THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

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Contents

33 The hidden discourse of the pronouncement in which Jesus spoke with Judas Iscariot for eight days, three days before he celebrated Passover.

I. JESUS’ DIALOGUES WITH THE DISCIPLES AND JUDAS

Jesus’ appearances on earth

When he appeared on earth, he performed signs and great wonders for the salvation of humanity. And as some people were [walking] in the way of righteousness and others were walking in their transgression, twelve disciples were called. He began to speak with them about the mysteries that are above the universe and the things that will happen at the end.

Frequently he does not appear to his disciples, but you find him as a child among them.

Knowing Jesus

He came to his disciples in Judea one day and found them seated, gathered, and training for piety. When he [came upon] his disciples gathered, seated, and offering thanksgiving over the bread, he laughed.

The disciples said to him, “Teacher, why are you laughing at our prayer of thanksgiving? What did we do? [This] is what’s right.”

He answered and said to them, “I’m not laughing at you—you don’t do this by your own will. Rather, by this your god receives praise.”

They said, “Teacher, It is you [ . . . ] the son of our god.”
Jesus said to them, “How do [you] know me? Truly I say to you, no race from the people among you will know me.”

When his disciples heard this, they began to get irritated and angry and to blaspheme against him in their heart. But when Jesus saw their foolishness, [he said] to them, “Why has agitation brought anger (to you)? Your god who is within you and [his . . . ] 35 have become irritated, along with your souls. Let whoever is [strong] among you people represent the perfect human being and stand before my face.”

And they all said, “We are strong!” But their spirit did not dare to stand before him—except for Judas Iscariot. He was able to stand before him, but he could not look him in the eyes. Instead, 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 the Barbēlō. But as for the one who sent you, I am not worthy to say his name.”

Jesus, knowing that he was thinking about the rest of the exalted matters as well, said to him, “Separate from them, and I will tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that you will go there, but so that you will be much grieved. 36 For someone else will take your place, so that the twelve [elements] might be complete in their god.”

And Judas said to him, “When will you tell me these things? And (when) will the great day of light dawn for the [. . . ] race?” But when he had said this, Jesus left him.

The strong and holy race

When morning came, he appeared to his disciples, and they said to him, “Teacher, where did you go? What do you do after you have left us?”

Jesus said to them, “I went to another great and holy race.”

His disciples said to him, “Lord, what is the great race that is more exalted and holier than we but not now in these aeons?”

When Jesus heard these things, he laughed and said to them, “Why are you thinking in your heart about the strong and holy race? 37 Truly I say to you, no offspring [of] this aeon will see that race, nor will any angelic army of the stars rule over that race, nor will any mortal human offspring be able to go with it. For that race does not come
from [this aeon] that came into being, [ . . . ] the race of the human beings that are among them, but it is from the race of Those Great People. [ . . . ] the powerful authorities that [ . . . ] nor any power [ . . . ], those by which you rule.”

When his disciples heard these things, they were disturbed in their spirit, each one, and they were at a loss for words.

The disciples’ vision

On another day Jesus came to them, and they said to him, “Teacher, we saw you in a vision, for we saw great dreams in [this] night that passed.”

He said, “Why have you [ . . . ] hid yourselves?”

38 For their part, [they said, “We] saw a great house [in which] there were a great altar, twelve men that we say are priests, and a name. A multitude was devoting themselves to that altar until the priests [finished presenting] the offerings. We too were devoting ourselves.”

Jesus [said,] “What kind [ . . . ]?

And they said, “[Some] fast for two weeks; others sacrifice their own children, others their wives, as they bless and are humble to one another; others sleep with males; others work at slaughtering; others perform a multitude of sins and lawless deeds. And the men who stand [beside] the altar invoke your [name]. 39 And because they are engaged in all the labors of their sacrifice, that altar is full.” After they had said these things, they fell silent because they were disturbed.

Jesus said to them, “Why have you become disturbed? Truly I say to you, all the priests that stand beside that altar invoke my name. And even more, I say to you that they have written my name upon the [ . . . ] of the races of the stars through the races of the human beings, and in my name they shamefully have planted fruitless trees.”

Jesus said to them, “It is you who present the sacrifices at that altar that you saw. That is the god you serve, and you are the twelve men whom you saw. The cattle that are brought in are the sacrifices that you saw, that is, the multitude that you lead astray upon that altar. [The . . . ] will stand; in this way he will use my name; and the races of the pious will devote themselves to him. Next another man will stand in attendance upon [the fornicators], and another will stand in attendance upon the killers of children, and
another upon those who sleep with men, those who fast, and the rest of impurity, lawlessness, and error, and those who say, ‘We are equal to angels.’ And they are the stars that bring everything to completion. For it has been said to the races of the human beings, ‘Look, God has received your sacrifice from the hands of a priest’—that is, the deacon of error. But it is the Lord who commands who is lord over all things. On the last day they will be put to shame.”

41 Jesus said [to them,] “Stop sacrificing animals, which you have lifted up on the altar. Because they are over your stars and your angels, having previously come to completion there, consider them of no use, and let [ . . . ] be manifest to you.”

His disciples [said, “Master,] purify us of the [ . . . ] that we have done by the deceit of the angels.”

Jesus said, “It is impossible [ . . . ] them [ . . . ] nor can a fountain extinguish the [ . . . ] of the entire inhabited world, nor can a spring in a [city] satisfy all the races, except the great one that is destined. And a single lamp will not illumine all the aeons, except the second generation, nor can a baker feed the entire creation 42 under [heaven].”

And [when the disciples heard these things,] they said to him, “Master, help us, and save us!”

Jesus said to them, “Stop contending with me. Each of you has his own star, and [ . . . ] of the stars will [ . . . ] what is his. It is not to the corruptible race that I was sent, but to the strong and incorruptible race. For no enemy has ruled [over] that race, nor any of the stars. Truly I say to you (pl.), the fiery pillar will fall suddenly, and that generation will not move [ . . . ] star(s).”

The race that will endure

And when Jesus had said these things, he left and [took] Judas Iscariot with him and said to him, “The water [ . . . ] of the high mountain, that from [ . . . ] 43 [“ . . . ” that has not come [ . . . ] the spring of the tree of [ . . . time] of this aeon [ . . . ] after a time [ . . . ] rather, he has come to water God’s paradise and the race that will endure, for he will not defile the [conduct] of that race, but [ . . . ] forever.”

Judas said to him, “Rabbi, what fruit does this race possess?”
Jesus said, “As for every human race, their souls will die, but as for them, when the time of the kingdom has been completed and the spirit separates from them, their bodies will die, but their souls will live and be taken up.”

