

The Thirteenth Daimon: Judas and Sophia in the *Gospel of Judas*

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Like my colleague and friend Professor April DeConick, author of *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*, I too recently read a text that interested me greatly but caused me to believe something went terribly wrong.¹ The text DeConick read was the translation of the *Gospel of Judas* prepared by the National Geographic team of translators, which included Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, François Gaudard, and myself. The text I read was DeConick's own book, which puts forward a revisionist interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*.

In her book, Professor DeConick attempts to correct what she regards as our oversights and to put forward the real meaning of the *Gospel of Judas*. What she produces, she is convinced, points to a totally different gospel than anything we might have imagined—a gospel of tragedy that is more *dysangelium* than *evangelium*. I personally find the thesis of Professor DeConick's book, that the *Gospel of Judas* is a gospel parody, to be interesting and provocative, and in principle I remain open to a document, ancient or modern, that functions as a tragic or even nihilistic text. In her book there are a number of points about the interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas*, including her comments on the critique of apostolic succession in the text, that merit serious consideration. But what initially bothered me—and continues to bother me—about DeConick's book is that everything we know about ancient gospels flies in the face of her basic thesis. In genre the *Gospel of Judas* closely resembles other so-called Gnostic

gospels, and all of them proclaim the good news of salvation through gnosis. I know of nothing quite like a gospel parody in all the literature of antiquity and late antiquity. Rather, this idea of a gospel parody seems to impose modern, Kafkaesque categories of genre onto an ancient text—and one that is perfectly comprehensible in light of ancient generic conventions.

According to Professor DeConick, all the apparently positive features of the *Gospel of Judas* should be treated with a wink and an elbow to the ribs. Isn't the title the "good news" of Judas? Sure, says DeConick—but it's really bad news for Judas. What about the Sethian confession of Jesus' identity uttered by Judas and Judas alone? For DeConick, this merely provides a hilarious juxtaposition between the intelligent "baddie of the baddies" and the dimwitted twelve. And how to explain the textual opening or incipit, promising revelatory conversations between Jesus and Judas Iscariot? And Jesus' private revelations to Judas, including the sprawling cosmogonic revelation that dominates the central portion of the text? And Jesus' repeated statements that he has revealed the mystery of the kingdom of God to Judas and told him everything? Actually, claims DeConick, this is all part of Jesus' mischievous ploy to let Judas know just how evil he is. All of this is a cruel joke, even though other Gnostic gospels present these same elements as the proclamation of Gnostic good news. Yes, Jesus laughs a great deal in the *Gospel of Judas*, as he laughs in other Gnostic texts, but he says more than once in the gospel that he is not laughing at Judas or the other disciples.

So I was and still am bothered. I am also disappointed by the accusations, some printed in Professor DeConick's December 2007 *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, concerning the work of the translational team that produced the initial transcription and

translation of the *Gospel of Judas* and the other texts in Codex Tchacos. DeConick refers to our “mistranslations” and offers her own “corrected” versions, when in fact both alternatives are almost always provided in the popular Judas book (*The Gospel of Judas*) and the critical edition of Codex Tchacos (*The Gospel of Judas, Together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes, from Codex Tchacos: Critical Edition*). As DeConick must know, these are not “mistranslations” at all, but rather they represent alternative ways of understanding a difficult text.

For example, the word *daimōn* (44,21), a term of Greek derivation, is used in the *Gospel of Judas* within a statement in which Jesus calls Judas the “thirteenth daimon,” and the term may be translated “demon,” understood in a negative sense, as DeConick suggests. But with all the references to *daimones* in Platonic, Middle Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Hermetic, and magical texts, where the term is often imbued with neutral or even positive connotations, it may just as easily be translated as “spirit,” as we translated it, or even “god,” as Professors Karen King and Elaine Pagels translate it in *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity*. Commonly *daimones* are thought to be intermediary beings that find their place between the divine and human realms.

