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Florence Darbre (conservator from the Martin Bodmer Foundation) and Gregor Wurst (Coptic expert and professor at the University of Augsburg) looking over two pages of the codex as they resembled the text, revealing the Gnostic context of the Gospel of Judas. © Kenneth Garrett

The Gnostic Context of the Gospel of Judas

Gaye Strathearn

The Gospel of Judas views Jesus and his ministry from a Gnostic perspective—a very different perspective from the one described in the canonical Gospels.

What Is Gnosticism?

During the second century AD a number of Christian groups were vying with each other to legitimate their particular interpretation of Christianity. History records that the group that eventually won the battle became known as “orthodox” Christians, while those who lost became the “heterodox.” Latter-day Saints, however, recognize that by the second century the Apostasy was already in full swing and that the labels of orthodox/heterodox are largely artificial terms. In this context we find the flowering of Gnosticism. This is an umbrella term that scholars first used in the eighteenth century¹ to describe a number of Christian and other groups that flourished from the second to fourth centuries AD.² The word “Gnostic” comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. A number of Gnostic texts, including the Gospel of Judas, indicate that

1. See Kurt Rudolph, “Gnosticism,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:1033–40.

2. Some scholars have argued against using the term Gnosticism. See Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). While most scholars acknowledge the difficulties of applying the term so broadly, it continues to be the standard designation.

salvation comes, not from Jesus' Atonement and Resurrection, but from a secret knowledge that Jesus imparted to a select group of his followers.³ Thus the heading of the Gospel of Judas reads, "The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot."⁴ Clement of Alexandria defines the type of knowledge for which Gnostics sought as knowledge of "who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, to what place we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth."⁵ For Gnostics the acquisition of knowledge about their origins and their earthly environment was a source of spiritual empowerment and the central focus in their quest for salvation.

The Nag Hammadi Library

Modern understanding of ancient Gnostic teachings was greatly enhanced with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945.⁶ Prior to that discovery most of our understanding about Gnostic groups came from heresiologists who sought to expose and eradicate their opponents. In circa AD 180, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote a five-volume work entitled *Against Heresies*, the length of which suggests that he considered these groups to be a significant threat.⁷ In his preface, Irenaeus acknowledged that "their language resembles ours" but insisted that "their sentiments are very different." He argued that they "falsify the oracles of God, and

3. See Apocryphon of James, 1.1.8–14; Apocryphon of John, 2.1.1–5; Gospel of Thomas, incipit, 1–2; Thomas the Contender, 2.138.1–4, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3d rev. ed. (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1990), 30, 105, 126, 201.

4. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006), 19, Codex Tchacos 33.

5. Excerpts from Theodotus, 78.1, in *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria*, trans. and ed. Robert Pierce Casey (London: Christophers, 1934), 89.

6. For a description of the discovery and contents of the Nag Hammadi Library, see James M. Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1–26.

7. Irenaeus tells us that he received information about the Valentinians (the major Gnostic group that he attacks) by studying their own commentaries and through personal interaction with some of them. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.preface.2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994): 1:315. In contrast to later heresiologists, for Irenaeus "the gnostic teachings and writings were not historical artifacts but living and dangerous realities." Terrance Tiessen, "Gnosticism as Heresy: The Response of Irenaeus," in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Wendy E. Heleman (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), 339.

prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation. They also overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretence of [superior] knowledge, from Him who founded and adorned the universe; as if . . . they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal.”⁸ He concludes his first book with an attack against a group who appealed to a text known as the Gospel of Judas, which indicates that Judas “accomplished the mystery of the betrayal.”⁹ Irenaeus’ descriptions are laced with polemic, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish that polemic from reality. The texts from Nag Hammadi allowed us, for the first time, to learn about Gnostic teachings from an insider’s perspective, without the polemical bias of the heresiologists.

In the Nag Hammadi Library we find gospels that were ascribed to New Testament Apostles, such as Thomas and Philip, but were not included in the New Testament canon. In addition, some of the texts interpret biblical figures very differently than the canonical text does. For example, in the story of the Garden of Eden, the serpent is the hero rather than the villain because he encourages Eve to gain knowledge (an important characteristic for Gnostics) by eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.¹⁰

It should not surprise us, therefore, to find a Gnostic gospel ascribed to Judas, portraying him as a hero *because* he betrays Jesus. In contrast, the rest of the Twelve Apostles are described in inferior ways. Jesus laughs at them when they gather together to partake of the Eucharist because they are partaking of the ritual without knowing him. Jesus’ explanation for his laughter causes them to become angry.¹¹ Despite their declarations to the contrary, none of the Twelve are strong enough to stand before Jesus, except Judas, who not only stands before him but declares, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.”¹² Jesus, therefore, instructs Judas to “step away from the others” so that he can tell Judas “the mysteries of the kingdom.”¹³ In addition, Jesus tells the Twelve that “each of you has his own star,”¹⁴ but

8. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.preface.1, 2; brackets in original.

9. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.31.1.

10. Hypostasis of the Archons, 89.31–90.19, translated in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. Robinson, 164–65.

11. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 22, Codex Tchacos 34.

12. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 22–23, Codex Tchacos 35.

13. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 23, Codex Tchacos 35.

14. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 29, Codex Tchacos 42.

he tells Judas that “the star that leads the way is your star.”¹⁵ These passages reflect the author’s attempt to discredit his opponents’ version of the Christian tradition.

Sethian Gnosticism

The Gospel of Judas, as has been argued by Marvin Meyer,¹⁶ appears to belong to a specific form of Gnosticism known as Sethian Gnosticism, wherein descendants of Seth are an elect race who gain power to return to their origins as they learn this knowledge.¹⁷

Sethian Gnostics had a complicated creation myth that is assumed in the Gospel of Judas. It appears to be an amalgamation of Plato’s *Timaeus* and an interpretation of the biblical account of Genesis. The classic Sethian text that describes the Gnostic version of the creation myth is the Apocryphon of John. The supreme god is an unknowable being who is described as much by what he is not as by what he is.¹⁸ This god creates a complex series of male and female divine beings, beginning with Barbelo and followed by Autogenes, who fill the Pleroma (the place where god dwells) with light.¹⁹ One of the last of these beings is named Sophia. She falls from grace when she desires to create without her consort.²⁰ The resulting creature is a defective being often identified as either Yaldabaoth²¹ (“child of chaos”) or Saklas²² (“fool”).

This Yaldabaoth is the Jehovah of the Old Testament who, along with his angels, created the material world and entraps human souls in material bodies to prevent them from returning to the Pleroma. For the Gnostics, therefore, the world and physical bodies are negative entities, things that

15. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 44, Codex Tchacos 57.

16. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 137–69.

17. See, for example, Gospel of Thomas, 3, 22; Authoritative Teaching, 22.23–34; 24.20–22; Hymn of the Pearl in Acts of Thomas, 108–12, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 2:380–84.

18. Apocryphon of John, 2.2.25–4.26; compare Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*, 33–35.

19. Apocryphon of John, 2.4.26–9.24; compare Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 34–35.

20. Apocryphon of John, 2.9.26–10.6. The Gospel of Judas does not specifically describe the fall of Sophia, but it may be assumed by her designation as “corruptible Sophia” (*tsophia Enphthartē*). Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 30, Codex Tchacos 44.

21. Apocryphon of John, 2.9.25–10.19; see also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.2. This name is also spelled Yaltabaoth in some sources.

22. Apocryphon of John, 2.11.15–17.

those with special knowledge want to escape.²³ This is a very different view of the world when compared with that of the canonical text. In the Gospel of Judas it is Yaldabaoth (also known as Nebro, “rebel;”²⁴), not Jesus, who is the god that the Twelve Apostles worship. Jesus often makes the distinction between himself and the “Twelve’s God.”²⁵ Jesus celebrates Judas’s betrayal because he “will sacrifice the man that clothes me,”²⁶ a common reference to the physical body. Thus the betrayal frees Jesus from the limitations of his physical body and allows him to return to the Pleroma.

Judas Introduced as a Descendant of Seth

Sethian Gnosticism receives its name because of the pivotal role played by Seth. The elect are his descendants. They are not subject to the God of this world or his angels. In the Gospel of Judas, Seth is called Christ.²⁷ His descendants are “the great generation with no ruler over it.”²⁸ It is the generation “which is from the eternal realms.”²⁹ Jesus teaches Judas, “The souls of every human generation will die.” In contrast, “When these people [the descendants of Seth], however, have completed the time of the kingdom and the spirit leaves them, their bodies will die but their souls will be alive, and they will be taken up.”³⁰ Judas belongs to this generation. He was “set apart” from the seed that “is under the control of the rulers [meaning Yaldabaoth’s angels].” Jesus then tells him, “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the other generations—and you will come to rule over them. In the last days they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].”³¹ The Gospel of Judas is at home within the context of Sethian Gnosticism.

23. The classic Orphic phrase that permeates much of Gnostic thought is *soma sema*, “the body is a tomb.” Plato, *Gorgias* 493a; *Cratylus* 400c, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Lane Cooper and others (Bollingen Series 71; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 275, 437.

24. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 37, Codex Tchacos 51.

25. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 22–23, Codex Tchacos 35–36.

26. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 43, Codex Tchacos 56.

27. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 38, Codex Tchacos 52.

28. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 40, Codex Tchacos 53.

29. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 43, Codex Tchacos 57.

30. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 30, Codex Tchacos 43, brackets added.

31. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, 32–33, Codex Tchacos 46–47.

The Fate of Gnosticism

Eventually, in AD 381, Gnosticism was outlawed in the Roman Empire when Theodosius I declared the Catholic Church to be the state religion. As a result, the Nag Hammadi texts and the particular Christian interpretation found in the Gospel of Judas were marginalized. Epiphanius of Salamis, a heresiologist from the fourth century AD, described his personal contact with a Gnostic group. He said that he “lost no time reporting them to the bishops there [in Egypt], and finding out which ones were hidden in the church. <Thus> they were expelled from the city, about eighty persons, and the city was cleared of their tare-like, thorny growth.”³² Under these conditions Gnosticism failed to thrive.³³ Their texts were hidden rather than copied, only to come forth in our day if they had been hidden in conditions that were conducive to their survival, as in the deserts of Egypt.