Judas said, “And so what will the remaining race of the human beings do?”

Jesus said, “It’s impossible to sow seed on [rock] and get their fruit. So too [ . . . ] the defiled race and corruptible wisdom. [ . . . ] the hand that created mortal human beings, and their souls go up to the aeons on high. Truly I say to you (pl.), [no ruler] or angel or power will be able to see those [places] that [this great] holy race will see.”

After Jesus said these things, he departed.

**Judas’s vision**

Judas said, “Teacher, just as you have listened to all of them, listen now to me as well. For I have seen a great vision.”

But when Jesus heard, he laughed and said to him, “Why are you training yourself, you thirteenth demon? But speak, and I will put up with you.”

Judas said to him, “I saw myself in the vision, with the twelve disciple stoning me and persecuting [me severely.] And I came also to the place where [ . . . ] after you. I saw [a house . . . ], and my eyes could not [comprehend] its size. Great people surrounded it, and that house had a roof of greenery. And within the house a [multitude . . . ]. Teacher, take me in along with those people.”

[Jesus] answered and said, “Your star has led you astray, Judas, because no mortal human offspring is worthy to enter the house that you saw. For it is that place that is kept for the holy ones, the place where neither the sun nor the moon will rule, nor the day, but they will stand at rest always in the aeon with the holy angels. Look, I have told you the mysteries of the kingdom, 46 and I have taught you about the error of the stars, and [ . . . ] send [ . . . ] upon the twelve aeons.”

Judas said, “Teacher, could it be that my seed is subject to the rulers?”

Jesus answered, “Come, and I will [ . . . ] you [ . . . ] but you will grieve much when you see the kingdom and its entire race.”

When Judas heard these things, he said, “What advantage have I received because you have separated me from that race?”
Jesus answered and said, “You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by the rest of the races, and you will be ruling over them. In the last days they <will . . . > you, so that you might not go on high 47 to the holy race.”

II. JESUS’ REVELATION TO JUDAS

The great and infinite aeon and the great Invisible Spirit

Jesus said: “[Come,] and I will teach you about the [ . . . ] that no human being will see. For there exists a great and infinite aeon, the extent of which no angelic race has seen. [In] it is the great Invisible Spirit, which no angelic eye has seen nor inner thought comprehended and which has not been called by any name. And a luminous cloud appeared there.

The self-originate and his four attendants

“And he (the Invisible Spirit) said, ‘Let an angel come into being as my attendant.’ And a great angel, the self-originate, the god of light, came forth from the cloud. And for his sake four angels came into being from another cloud, and they came into being for the attendance of the angelic self-originate.

Adamas and additional aeons of light

“And 48 the self-originate said, ‘Let [Adamas] come into being.’ And [the emanation] came into being, and he [created] the first luminary to rule over it. And he said, ‘Let angels come into being to serve [it].’ And innumerable [myriads] came into being.

“And he said, ‘[Let] a luminous aeon come into being.’ And it came into being, and he created the second luminary to rule over it, along with innumerable angelic myriads serving.

“And this is how he created the rest of the aeons of light, and he established (luminaries) to rule over them, and he created innumerable angelic myriads for their service.
The incorruptible race of Seth and the luminaries, heavens, and firmaments

“And Adamas was dwelling in the first cloud of light, which no angel among all those called divine has seen. And he 49 [ . . . ] that [ . . . ] the image [ . . . ] and according to the likeness of [these] angel[s]. He caused the incorruptible [race] of Seth to appear [ . . . ] the twelve [ . . . ] the 24 [ . . . ] By the will of the spirit, he caused 72 luminaries to appear in the incorruptible race. By the will of the spirit, the 72 luminaries for their part caused 360 luminaries to appear in the incorruptible race, so that their number might be five for each.

“Their parent is the twelve aeons of the twelve luminaries, and for each heaven there are six aeons, so that there might be 72 heavens for the 72 luminaries. And for each 50 [ of them] there are [five] firmaments, [so that there might be] 360 [firmaments.] As for them, they were given authority and an innumerable angelic military [greatness] for glory and service, and [also] virgin spirits for glory and service to all the aeons and the heavens and their firmaments.

The corruptible universe: Nebrō and the rulers

“The multitude of those immortals is called ‘universe’—that is, ‘ruin’—by the parent and the 72 luminaries that are with the self-originate and his 72 aeons, the place where the first human being appeared with his incorruptible powers. And the aeon that appeared with its race, the one in which there is the cloud of acquaintance and the angel, is called 51 Œl[œlæth (?)] . . .

“Afterwards [ Œlœlæth (?)] said, ‘Let twelve angels come into being to rule over the chaos and [Hades].’ And look, from the cloud there appeared an angel whose face poured forth fire and whose likeness was defiled with blood. He has [a] name, Nebrō, which has been interpreted as ‘apostate,’ but others say ‘Ialdabaôth.’ And another angel came forth from the cloud as well: Saklas. Nebrō created six angels with Saklas for attendance, and these produced twelve angels in the heavens, and each one received a portion in the heavens.
“And the twelve rulers, along with the twelve angels, said, ‘Let each one of you
race [ . . . five] angels.’

The first is Seth, who is called ‘Christ.’

The second is Harmathōth, who [ . . . ].

The third is Galila.

The fourth is Iōbēl.

The fifth is Adōnaios.

These are the five that ruled over Hades and beforehand over chaos.

**The origin of human beings**

“Next Saklas said to his angels, ‘Let us create a human being according to the likeness and according to the image’ (Gen. 1:26). Then they formed Adam and his wife Eve. But she is called in the cloud ‘Life’ (Zōē), for it is in this name that all the races seek him, and each one of them calls her by their names.

“But Saklas did not command [ . . . ] produce, except [ . . . ] in the generations [ . . . ] which [ . . . ]

“And the [angel] said to him, ‘Your life will be for a finite time, along with your children.’”

And Judas said to Jesus, “What is the longest that a human being might live?”

Jesus said, “Why are you amazed that Adam and his race received a limited time? It is in this place that he received his kingdom for a limited time with his ruler.”

Judas said to Jesus, “Does the human spirit die?”

Jesus said, “Thus god ordered Mikhaēl to lend the spirits of the human beings to them so that they might serve. But the great one commanded Gabriēl to give the spirits to the great undominated race—the spirit along with the soul. Therefore, the rest of the souls [ . . . ] mountain [ . . . ] light [ . . . ] seek the spirit within you (pl.), which you have caused to dwell in this flesh among the races of the angels. But god caused acquaintance to be [given] to Adam and those with him, in order that the kings of chaos and Hades might not rule over them.”
Human beings and their stars

And Judas said to Jesus, “What, then, will those races do?”