Again, the Coptic verbal form *porj= e-* (46,17) may be translated as either “separate/set apart for” or “separate/set apart from” in the *Gospel of Judas*, in spite of Professor DeConick’s suggestions. According to the gospel, Judas asks Jesus, “What is the advantage that I have received? For you have set me apart for—or from—that generation.” Walter E. Crum’s *Coptic Dictionary* (271b-272a) gives both “be divided from” and “be divided into” (reflecting the Greek *aphorizein* [etc.] *eis*) as possible

meanings of *pōrj e-*. So initially we translated the phrase at 46,17, which differs from the usual construction in the text and codex (*pōrj ebol e-/n-* = “separate/set apart from”), with “set apart for,” though a footnote in the critical edition gives the alternate translation “set apart from,” and Rodolphe Kasser’s French translation reads “tu m’aies séparé de cette (présente) génération-là.” While I have indicated elsewhere that I also am increasingly inclined to translate this difficult Coptic phrase as “set apart from,” the fact remains that either translation is possible. Karen King and Elaine Pagels are in agreement on this point.

Once again, the reading and reconstruction of the Coptic text on the bottom of page 46 of the *Gospel of Judas* have proved to be something of a nightmare, as Professor DeConick is well aware. From the beginning we struggled with the obscure and fragmentary ink traces on the papyrus. In the spring of 2006 we made our provisional Coptic transcription and English translation available, and we kept working, in collaboration with other scholars, to make sense of the text. In Paris, at a conference at the Sorbonne, where Professor DeConick was in attendance, and in Washington, D.C., at another conference she attended, both in the late autumn of 2006, we distributed up-to-date transcriptions to all who wished to see the text, and in 2007 the critical edition of Codex Tchacos appeared, with the following translation: “In the last days they <will . . .> to you, and (that?) you will not ascend on high to the holy [generation].” The reading at the bottom of page 46 changed, as might be anticipated, partially on the basis of the additional input of Professors Wolf-Peter Funk and Peter Nagel, as the relevant footnote in the critical edition indicates. But we are still left with a solution of desperation: the assertion that the only way we can make sense of the text is by assuming a scribal error involving the omission of some words in the Coptic text (indicated by the angle brackets).

What does DeConick assume we sought to do in this arduous task of reading an excruciatingly difficult Coptic text? In her Op-Ed piece, she writes, “Perhaps the most egregious mistake I found was a single alteration made to the original Coptic. According to the National Geographic translation, Judas’s ascent to the holy generation would be cursed. But it’s clear from the transcription that the scholars altered the Coptic original, which eliminated a negative from the original sentence.” There is hardly a more damning accusation that one can make against one’s fellow scholars: that we deliberately altered the Coptic text for our own purposes, and hindered the scholarly quest for understanding. Nothing could be further from the truth, as anyone who has observed us and our work, including Professor DeConick, knows. I can only hope that, if given the opportunity, Professor DeConick would be willing to retract a defamatory charge that somehow came out wrong. Now the same accusation has been picked up by *The National Review*, which repeats Professor DeConick’s indictment. That is, alas, the way slanderous comments get around. In *The Thirteenth Apostle* DeConick goes on to offer a conjecture for how we arrived at the earlier reading, guessing that we assumed an otherwise unattested abbreviation of a Greek verb. I recalled nothing of the sort. Hence, I called Gregor Wurst in Augsburg, and he assured me that he had recently contacted DeConick to tell her that she had misunderstood our translational decision, which was based on a normal Coptic idiom found in Crum’s dictionary. But now that too is in print.

Professor DeConick admits that her thesis about Judas Iscariot in the *Gospel of Judas* hinges in large part on the statement of Jesus that Judas is the “thirteenth daimon,” destined to rule over the thirteenth aeon or realm. The word *daimōn* occurs only once in the extant pages of the *Gospel of Judas* and Codex Tchacos, and Professor Antti

