
The Thirteenth Apostle

What the Gospel of Judas Really Says

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To
Wade Allen Greiner

The Silenced Voice

When I first read the *Gospel of Judas* in English translation, I didn't like it. Jesus was rude. He laughed inappropriately. He treated his twelve disciples as enemies. And Judas Iscariot was the only one who knew anything.

I couldn't help but think about Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons' description of this old Gnostic Gospel as a "fictitious history." Writing in the late second century about the *Gospel of Judas*, Irenaeus says that the central character is "Judas the traitor," who alone knew "the truth as none of the others did." Because of his special knowledge, he "accomplished the mystery of the betrayal" which threw the cosmos into chaos. He links the *Gospel of Judas* with certain Gnostics who thought that all the evil people in the biblical stories – Cain, Esau, Korah, the Sodomites – were their ancestors.¹

Now I have always been suspicious of Irenaeus' description of the *Gospel of Judas*, especially the evil pedigree he links it to, since he was writing to discredit the Gnostics and suppress one of their Gospels. But I think my initial reaction to reading the *Gospel of Judas* was probably similar to his. I didn't like the unfamiliar story.

Then I watched the documentary, "The *Gospel of Judas*: The Lost Version of Christ's Betrayal," premièred on the National Geographic Channel.² I quickly became intrigued by the fantastic and exciting interpretation set out by the National Geographic team of scholars, an interpretation where Judas was Jesus' best

friend and collaborator.³ The National Geographic interpretation sounded like something from Martin Scorsese's movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*. A Gnostic Judas? Could it be?

So, even though I had no intention of writing about the *Gospel of Judas* (I was in the middle of writing a book on another early Christian Gospel and didn't need or want the distraction), I eagerly went to the National Geographic website. From that website, I downloaded their English translation as well as their transcription of the *Gospel of Judas* in its original language, Coptic, which is an old form of Egyptian written with Greek letters.⁴ I spent a few days in my office between classes translating the *Gospel of Judas*, searching for the sublime Judas who was supposed to be there.

I didn't find the sublime Judas, at least not in Coptic. What I found were a series of translation choices made by the National Geographic team, choices that permitted a Judas to emerge in the English translation who was different from the Judas in the Coptic original. In the original, Judas was not only *not* sublime, he was far more demonic than any Judas I know in any other piece of early Christian literature, Gnostic or otherwise.

I found this both fascinating and frustrating. But more importantly, I felt misled. The *Gospel of Judas* we had learned about from the National Geographic publications and productions simply does not exist.⁵ It isn't a Gospel about a "good" Judas, or even a "poor old" Judas. It is a Gospel parody about a "demon" Judas written by a particular group of Gnostic Christians known as the Sethians who lived in the second century CE.

The purpose of the *Gospel of Judas* was to criticize "mainstream" or "apostolic" Christianity from the point of view of the Sethian Gnostics. The Sethian Christians, whose religious beliefs I will describe in detail in the next chapter, were involved in an intra-religious debate that was raging in the second century as a number

of distinct Christianities struggled for control of Christianity. Christianity in the second century was not controlled by a single church or a single hierarchy or a single orthodoxy. In fact, "orthodoxy" (correct thinking and practice) and "heresy" (wrong thinking and practice) were very relative terms. Who was orthodox and who was a heretic depended upon where you were standing. If you were a mainstream or apostolic Christian, you were orthodox and everyone else was a heretic. If you were a Sethian Gnostic Christian, you were orthodox and everyone else was a heretic.

So the barbs in the *Gospel of Judas* are many, all directed at the theology and practices of apostolic Christians. The *Gospel of Judas* attempts to harpoon apostolic Christianity for its blind reliance on the authority of the twelve apostles for its teachings. For the Sethian Gnostics, truth can only be had through revelation, through a personal religious experience of God. So external authorities beware. The Sethians who wrote the *Gospel of Judas* especially found atonement theology unconscionable. Apostolic Christianity had long defended Jesus' death as a necessary sacrifice made to God the Father for the purpose of atonement, vicariously redeeming humanity from its sins. The Sethian Gnostics found this doctrine morally reprehensible – no different from child sacrifice or murder – and thus not an action that could be condoned by God. The *Gospel of Judas* is fascinating in this respect, building a very sophisticated response to skewer the atonement. And the one figure that they use to do this is the cursed Judas Iscariot, the demon who was responsible for Jesus' death.

So Christianity in the second century was sectarian and in conflict. Christianity was only in its youth. It hadn't figured itself out yet. It was trying to determine its relationship with Judaism, its understanding of Jesus, its view of salvation, its use of rituals, its hierarchy, its position on women, its sacred scripture, its

interpretation of that scripture, and so forth. For every one of these issues, there were several answers among Christians. And many of these Christians formed their own communities. They talked to each other. They argued with each other. They agreed and they disagreed. Sometimes the discussions became heated, turned nasty, included name-calling, false accusations, and real hatred and bitterness.

It is within this complicated and confrontational environment that the *Gospel of Judas* was written. For this reason, it is necessary for us to become somewhat familiar with the general landscape of second-century Christianity. Who were the apostolic Christians? What faith were they defending? What other forms of Christianity existed? What were the disputes all about?