Jesus said, “Truly I say to you (pl.), it is the stars that bring completion upon all these things. When Saklas completes the time that has been assigned to him, their star will come with the races, and what has been said will be brought to completion. Next, they will fornicate in my name and kill their children, and [ . . . ] the aeons, bringing their races that attend them to Saklas. And next [ . . . ]rael will come, bringing the twelve tribes of Israel from [ . . . ], and all the races will serve Saklas, [also] sinning in my name, and your (sg.) star will rule over the thirteenth aeon.” But next Jesus laughed.

[Judas] said, “Teacher, why [are you laughing at us?]”

[Jesus] answered [and said,] “I am laughing not at you (pl.), but at the error of the stars, because these six stars go astray with these five combatants, and they all will be destroyed with their creations.”

And Judas said to Jesus, “What will those who have been baptized in your name do?”

Jesus said, “Truly I say [to you (sg.)], this baptism will destroy the entire race of Adam, the earthly man. Tomorrow the one who bears me will be tortured. Truly I [say] to you (pl.), no hand of a mortal human being [will] sin against me. Truly [I say to you, Judas, those who offer sacrifice to Saklas [ . . . ] god [ . . . ].]

[About 3 lines are missing here.]

[ . . . ] everything that is evil. But you will exceed them all, for you will sacrifice the human being who bears me.

Already your horn has been raised,
and your anger has been filled,
and your star has passed by,
and your heart has prevailed.
57 “Truly [I say to you,] your [. . . the thrones] of the aeon have been [defeated,] and the kings have become weak, and the races of the angels have grieved, and the evil ones [. . .] the ruler is destroyed. And next, the [place] of the great race of Adam will be exalted, for prior to heaven, the earth, and the angels, that generation exists through the aeons.

Conclusion of the revelation

“Look, you have been told everything. Look up, and see the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. And the star that leads the way is your star.”

And Judas looked up and saw the luminous cloud, and he (Jesus) entered it. Those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud, saying, 58 [“ . . . the] great race [. . .] image [. . .”] And Judas no longer saw Jesus.

III. JUDAS HANDS JESUS OVER

Outside the upper room

And at once there was a disturbance among the Jews, more than [. . . and] their high priests grumbled because [. . .] had gone into the guest room for his prayer. But some of the scribes were there watching closely so that they might seize him during the prayer. For they were afraid of the people because they all held him to be a prophet.

And they approached Judas and said to him, “What are you doing here? You are Jesus’ disciple.”

For his part, he answered them as they wished. And Judas took money and handed him over to them.

THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS
The “Sethian” Text Group and the History of “Sethianism”


Key Identifying Characteristics of “Sethianism” as Schenke first formulated it

(+): present in Gospel of Judas
(-): absent in Judas

- Gnostics as spiritual progeny of Seth, saved by nature (+)
- heavenly Seth as redeemer figure (-)
- divine triad of Invisible Spirit, Barbelō, and Self-Originate (+)
- four luminaries, with heavenly Adamas (+)
- salvation history with three periods (-)
- baptismal ritual with “five seals” (-)

Major Ancient Works Assigned to the Sethian Text Group

(*): source criticism suggests secondary Christianization

The Secret Book According to John (*)
The Reality of the Rulers
The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit
Foreigner

The Revelation of Adam (*)
First Thought in Three Forms
Zöstrianos

Standard Phases in Sethian History

- origin in Hellenized Judaism and development of mythology (before 125)
- Christianization of Sethian mythology (ca. 125 – 250)
- turn away from Christianity to mystical Neoplatonism (after 250)

The Gospel of Judas: Text and Translation

The Gospel of Judas and Sethianism

  Marvin Meyer, “When the Sethians were Young: The Gospel of Judas in the Second Century” (57-74)
  John Turner, “The Sethian Myth in the Gospel of Judas: Soteriology or Demonology?” (95-133)

Towards a New “Gnostic” Text Group

Irenaeus of Lyons, Detection and Overthrow of Gnōsis, Falsely So-Called (ca. 180)
  • description of “multitude of Gnostics”: 1.29 (“some”), 1.30 (“others”), 1.31 (“others”)
  • 1.29: myth matches Secret Book According to John
  • 1.31: “And furthermore—they say—Judas the betrayer was thoroughly acquainted with these things; and he alone was acquainted with the truth as no others were, and (so) accomplished the mystery of the betrayal. By him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thrown into dissolution. And they bring forth a fabricated work to this effect, which they entitle The Gospel of Judas” (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures 181).

Shared Features of the “Secret Book According to John” and the “Gospel of Judas”

(1) Literary
  • revelation dialogue between Jesus and a disciple
  • theology, cosmogony, uranography (rulers, angels, demons, heavens), true origin and history of humankind
  • disappearance of Jesus at end of dialogue

(2) Theological/Mythical
  • divine triad of Invisible Spirit, Barbēlō, and Self-Originate
  • four attendants of Self-Originate
  • heavenly Adamas and posterity/race of Seth
  • hostile world ruler laldabaōth and/or Saklas = God of Genesis
  • 12 cosmic rulers and a set of five ruler names

(3) Soteriological/Sectarian
  • racial language for the saved: “immovable race (γενεά),” “holy race (γενεά)” etc.

Notable Differences Between the “Secret Book According to John” and the “Gospel of Judas”

• less attention to role of the Barbēlō, more to that of the Self-Originate in Judas
• generation of lower ruler(s): error by Wisdom in Secret Book, deliberate act of one of the incorruptible powers (Ēlēlēth?) in Judas

When the *Gospel of Judas* became available to scholars in 2006, a debate immediately broke out over whether the character of Judas in this remarkable work is a positive or negative figure. The original editors and their sponsor, the National Geographic Society, understandably promoted the novelty of a Judas who is a hero, not a villain. A dissenting scholar, however, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* that argued for the negative Judas and accused the original editors of tweaking the Coptic text to support the positive Judas. The ensuing debate dominated the earliest conferences on the *Gospel* and its appearances in the media.

But while disagreement over Judas’s character continues, scholars have discussed almost as intensely, if less publicly, the question of whether the *Gospel* is Sethian in its teachings and sectarian origins. This question is much more important to historians of ancient Christianity than that of Judas’s character because “Sethianism” has become one of the most important categories for the reconstruction of the social and intellectual history of the phenomenon formerly known as “Gnosticism” and for the interpretation of Gnostic texts. By gathering a set of works within a larger group, historians believe that we better understand the individual writings and that we have uncovered a particular group or school of Gnostics known as “Sethians.” In turn, we have often fit individual texts into our reconstructed history of this larger Sethian tradition by dividing them into multiple sources. The appearance of the *Gospel of Judas* has led scholars to ask, Does it belong to the Sethian text group? And if so, how does it fit into our understanding of Sethianism and its development?