Marjanen notes, in a review published on the National Geographic website, “Since the word *daimōn* appears only once in the entire text, some caution should be exercised in its interpretation. Even if it is taken as a negative reference, it does not necessarily mean that it is the final characterization of Judas in the text.” There obviously is no developed demonology in the *Gospel of Judas*; in fact, even the malevolent archons Nebro and Saklas are not called demons in the *Gospel of Judas*, but angels (*angeloi*). DeConick explains the reference to thirteenth, the thirteenth daimon, and the thirteenth aeon by noting references to the thirteen aeons and the god of the thirteen aeons—the demiurge, the creator of this mortal world below—in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* and *Zostrianos* from the Nag Hammadi library. She also mentions the thirteen kingdoms of the *Revelation of Adam*, another text from Nag Hammadi, even though in this text the nature of the thirteenth kingdom is obscure (see, for instance, Gedaliahu Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*). On the basis of this limited evidence, DeConick draws far-reaching conclusions—that in the *Gospel of Judas* Judas Iscariot is an evil demon, a lackey of the demiurge Yaldabaoth, who is in bed with Yaldabaoth and is destined to hang out in the thirteenth aeon with Yaldabaoth the megalomaniac hereafter. Poor Judas! He is told everything in the *Gospel of Judas*, but in the end he remains a poor devil.

Professor DeConick makes no mention in her book of an additional reference brought up by Professor Pagels at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego in November 2007. In another Nag Hammadi text, entitled *Marsanes*, a heavenly locale designated “the thirteenth seal” is the abode of “the unknown silent one,” that is, the highest God. (Professor Birger Pearson has written fairly extensively on the thirteenth

seal in *Marsanes*.) This “thirteenth” realm is a far cry from the place envisioned by DeConick, a dreadful domain shared by the demiurge and his demonic counterpart. Unfortunately, *Marsanes* didn’t make it into DeConick’s book—so neither did her “thirteenth apostle” have a chance to make it into *Marsanes*’ heaven.

DeConick also fails to include in *The Thirteenth Apostle* a single parallel specifically to the phrase “thirteenth aeon,” one of the key terms in the *Gospel of Judas*—and a term that occurs prominently in another Gnostic text that has been known for a very long time. In fact, the “thirteenth aeon” shows up more than forty times in the *Pistis Sophia* (and it also is to be found in the *Books of Jeu*), where it is “the place of righteousness” located above the twelve aeons and the heavenly home of the twenty-four luminaries—including Sophia, who calls the thirteenth aeon “my dwelling place.” In the literature of antiquity and late antiquity, the thirteenth realm can occupy a place just above the twelve (who are often considered to be the signs of the zodiac), on the border of the infinite—a place, it may be, between the world of mortality below and the world of the divine on high. Sometimes, as in *Marsanes*, the thirteenth realm may be taken as the locale where the transcendent deity dwells. According to the *Pistis Sophia*’s version of the myth, Sophia, straining to ascend to the light above, is deceived and comes down from the thirteenth aeon, descending through the twelve aeons to “chaos” below. Here in this world she is oppressed, and the powers of the world, including lion-faced Yaldabaoth, seek to rob her of the light within her. For a time, she is prevented from leaving the place of her oppression. In the words of Pistis Sophia, the cohorts of Authades, the arrogant one, “have surrounded me, and have rejoiced over me, and they have oppressed me greatly, without my knowing; and they have run away, they have left me, and they have not been

merciful to me. They turned again and tempted me, and they oppressed me with great oppression; they gnashed their teeth at me, wanting to take away my light from me completely.” In the midst of her suffering, Pistis Sophia—the wisdom of God weakened and languishing in this world, reflective of the soul of the Gnostic trapped here below—cries for salvation, and eventually her cry is heard: “Now at this time, save me, that I may rejoice, because I want (or, love) the thirteenth aeon, the place of righteousness. And I will say at all times, May the light of Jeu, your angel, give more light. And my tongue will sing praises to you in your knowledge, all my time in the thirteenth aeon” (1.50, Schmidt-MacDermot).

