, she maintains that Jesus is the subject of the third verb.[28] Thus in her view, it is Jesus who enters the cloud, leaving his body behind and ascending to heaven:

> This time it is his final departure. . . . The scene here not only alludes to Jesus' transfiguration in the canonical gospels . . . but obviously also to the cloud that lifts Jesus up and carries him into heaven (Luke 24:5; Acts 1:9). . . . In the final scene, the man being handed over by Judas is not the same Jesus any longer. According to the well-known docetic understanding, it is the man who temporarily carried Jesus, who gave Jesus his empty appearance; it is but an empty body, since Jesus' inner self, the spiritual Jesus, has already left the world at the time of the "betrayal."[29]

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[26] Ehrman, *Lost Gospel*, 108.

[27] Gesine Schenke Robinson, "The Relationship of the Gospel of Judas to the New Testament and to Sethianism," *Journal of Coptic Studies* 10 (2008): 63–98, at 65–68.

[28] The same interpretation was proposed by Birger Pearson in "The Figure of Judas in the Coptic Gospel of Judas," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2007.

[29] Schenke Robinson, "Relationship," 67–68.