Nearly all scholars have said, Yes, the *Gospel* somehow belongs to the tradition of Sethianism, but the work’s failure to conform to important features of that tradition leads some scholars to say that it comes from very early in Sethian history, others to say that it comes from a very late period in that history, and still others to say both — by dividing the Gospel into different sources and layers. In my view this disagreement raises a more profound question that historians have not addressed: maybe the *Gospel of Judas* does not fit into our understanding of Sethian Gnosticism because our understanding of Sethian Gnosticism is wrong.

For a variety of reasons, not much study of Gnosticism happens here at NAPS. Heresiology, Yes. Gnosticism, No. If you’re looking for papers on Gnosticism at this meeting, you’re at it now — except for a paper that included the *Gospel of Philip* on Thursday. In Valentinian terms, most NAPS members are not pneumatikoi, but merely psychikoi. So my lecture this morning will not delve into the detailed specifics of this problem. Rather, I will emphasize the methodological and historiographical questions that the *Gospel of Judas* and “Sethianism” raise and start with the basics. If my presentation is too basic and familiar for some of you, I apologize, but I think it’s better to start at the beginning.

So I will first explain the origins, characteristics, and functions of the category “Sethianism” in modern scholarship. Then I will describe how scholars have approached
the question of whether and how the Gospel of Judas belongs to this category. Finally, I will make the argument to which my title refers — namely, not that the Gospel of Judas should bring to an end the practices of gathering texts into such traditions or of creating social categories, which I consider essential to the history of early Christianity, but that Judas should lead historians to discard the present category “Sethianism” and its reconstructed history and instead to create a new one, called “the Gnostics,” and start over on its history. In effect, this morning I will retract the flawed reasoning found on pages 37 to 41 of my book The Gnostics. Otherwise, of course, that book remains a model of historical judgment and analysis.

The modern scholarly category of “Sethianism” was born in 1974 when Hans-Martin Schenke published an essay entitled “The Sethian System according to the Nag Hammadi Manuscripts.” The discovery of so-called Gnostic manuscripts near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 had brought a flood of new data for scholars of Gnosticism to sort through. They could compare these new primary sources with the accounts that the heresiologists give of so-called Gnostic groups, which include descriptions of “Sethians.” Schenke noted that the heresiological descriptions of the Sethians, which first appear in the third century, are contradictory, although they share the assertion that Sethians celebrated their connection to Seth, Adam and Eve’s third son. Moreover, none of the newly discovered Nag Hammadi texts precisely match the church fathers’ accounts of “Sethians.” Therefore, Schenke concluded, our own category of Sethianism cannot be that of the church fathers.

Schenke then noted that several texts from Nag Hammadi likewise shared a preoccupation with Seth, and that several of them spoke of God’s elect, the truly saved religious people, as “the seed of Seth” or descendants of Seth. Moreover, several of these works seem to narrate, refer to, or presuppose the same mythological system. In his original article of 1974 and his expanded discussion of 1981, Schenke developed a list of mythological motifs and characters that he considered not only characteristic of but also distinctive of the Sethian system. Schenke recognized that these motifs and characters could occur in works that were not Sethian, just as, say, the Christian characters Jesus and the Virgin Mary might appear in the Quran or other Muslim texts, but it was how such motifs and characters function within an overall mythological system that was decisive. Moreover, Schenke admitted that few if any Sethian works would feature all of the listed motifs. For reasons of genre and purpose, no Sethian work would necessarily feature the entire system, just as we would not expect every writing produced by a Presbyterian theologian or group to contain the entire body of Presbyterian doctrine and practice.

The best known Nag Hammadi works that Schenke considered Sethian are The Apocryphon or Secret Book According to John, The Hypostasis of the Archons or The Reality of the Rulers, The Revelation of Adam, and Zöstrianos. I have listed a few more on the handout.

Schenke included in his list of Sethian evidence not only writings from Nag Hammadi and other manuscript hoards, but also testimonia from the church fathers that appear to describe the same mythological system. Of these heresiological reports that Schenke included only Epiphanius of Salamis attributes the system to a group called “Sethians,” and Schenke did not include other descriptions of so-called “Sethians” because the systems they report did not match his reconstructed Sethian mythology. So
the touchstone of what is genuinely “Sethian” is Schenke’s text group, not the reports of ancient authors about “Sethians.”

For Schenke the value of creating this constellation of texts was twofold. He writes:

The texts of this group shed light upon one another if compared synoptically; and the proportion and relationship of common, shared material to special, unique material permits a process of deduction that leads to considerable insight not only into the development of the teaching they contain, but also into the history of the community that transmitted them.

In other words, first, at the level of the individual work, placement in the text group allows the reader to solve exegetical difficulties and simply to understand the story better through reference to other works in the group. You’ll understand and appreciate The Reality of the Rulers more if you’ve read The Secret Book According to John. Second, as a group the texts give us access to the religious community that produced and transmitted them and allow us even to reconstruct their history. The Sethian group of texts gives us access to a Sethian group of people.

The method of gathering a set of ancient works into a text group and hypothesizing a community behind them is, as you all know, standard in the study of ancient Christianity. For example, in New Testament studies, we group together the Gospel of John and the three Letters of John, but not the Apocalypse of John, into a group called “Johannine literature.” Our understanding of, say, 2 John is enhanced by comparison of it with the Gospel and 1 John, and we posit a community, Johannine Christianity, as the source of these works. Scholars have used these works to reconstruct a history of Johannine Christianity, and they have even discerned redactional layers in the Gospel that reflect this history. Again, one may quarrel with specific arguments, but this is standard operating procedure when we lack better evidence for religious groups and their development.

Moreover, we may ask, What is an ancient author, if not a text group that we attribute to a single human being?

In the case of “Sethianism,” only very few scholars have questioned the basic textual group that Schenke created. There have been and doubtless will continue to be debates about whether specific texts should be included and whether and how the text group should be related to other text groups and individual works. But nearly all scholars of Gnosticism have recognized the utility of “Sethianism” for illuminating the frequently puzzling mythological details in individual works. This includes even the scholars who have been most critical of the prevailing concept of Gnosticism, such as Michael Williams and Karen King.