LDS Perspectives on Gnosticism

For Latter-day Saints, a study of Gnosticism can be a valuable pursuit. For example, it is an important resource for understanding the complexity of the growth and development of the early Christian Church. In addition, it is possible that a text from the Nag Hammadi Library, the Gospel of Thomas, could contain some authentic sayings of Jesus that are not recorded in the canonical Gospels, although it would be difficult to identify them with any sense of certainty. For Latter-day Saints in particular, a study of Gnostic groups shows that they accepted some teachings that have certain parallels with Latter-day Saint doctrines: a belief that we had a premortal existence as spirits,³⁴ that a number of levels of salvation are

32. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 17.4–9, in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, ed. James M. Robinson and others, trans. Frank Williams, 2 vols., Nag Hammadi Studies 35 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987–1994), 1:97–8; angle brackets in original, square brackets added.

33. “Gnosticism was ultimately eradicated from Christendom, except for occasional underground movements, some affinities in medieval mysticism, and an occasional tamed echo that stays just within the limits of propriety. . . . Gnosticism of sorts was also able to continue beyond the frontiers of the Roman-Empire-become-Christendom. It is still extant in the war-torn area of Iraq and Iran in the form of a small sect called Mandeans, which is their word for ‘knowers,’ that is to say, ‘Gnostics.’” Robinson, “Introduction,” *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 5–6.

34. Gospel of Philip 64.10–12; Gospel of Thomas 41.27–29, 47.26–29; Apocryphon of James 5.23–29. Elder Neal A. Maxwell referred to the Apocryphon of James in his general conference address “Premortality, a Glorious Reality,” *Ensign* 15 (November 1985): 15–17. See also Hugh W. Nibley, “The Expanding

possible,³⁵ that the restoration of lost knowledge is essential for salvation,³⁶ and that a type of marriage, associated with the Holy of Holies in the temple, is required to return to the highest level of salvation.³⁷ These types of teachings are not prominent in modern traditional Christian theology. Thus, the Gnostic texts indicate that, in antiquity, these were important issues for some Christians.

Latter-day Saints, however, must be cautious. They must guard against any endeavor to study Gnostic writings with the purpose of identifying proof-texts for their own doctrine. We have noted, for example, that the Gnostics had a very different understanding of the nature and purpose of

Gospel,” *BYU Studies* 7, no. 1 (1965), 12–13; Hugh W. Nibley, “Treasures in the Heavens,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, ed. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gilgum, and Don E. Norton, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1986), 175; Blake Ostler, “Clothed Upon: A Unique Aspect of Christian Antiquity,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 1 (1982): 36–37.

35. Tripartite Tractate 118.14–138.27. Hugh W. Nibley, “On the Sacred and Symbolic,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Rituals and Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994), 601; Hugh W. Nibley, “Apocryphal Writings and Teachings of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, ed. Don E. Norton, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 12 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 292–93.

36. Apocalypse of Adam 85.19–31; Apocalypse of Peter 71.15–21; The Sophia of Jesus Christ 93.16–19; see also Stephen E. Robinson, “The Apocalypse of Adam,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 2 (1977): 131–53.

37. Gospel of Philip 65.1–26; 67.27–30; 69.14–70.22; 72.17–23; 82.2–26; 86.1–5; Gospel of Thomas 75, 104; Tripartite Tractate 122.12–17; Dialogue of the Savior 138.12–19. See also S. Kent Brown and C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Apocalypse of Peter: Introduction and Translation,” *BYU Studies* 15, no. 2 (1975): 131–45; Stephen E. Robinson, “The Apocalypse of Adam,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 2 (1977): 131–53; S. Kent Brown, “The Nag Hammadi Library: A Mormon Perspective,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 255–83; Hugh W. Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 87–113; Hugh W. Nibley, “Three Degrees of Righteousness from the Old Testament,” in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 9 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989), 308–40; Hugh W. Nibley, “Appendix 6: From the *Gospel of Philip*,” in *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, ed. John Gee and Michael D. Rhodes, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2005), 525–32; Ann N. Madsen, “Melchizedek at Qumran and Nag Hammadi,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, 285–95; William J. Hamblin, “Aspects of an Early Christian Initiation Ritual,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 1: 202–21.

mortal existence and the identity of the God of the Old Testament. They believed that salvation was possible only for a select, predetermined group of people. In addition, their concept of “temple marriage” was a celibate union between individuals and either Christ or their own divine image.³⁸ Any Gnostic teachings found in these writings must be understood within their own Gnostic context.

38. See Gaye Strathearn, “The Valentinian Bridal Chamber” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2004).

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Florence Darbre and Gregor Wurst spent five years reconstituting the Codex Tchacos. The manuscript came to them in extremely poor condition with some one thousand brittle fragments. Their painstaking efforts resulted in the restoration of about 80 percent of the text. © Kenneth Garrett