In other words, Sophia comes from the thirteenth realm above; she is separated from—and separated for—that realm, to use the language of the *Gospel of Judas*; and she is destined to return there again. While here below, moreover, she refers to herself with another term that resonates with Judas’ portrayal in the *Gospel of Judas*: she refers to herself as a *daimōn*. In her fourth repentance, Sophia bemoans her fate, saying, “I have become like a peculiar demon (*daimōn*), which dwells in matter, in whom is no light. And I have become like a spirit counterpart (*antimimon* ^ε*mpn(eum)a*) which is in a material body, in which there is no light-power” (1.39, Schmidt-MacDermot). Again, in her twelfth repentance, Sophia laments that “they have taken away my light and my power, and my power is shaken within me, and I have not been able to stand upright in their midst, I have become like matter which has fallen; I have been cast on this side and that, like a demon which is in the air” (1.55, Schmidt-MacDermot). The word used for “demon” here is *refšoor*, the Coptic equivalent of the Greek *daimonion*.

Hence, in a manner that closely parallels the portrayal of Judas Iscariot in the *Gospel of Judas*, Sophia in the *Pistis Sophia* is likened to a daimon, perhaps as an intermediary being; she is persecuted at the hands of the archons of the twelve aeons; and though long separated from it, she will return to her dwelling place in “the thirteenth aeon, the place of righteousness.” That is the good news of Sophia in the *Pistis Sophia*.

The *Pistis Sophia* thus raises fundamental questions about DeConick’s understanding of Judas—and any completely negative understanding of Judas—in the *Gospel of Judas*. Rather than functioning as a boon companion of Yaldabaoth, as DeConick proposes, Judas may be seen, in the light of the *Pistis Sophia*, as the spitting image of Sophia. (Sophia, or wisdom, is referred to once in the extant pages of the *Gospel of Judas*, at 44,4, in a fragmentary section, as “corruptible wisdom” or “corruptible Sophia.”) It turns out that just this sort of link between Judas and Sophia was made by Gnostics already in the second century, as Irenaeus of Lyon informs us—in a passage that DeConick mentions in her book (but without making reference to the *Pistis Sophia* and without noting the implications for the *Gospel of Judas*; I did the very same thing in my book *Judas*). According to Irenaeus in his *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*), certain Valentinian Gnostics, who must have been enunciating their beliefs around the same time in the second century when the *Gospel of Judas* was being composed and read, established a close connection between the suffering of Sophia and the passion of Judas—both being linked, says Irenaeus, to the number twelve, with Judas numbered as the twelfth and final disciple in the circle of the twelve and Sophia numbered as the twelfth aeon.

Irenaeus argues against the Valentinian Gnostics as follows, from his proto-orthodox perspective: “Then, again, as to their assertion that the passion of the twelfth aeon was proved through the conduct of Judas, how is it possible that Judas can be compared with this aeon as being an emblem of her—he who was expelled from the number of the twelve, and never restored to his place? For that aeon, whose type they declare Judas to be, after being separated from her Enthymesis (thought, reflection), was restored or recalled to her former position; but Judas was deprived of his office, and cast out, while Matthias was ordained in his place, according to what is written, ‘And his bishopric let another take’ (Acts 1:20). They ought therefore to maintain that the twelfth aeon was cast out of the Pleroma (the heavenly fullness of the divine), and that another was produced, or sent forth to fill her place; if, that is to say, she is pointed at in Judas. Moreover, they tell us that it was the aeon herself who suffered, but Judas was the betrayer, and not the sufferer. Even they themselves acknowledge that it was the suffering Christ, and not Judas, who came to the endurance of passion. How, then, could Judas, the betrayer of him who had to suffer for our salvation, be the type and image of that aeon who suffered?” (2.20, *ANF*).