There has been more substantial disagreement about the extent to which we can move from the text group to a religious community that existed in the second and third centuries. Schenke was very optimistic that his text group reflected the beliefs, experience, and ritual life of an actual Gnostic community, and he believed that he could trace the history of that community, albeit somewhat sketchily. Other scholars, however,
are less sanguine about the reconstruction of a second-century religious group from pseudepigraphical works of mythology that primarily discuss the nature of God and events before the great flood of Noah. Or they are skeptical of the entire project of assigning ancient texts and people into reified social groups. Such scholars are more comfortable speaking simply of a literary tradition, which may have originated among like-minded individual authors who riffed off each other’s writings much as authors of fan fiction do today.

Most historians, however, have agreed that, despite the mythological character of the works, the Sethian text group must have come from a religious community of some kind. They point to such features as sectarian self-identifying language and references to a shared ritual of baptism. And a kind of orthodox view of Sethian origins and development has emerged, based on Schenke’s own hypothetical reconstruction of the sect’s history. The orthodox scholarly narrative of Sethian history has had a crucial effect on how we understand the origin and character of Gnosticism and its relationship to Christianity. And so I need to tell this story as historians understand it.

The Sethians, most scholars agree, did not originate within Christianity. Rather, Sethianism most likely first emerged among Hellenized Jews in the first century or early second century C.E. For political and/or philosophical reasons, these learned Jews became disenchanted with the God of Genesis and speculated instead about a higher divinity and its relationship with Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. After they had developed their basic mythology and a baptismal ritual, they encountered Christian teachings about Jesus. The Sethians then incorporated Jesus and other Christian elements into their system. This Christianization of Sethianism brought the sect to the attention of heresiologists like Irenaeus of Lyons, who had available to him a version of the Secret Book According to John when he wrote his Against the Heresies around 180.

By the late second century, then, the Sethians were one among the many groups that might be called Christian, but the Christian character of Sethianism was mostly superficial and did not really transform the essentially non-Christian heart of its mythology. It was, then, Valentinus and his students who created the first genuinely Christian Gnostic myth. Meanwhile, the work of bishops like Irenaeus helped to promote an emerging “proto-orthodoxy” among Christians, and the Valentinian school of Christian thought provided gnostically inclined Christians with a much more fully Christian form of mythological Gnosis. And so by the middle of the third century, Sethians turned away from Judaism and Christianity and engaged more with mystical forms of non-Christian Platonism connected with Plotinus and others. Sethian works from this period emphasize modes of mystical ascent to contemplation of God and play down the biblically inspired mythology of earlier works. By the fourth century, people with Sethian interests likely dispersed into various movements of the post-Constantine era — desert monasticism, theurgic Neo-Platonism, and the like — although there may have been a few Sethian Christians hanging out in Egypt to give us the Nag Hammadi codices and to inspire the heated imagination of Epiphanius.

Certainly scholars argue about details of this basic story. But the key features of the standard history of Sethianism are its non-Christian origin and essence. Christian elements of Sethian mythology, such as references to Jesus and the apostles, were secondary, added after the development of Sethianism’s basic ideas. Thus, the Sethians
easily shed them when being “Christian” became less viable or attractive. This hypothesis holds great explanatory power at the level of the text group, for it enables scholars to place Sethian texts in a rough chronological order, and it invests their unity in mythological features that undeniably appear throughout the text group, in which however the prominence of Christian motifs conspicuously varies.

Moreover, this hypothesis liberates Gnosticism from its identity as a Christian heresy. I suppose it may now be a Jewish heresy, but more deeply, Sethian Gnosticism does not represent a rebellion against specific Christian doctrines, but arises from a profound sense of alienation from the created world, its political structures, and its God.

On the other hand, Christian motifs do appear in nearly all of the Sethian works — and most importantly, they appear in *The Secret Book According to John*, which must be one of the earliest works in the text group because Irenaeus knew some version of it in 180. And so a non-Christian Sethianism requires source criticism, the detection of sources or layers in certain texts in the group that would reflect the community’s origin in Hellenized Judaism and subsequent Christianization. In the case of the *Secret Book According to John*, this surgery is fairly easy to perform, for the most explicitly Christian elements occur only in a frame story. The *Secret Book* opens with the disciple John confused and dismayed over the crucifixion of Jesus. After John has a short conversation with an unsympathetic Pharisee, the Savior, presumably Christ, appears to John. The Savior’s lengthy revelation to John is interrupted by questions only a few times. It covers the complex nature of the godhead, which includes a divine figure called the anointed or Christ, and it retells the events in the first six or so chapters of Genesis, without any references to Jesus or unambiguous citations of or allusions to explicitly Christian literature. The frame story returns at the conclusion of the Savior’s discourse, and in two of the four manuscripts the author proclaims that Jesus is the Christ.

Most scholars have concluded that an editor has taken an originally non-Christian mythological discourse based on Genesis, Plato’s *Timaeus*, and other non-Christian works and secondarily framed it with a dialogue between Jesus and the disciple John. This hypothesis finds further support in Irenaeus’s summary of part of the *Secret Book*, which mentions neither Jesus as the revealer of the myth nor John as its recipient. The placement of a non-Christian Gnostic discourse within a Christian frame would reflect the Sethians’ origin as a non-Christian movement, which then later became Christianized.

Another Sethian document that lends itself to source criticism is the *Revelation of Adam*. In this work Adam reveals his personal history and future events to his son Seth. For about the first half of the text, Adam sticks fairly closely to Genesis, but then he describes the advent of a savior, recites a hymn that explains the savior’s incarnation, and warns of a coming eschatological crisis. This last portion of the work includes some biblical imagery, but draws more on pagan mythology and may allude vaguely to Jesus and other Christian ideas. Here again, many scholars conclude, we see two original sources somewhat awkwardly joined together and attributed to Adam — one source reflects Jewish speculation on Genesis and the importance of Seth, while the other reflects non-Jewish or specifically Christian syncretistic adaptation of pagan motifs to explain the incarnation of a savior figure. The combination of these two traditions again speaks to the secondary Christianization of an originally Jewish Gnostic community.
Other texts in the group have less obvious interior diversity, but they too can be subjected to source analysis, especially if the historian seeks to reconstruct a highly precise literary — and thus social — history of Sethianism.

You will notice that, in addition to identifying suspicious seams within texts, the source critics of Sethian works depend upon the easy identification of different religious traditions — not only Jewish vs. Christian vs. pagan — but also of traditions within these larger complexes. For example, even within Judaism, speculation on the role of Wisdom (Sophia) in the created order can be distinguished from interest in retelling the stories of Genesis 1-6, which can in turn be distinguished from eschatological visions. Scholars understand these diverse mythological traditions to be indications of separable modes of religiosity, which can be the basis for discerning different literary traditions, and so different sources, and then even different religious communities or stages in the development of a single community. Ancient religious people did not multi-task, it seems.

Not surprisingly, the publication of the *The Gospel of Judas* has elicited similar interpretive strategies from scholars of Sethianism, but before turning to it, I should report that some scholars have challenged both the standard narrative of Sethian history and the source critical analyses that support it. The most recent such challenge may be found in Dylan Burns’s new book, which I recommend highly, even if I do not share his conclusions about Sethian history.

Consider, for example, the *Secret Book According to John*. Its explicitly Christian frame story and its seemingly non-Christian revelation discourse have made it the most persuasive example of multiple sources and secondary Christianization. But critics point out that in actuality it is very hard to detect precisely where the frame story ends and the revelation discourse begins. There are several indicators one could use to detect such a seam — for example, the beginning of direct address, a shift in the subject’s person (from, say, third person to first), the appearance of a second-person addressee — but here these indicators do not occur at the same place. In addition, if the redactor was concerned to Christianize his non-Christian source by placing it within the Jesus-John dialogue and even proclaiming Christ’s messianic identity at the conclusion, why didn’t he add some Christian touches to the discourse itself? Is it possible instead that an original Christian author deliberately did not include explicit references to Christian persons and ideas in what he presents as a retelling of Genesis? And even more basically, what’s “Christian” and what’s “Jewish” in the early to mid second century? Must we expect Christians always to write about Jesus, the disciples, and the like? The New Testament Epistle of James suggests that they did not.

And at the level of social and religious history, the fact remains that the three ancient non-Sethian authors who show knowledge of Sethian mythology or literature — namely, Irenaeus of Lyons, Porphyry of Tyre, and Epiphanius of Salamis — all three identify the writers and readers of this literature as Christians, false Christians, say Irenaeus and Epiphanius, but Christians nonetheless. We have no external evidence that confirms the existence of a non-Christian Sethian community.

Finally, one of the most distinctive features of Sethian mythology is that it does not merely depict the God of Genesis, the God who created this universe, as a lower demiurgic deity, inferior to the ultimate first principle — nearly all philosophically inclined Jews and Christians of the first centuries of our era did that. Rather, they
identify him as an evil, malicious, and ignorant being, named Ialdabaôth or Saklas — that is, as satanic. How likely is it, really, that thoughtful Jews, no matter how influenced by Platonism or how discouraged by political events, would make this kind of identification? Is it not more plausible to imagine an intermediary step such as the proclamation of the temporary nature and inferior status of the Law in the preaching of Paul or the sharp contrast between Moses and Jesus found in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus tells skeptical Jews that their father is Satan?

Obviously I’m among the skeptics of the standard narrative of Sethian history and of the practice of source criticism that supports it. The appearance of the Gospel of Judas has only strengthened my skepticism on these points. I have, however, never doubted the contents and utility of the Sethian text group or its connection to an actual religious community in the second and third centuries. I had not thought to question any of these things when I wrote The Gnostics some five years ago. I pretty much still believe most of this, but I think Judas means we need to approach this category in a new way. Let’s turn now to the new gospel and its significance for the category and history of “Sethianism.”

Scholars noticed the Sethian features of the Gospel of Judas as soon as it appeared. The work identifies the ultimate god as “the great invisible spirit” and includes the Barbelo aeon, the self originate and its four attendants, the divine Adamas, and the race of Seth in its godhead — all distinctively Sethian ideas. This world is created by Saklas, who is distinct from Ialdabaooth, but there is precedent for this in Sethian literature. Moreover, like the Secret Book According to John, the gospel contains a revelation discourse that focuses on the complexity of the godhead and the creation of humanity, embedded within a dialogue between Jesus and a disciple, here Judas. Finally, also like the Secret Book, Irenaeus seems to confirm the existence of the Gospel of Judas in the mid second century. He gives its title, and his brief and sketchy description of its contents matches the gospel that we have fairly well. We’ll return to this point in a moment.

On the other hand, Judas differs from other Sethian works in important ways. It does not give any role to the aeon Wisdom (Sophia) in the generation of Saklas, the creation of this world, and the salvation of humanity — in sharp contrast to the Secret Book and some, but not all, other Sethian works. It does not discuss explicitly an advent of a savior figure, such as First Thought or the Great Seth, as one finds elsewhere, and there is no reference to the distinctive Sethian baptismal ritual. In addition, the Gospel of Judas is very Christian. In the Secret Book According to John, the Christian frame story is very short: the vast majority of the work consists of the allegedly non-Christian revelation discourse. In the Gospel of Judas, however, dialogues between Jesus, Judas, and the other disciples constitute most of the work, while the allegedly non-Christian revelation discourse is rather short and serves as a kind of climax to the preceding dialogues. Judas’s betrayal of Jesus to Jewish leaders then concludes the gospel.

No scholar who has examined the gospel’s place in the history of Sethianism has found that it undermines the standard narrative of Sethian history. Indeed, the example of another seemingly non-Christian revelation discourse placed within a Christian story has only confirmed the superficial relationship between Christianity and Sethianism. But scholars have disagreed markedly about how to fit Judas into the historical development
of Sethianism. Its Sethian character appears either to be underdeveloped or merely tacked on, so the options seem to be very early in Sethian history or very late.

So, on the one hand, our beloved and much-lamented colleague Marvin Meyer argued that the Gospel of Judas comes from, as he puts it, “when the Sethians were young.” He accepted that Irenaeus knew pretty much the text that we have, and he believed that the revelation discourse comes from Sethianism’s origins outside Christianity, in what he called “Jewish Gnosis.” Its underdeveloped version of the Sethian myth, moreover, suggests that it may be even older than what we find in the Secret Book According to John. Both works, however, show how the Sethian myth was secondarily Christianized — and quite early.

On the other hand, Gesene Schenke Robinson and John Turner argue that the Gospel of Judas was originally Christian, but was secondarily Sethianized and must come from the third century. Both, then, must claim that the Gospel of Judas known to Irenaeus in 180 cannot be the text that we now have; rather, Irenaeus must have known an earlier version of the Gospel of Judas or even a different text altogether. In part, they make this claim based on what Irenaeus does not say about the gospel; that is, both argue that if Irenaeus knew the text that we have, he would have summarized and/or criticized certain features about which he is silent. These include the gospel’s highly negative portrayal of the disciples other than Judas and the specifically Sethian aspects of the gospel’s mythology.