So Irenaeus—who knew of the existence of a text called the *Gospel of Judas*—admits that in the second century there were Gnostics who compared Judas and Sophia and were convinced that Judas was “the type and image of that aeon who suffered.” (Incidentally, he also states, just prior to his reference to the *Gospel of Judas*, that some Gnostics declared that after the resurrection, Christ, who himself was linked to Sophia, ascended to the right hand of Yaldabaoth for a thoroughly positive purpose—to aid in the salvation of souls.) This admission of Irenaeus, combined with the close similarities in

theme and terminology in the presentations of Judas and Sophia in the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Pistis Sophia* (and the *Books of Jeu*), allows for a powerful conclusion regarding the role of Judas Iscariot in the *Gospel of Judas*. I suggest that among certain Gnostics of the second century, including some Valentinians and the folks who wrote and used the *Gospel of Judas*, the figure of Judas could be presented in terms that are reminiscent of the figure of Sophia, and that the account of Judas in the *Gospel of Judas* should be read with elements of the fall, passion, grief, and redemption of the wisdom of God in mind. Like Sophia in other texts and traditions, Judas in the *Gospel of Judas* is “separated from” the divine realms above, even though he knows and professes the mysteries of the divine and the origin of the savior; he goes through grief and persecution as a daimon confined to this world below; he is enlightened with revelations “that no human will ever see”; and at last he is said to be on his way, much like Sophia, to the thirteenth aeon of Gnostic lore.

The story of Judas, like the story of Sophia, recalls the story of the soul of any Gnostic who is in this world and longs for transcendence. The *Gospel of Judas* may be understood to portray Judas as the type and image of Sophia and of the Gnostic, and the text proclaims how salvation may be realized—not, it is emphasized, through a theology of the cross and the experience of sacrifice (as Karen King and Elaine Pagels show so clearly), but on the contrary through gnosis and insight into the nature of the divine and the presence of the divine in the inner lives of people of knowledge.

Without a doubt this interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* calls into question many of the central tenets of an argument for the text to be viewed as a gospel parody or a gospel tragedy. Still, a number of uncertainties of interpretation will linger as long as

the lacunae on the top portion of pages 55-58 of the *Gospel of Judas*, with the account of the conclusion of the story of Jesus and Judas, are unresolved. Furthermore, there certainly is room for a more nuanced approach of the text, one which takes seriously the diverse features of this challenging document. I suspect that in the future the figure of Judas Iscariot in the *Gospel of Judas* may be interpreted, in good Hegelian fashion—and in the light of such parallel texts as those cited here—as neither a completely positive character nor a totally demonic being, but rather a figure, like Sophia, and like any Gnostic, who is embroiled in this world of mortality yet is striving for gnosis and enlightenment. To this extent there is room for aspects of a revisionist interpretation, like that of DeConick and others, to be joined to the positive features of the *Gospel of Judas*, to give a balanced approach to the text. After all, Judas, like Sophia, is caught between the worlds of mortality and immortality, looking for liberation, and the *Gospel of Judas* shows how liberation may be achieved. Thus, the evidence of the *Gospel of Judas*, together with insights drawn from *Marsanes*, the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Books of Jeu*, and Irenaeus of Lyon, may provide a new set of perspectives on Judas and Sophia in second-century Gnostic literature. What is clear, though, is that the mystical message of the *Gospel of Judas*, however it may be nuanced, remains supremely good news, from a Gnostic point of view, the very best news in the world. In the end, gnosis—and wisdom—triumph.

¹ I wish to acknowledge the significant contribution of Jonathan Meyer to the final formulation of the argument presented in this paper.

THE lost gospels of Judas, which were discovered in Egypt more than five decades ago, have been dubbed the "one of the most surprising document finds of the 20th century" by ethnologist Richard Dawkins, who claims they help shed light on the story of Jesus Christ. By Callum Hoare. PUBLISHED: 10:50, Fri, Oct 4, 2019 | UPDATED: 12:36, Fri, Oct 4, 2019. 0. Ms DeConick, after re-translating the text, published "The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says" to assert that Judas was not a "daimon" in the Greek sense, but that "the universally accepted word for 'spirit' is 'pneuma' " in Gnostic literature 'daimon' is always taken to mean 'demon'. The Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic gospel. The content consists of conversations between Jesus and Judas Iscariot. Given that it includes late 2nd century theology, it is thought to have been composed in the 2nd century by Gnostic Christians, rather than the historic Judas himself. The only copy of it known to exist is a Coptic language text that has been carbon dated to 280 AD, plus or minus 60 years. It has been suggested that the text derives from an earlier manuscript in the Greek language. An

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