Turner rather precisely dates the Gospel of Judas to the second quarter of the third century. He suggests that, in the history of Sethianism, the gospel’s highly charged criticism of clergy who make claims to apostolic succession indicates that it comes after Sethian works, such as the Revelation of Adam, which criticize the baptism and Christology of other Christians. And yet it must come before works like Zōstrianos, which originated in the later third century, when the Sethians turned away from Christianity to pagan Platonism. Turner does not attempt a precise account of the literary sources and stages of the gospel, except to say that the current gospel must be a revision of a non-Sethian work that depicted Judas’s handing over of Jesus in the way Irenaeus describes it.

Schenke Robinson, in contrast, presents a detailed hypothetical history of the gospel’s redaction. I leave aside the details here; rather, the most important point is this, and here I quote:

The Gospel of Judas is a distinctive Christian-Gnostic, albeit anti-orthodox, text, whereas Sethianism was basically a non-Christian, Jewish-Gnostic movement. Although Sethianism did come in contact with Christianity, and its texts were subjected to various degrees of Christianization, its focal point or main thrust never had a specifically Christian-Gnostic perspective; it was always more typified by an inner-Jewish tension. Sethian writings generally deal with notorious Old Testament figures by means of reinterpreting their purpose and function in the Hebrew Scriptures, and reassessing their reputation in Judaism; they do not employ New Testament characters. Non-Sethian Christian-Gnostics, in contrast, favor personages who are marginalized in the orthodox church and give them a different role and meaning — as, for
instance, the case with Mary in the *Gospel of Mary*. Hence rather than being a document whose Sethian themes are not yet fully developed, the *Gospel of Judas* in its present form appears to be a quite late and distant offshoot of Sethianism (p. 89).

Schenke Robinson reaches the exact opposite conclusion from that of Meyer: *Judas* does not represent underdeveloped Sethianism, but a late and distant offshoot of Sethianism. But despite this very important difference in their conclusions, Schenke Robinson and Meyer, along with Turner, agree that somehow we need to fit the *Gospel of Judas* into the history of Sethianism as we know it — that is, into the history of a community that originated in non-Christian Judaism, that subsequently had a brief, highly conflicted, and yet ultimately superficial relationship with Christianity, and finally became alienated from increasingly orthodox Christianity and drifted into pagan mystical Neo-Platonism. In this history, the deeply Christian and less deeply Sethian *Gospel of Judas*, must come rather early — at the start of the Sethians’ contact with Christians — or rather late — as that contact was coming to a bitter end.

What these scholars and the others who have engaged this problem seem to have forgotten is this: we made up Sethianism and its history. Sethianism is a modern category, a text group that we scholars have created. That these texts belong together, that they can be placed in a chronological order, and that they reflect the religious history of a specific group of people are all ideas that we have invented. These are powerful ideas, which have made the surviving texts easier to understand and contextualize — but again, Sethianism and its history are modern creations.

I propose that, instead of deciding how to fit the *Gospel of Judas* into our current theory of Sethianism and its history, we should use this new piece of data to see whether this category still works and whether the history we have created from it still makes sense.

In the brief time that remains, I’ll sketch out what I mean in a preliminary way. As several scholars have pointed out, one of our few anchors for dating and sorting so-called Gnostic teachers, texts, and groups is Irenaeus of Lyons’ *Against the Heresies* from around 180. As I have said, Irenaeus mentions a *Gospel of Judas*. It is not clear whether he has read the book or has merely heard about it. His description of its contents is very brief and sketchy. What he says can be summarized into three characteristics.

First, Judas knew “these things”: it’s not clear which of the many things Irenaeus has just described Judas knew. Some of the mythological motifs and stories Irenaeus has narrated in the preceding sections of his book are found in our *Gospel of Judas*, but many more or not, including the things that Irenaeus attributes to the other Gnostics just before he mentions *Judas*. It may be relevant on this point that our *Judas* is a relatively short work.

Second, Irenaeus says that “Judas alone was acquainted with the truth as no others were, and accomplished the mystery of betrayal.” This matches what we find in our gospel. Our *Gospel of Judas* repeatedly emphasizes Judas’s knowledge of Jesus’ true identity and origin and the ignorance of the other disciples, and it concludes with his agreement to hand Jesus over to Jewish leaders.

Third, Irenaeus says that by Judas’s act “all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thrown into dissolution.” In our gospel, after Jesus tells Judas that he will sacrifice
the human being he inhabits, he announces that “the thrones of the aeons have been
defeated, and the kings have become weak, and the races of the angels have grieved, . . .
the ruler is destroyed.” This sounds very much like what Irenaeus describes — the
dissolution of the present world order, both earthly and heavenly.

So, brief as it is, Irenaeus’s description of the Gospel of Judas that circulated
before 180 matches our newly discovered work. He does not say anything about the
work that rules out our gospel. Any hypothesis, therefore, that argues against identifying
our Gospel of Judas as a Coptic translation of the Greek work known to Irenaeus must
rely on Irenaeus’s failure to mention other aspects of the gospel. It seems to me, then,
that we ought to identify our gospel as a translation of that known to Irenaeus unless
other evidence from antiquity compels us to do otherwise.

Let’s turn now to the context in which Irenaeus mentions the Gospel of Judas. It
comes toward the end of the first book of Against the Heresies, which is devoted to a
genealogy of heretical teachers and groups, the purpose of which is to expose the
diabolical origins of the Valentinian school of Christianity. Irenaeus does not present
these heresies in chronological order, but he concludes his catalogue of heresies with his
account of “a multitude of Gnostics,” whom he identifies as the immediate intellectual
predecessors of Valentinus and his school. Irenaeus first narrates what some of them say,
then what others of them say, and finally what still others say. Later heresiologists
concluded that Irenaeus was in fact describing three distinct groups and gave them
specific names, but Irenaeus seems to see all of them as somewhat different
manifestations of the group whose teachings Valentinus adapted, a group that he
elsewhere refers to as “the Gnostic school of thought (or heresy).”

Scholars have long recognized that in the first portion of this discussion Irenaeus
narrates a mythological account of divine emanations that matches that in the Secret Book
According to John. Some version of this work must have appeared no later than the
middle of the second century, most likely earlier if, as Irenaeus claims, Valentinus and
his students knew its teachings.

Irenaeus, then provides us with the basis for attributing both the Secret Book
According to John and the Gospel of Judas to the Gnostic school of thought that he says
influenced Valentinus. In other words, these two works may serve as the foundation or,
better, the nucleus for a new text group, a group of texts that we might call “Gnostic.”
That is, after all, the term that Irenaeus uses. I suggest that this is a better plan than
borrowing the name “Sethian” from certain heresiological reports and then having to
explain that some of these heresiological reports are not truly “Sethian.”

This new text group would most probably look very similar to the old
“Sethianism,” but here the Gospel of Judas forms part of the nucleus of the group, rather
than being a text that we must somehow find or not find a place for in a pre-existing
group — and, I think, we have to reconstruct the origins and history of this group
differently and reconsider what it means for the relationship between Christianity and so-called Gnosticism.

On the handout I have listed the most significant features that the Secret Book
According to John and the Gospel of Judas share. First, they both feature a revelation
dialogue between Jesus and a disciple, which provides information about God, the origin
of the cosmos, the structure and population of the heavens, and the origin and early
history of humanity. In each case, the divine revealer departs at the conclusion of the
dialogue — confusingly so in the *Gospel of Judas* because in the next scene Jesus is praying in a “guest room” and Judas is betraying him.

Second, they share a set of theological or mythical motifs that tell a similar story. An unknowable ultimate source, the Invisible Spirit, emanates two other divine hypostases, the Barbēlō and the Self-Originate aeon, the latter of which has four attendants. From these emanate multiple other divine aeons, among whom are heavenly prototypes of Adam and the posterity of his son Seth. The universe in which we live, in contrast, is created and ruled by a hostile power, named Ialdabaōth and/or Saklas, who is identified as the god of Genesis. At the top of the hierarchy within this cosmos preside twelve rulers, doubtless corresponding to the twelve signs of the Zodiac, for both works closely identify the power structure of this universe with the heavenly bodies. Five names of rulers occur in both works in the same order — only five because that’s as many as the *Gospel of Judas* names.

Third, both works identify the saved people as a genea, a “race” — “the immovable race” in the *Secret Book* and “the strong and holy race” in the *Gospel of Judas*. Neither work states that the saved human beings of earth are the descendants of Adam and Eve’s son Seth, despite the presence of an archetypal posterity of Seth in the divine realm. In fact, the *Gospel of Judas* speaks of “the great race of Adam.” Given the prominence of Adam in both works and the relative inconspicuousness of Seth, the name “Sethian” does not seem the most apt choice for these materials.

Let’s turn now to some differences between these two works.

In the *Gospel’s* opening dialogue, Judas makes a confession of Jesus’ identity similar to Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi in the Synoptic Gospels: “I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of the Barbēlō. But as for the one who sent you, I am not worthy to say his name.” Despite the prominence of the Barbēlō in this important statement, the *Gospel of Judas* gives remarkably less attention to that aeon in its theology than does the *Secret Book*.

Even more significant, however, is that the two works differ in how the rulers of this cosmos originate. Famosly, in the *Secret Book*, Ialdabaōth comes into being when the aeon Wisdom attempts to think without the consent of her male consort: Ialdabaōth is a kind of glitch in divine thought, an error. In the *Gospel of Judas*, however, one of the immortals, most likely Ėlēlēth, calls Ialdabaōth and his fellow rulers into being. This scenario appears also in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* from Nag Hammadi, which shares other key features with *Judas*. In other words, the error and fall of the aeon Sophia, which scholars have tended to highlight as a central feature of Gnosticism, was only one of seemingly two possible Gnostic explanations for how the imperfect lower divinities originated from the serene perfection of the Entirety.

If we jettison the category “Sethianism” and its standard history and instead try to develop a category “Gnostic” from the new evidence the *Gospel of Judas* presents us, then we can see that this movement developed in close interactions with competing Christian claims to revelation and authority, claims in which literary depictions of the original disciples of Jesus figured prominently. Both the *Secret Book According to John* and the *Gospel of Judas* are revelations — apocalypses — akin in their literary forms to Revelation in the New Testament and the *Shepherd of Hermas* outside of it. Theologically they participate in the lively debate among second-century Christians over how to relate the new revelation of Jesus to the Septuagint, the Jewish Law, and the God
of Genesis — a debate that the teachings of Paul and the Gospel of John set up and that Christians ranging from Basilides to Marcion to Valentinus and Justin took up with vigor. The narrative of secondary and superficial Christianization appears much less plausible.

Gnostic Christianity, I suggest, did not originate in some particularly grave sense of alienation from this world and its God, but in the very elements that generated diversity and debate among second-century Christians — the nature of authority and the legacy of the original apostles, the practice and meaning of rituals like baptism and the eucharist, the persistence of or end to revelatory experiences of the Savior, the status of the Jewish scriptures and their God when the Law is no longer observed. To be sure, the Gnostics lie at one extreme end of the spectrum of Christian approaches to these questions, but they do lie on that spectrum.

This proposal simply modifies, in light of the appearance of Judas, the method for identifying evidence for the Gnostic school of thought that Bentley Layton first articulated in 1995, long before the appearance of the Gospel of Judas, and which I defended in my book. In his original essay Layton also advocated placing at the center of any historical reconstruction of the Gnostics Irenaeus’s description of the so-called Gnostic school of thought, as well as that of Porphyry, and the literature that they associate with the people they call Gnostics. For Layton Schenke’s Sethian hypothesis provided a crucial step by which the data assigned to the Gnostics could be expanded beyond that which Irenaeus and Porphyry provide. I argued for this proposal in my own book on the Gnostics, but there I fell victim to the error of assessing whether the Gospel of Judas belongs within the Sethian group. I failed to realize that the text group itself needs to be revised in light of this new piece of data.

Now several of my colleagues would abandon the project that I advocate. Instead, they justly fear the creation of reified categories and groups that would obscure the hybridity and fluidity of pre-Nicene Christianity. I’m very sympathetic to this position, but I’m reminded of the question some feminist historians asked in the 1980s and 1990s: Why, just as historical women were being rediscovered, did the academy decide to do away with subjectivity and, well, women? In a similar way, I’m worried that, just as sources have appeared that allow us to better reconstruct the teachings and practices of the so-called heretics, we will deprive them of much of what we consider the essentials of religion in general and of Christianity in particular — community, ritual, patterns of authority, and tradition.

If historians of pre-Nicene Christianity are going to make any progress in reconstructing the social and intellectual history of Christians, then we must make use of groups of literary works that seem to reflect the same religious and social traditions. But we must always recognize that the categories that we create we have in fact created. We must be open to the possibility that new data may require the dismantling of old textual groups, the creation of new ones, and the revision of our theories of historical development. And that, I think, is the case with the Gospel of Judas. Rather than assessing how it fits into our beloved category of Sethian Gnosticism, which has served us so well, we ought to consider revising how we think about Gnostics, Gnosticism, and Christianity. I’m not sure whether the Judas of this new text is a hero or a villain, but he might be able to teach us a few things about the history of early Christianity.