The Apostolic Church

The form of second-century Christianity that looks most like Christianity today is what various scholars call “proto-orthodox,” “mainstream,” “catholic,” or “apostolic” Christianity, although I must point out that it wasn’t the same as Christianity today. It would take two more centuries before the apostolic churches would sort out their major theological tenets, including Jesus’ relationship to God (was he the same as God or subordinate to God?), the problem of Christ’s two natures (how was his divine nature related to his human nature?), and the Trinity (how were the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit the same God and yet distinguishable?). The same can be said regarding their rituals. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Augustine of Hippo was still trying to sort out whether a person needed to be rebaptized if a lapsed priest had initially performed the baptism, and whether infant baptism was to be preferred over adult baptism.

Apostolic Christianity’s main rituals were the initiation rites (water baptism and anointing) and a sacred meal of thanksgiving, when the bread and the cup were shared in remembrance of Jesus’ death (the eucharist). It is a form of Christianity that was lauded by many men in the ancient world who were powerful bishops and respected theologians. They have become known as the “Church Fathers.”

One of the things that these men agreed on was a basic formulation of their faith, a formulation which they claimed was passed down to them from the twelve apostles. An early form of the Apostolic Creed recorded by Irenaeus contains elements of the faith that would become the normative expression of Christianity – belief in one God, the creator of the universe; his Son Jesus Christ, who was born of the flesh of the Virgin Mary, who was crucified and raised from the dead, who ascended into heaven, and who will return at the end of the world to resurrect in the flesh the dead, judging everyone, punishing the wicked with damnation and rewarding the righteous with life everlasting:

For the Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the incarnate ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things, and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race,

in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God and Savior and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess to him, and that he should execute just judgment towards all; that he may send spiritual wickedness and the angels who transgressed and came into a state of rebellion together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men. into the everlasting fire; but may, as an act of grace, confer immortality on the righteous and holy, and those who have kept his commandments, and have persevered in his love, some from the beginning, and others from their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.⁶

In the discussion following his record of this creed, Irenaeus makes several assertions to justify it. He says that although Christianity is scattered “throughout the whole world,” her “one house carefully preserves” this faith in many parts of the world. He emphasizes that this faith is “traditional” and “one.” He then goes on to declare that all forms of Christianity which deviate from this faith are “blasphemy.” He compares the deviant Christians to Satan’s fallen angels, “apostates” or renegades who will be punished by God for their wickedness and deceit.⁷

Of course, his assertions are rhetorical, meant to gain the upper hand in the debate about what shape Christianity should take. The creed that he lauds as “old” from the time of the apostles, in fact came into existence in the second century as a weapon in the arsenal against Christians whose Christianity looked very different from Irenaeus’. If there was a “traditional” or “old” creed from the apostles, it would have been close to what Paul remembers when he tells us that he passed on to his churches the traditional teaching

that he likely received from the Jerusalem church, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”⁸

The perception that apostolic Christianity was the dominant or major form of Christianity in the second century is only a perception, not a historical reality. It is a false impression that results from the fact that the surviving literature survived because it supported the form of Christianity that came to dominate and suppress all others. The emergence of orthodoxy from apostolic Christianity was a complicated process, involving a web of factors, not the least of which was a Roman emperor, Constantine, who wanted a single agreed faith.

One of the strategies used by the apostolic churches when they began to emerge as the orthodox tradition was to burn the books of those they declared to be heretics. This leaves history with the impression that their own writings were the dominant writings or expressed the opinions of the overwhelming majority, while other Christians had little or nothing to say. Of course, this is not true, but it means that historians have a difficult task trying to reconstruct the other forms of Christianity from the charred remains. Thank goodness that the apostolic Christians were argumentative and critical of other forms of Christianity, because their pens left traces of the suppressed Christianities. The greatest joy for the historian of early Christianity, however, is the accidents of history that have preserved some of the writings from those suppressed forms of Christianity, like the recent discovery of the *Gospel of Judas*.

The Marcionite Church

So who were these second-century apostolic creeds targeting? There were a number of other sectarian groups that were widespread and powerful. Perhaps the largest and most influential sectarian church was the one established by Marcion, a Christian from Asia Minor. He was born in 85 CE in the city of Sinope on the shore of the Black Sea. In the early part of the second century, he traveled to Rome, where he joined the local church and planned to study as a Christian theologian. It took Marcion several years to work out his systematic theology and write two major books laying out his system.

He was a very astute biblical scholar, who loved Paul's letters and knew the Jewish scriptures inside out. During the course of his rigorous study and criticism of the Jewish scriptures, he noticed that the God of the Jewish scriptures was wrathful, vengeful, and jealous, the opposite of the God of mercy, grace, and love that Jesus and Paul proclaimed. So Marcion thought that the Unknown God that Paul preached about in Acts to the Athenians was Jesus' Father, the Christian God, while Yahweh was the wrathful God of the Jews.

This distinction made sense to him in light of Paul's discussion about the Jewish Law and the advent of Jesus. Marcion took Paul's thought to its radical and logical conclusion – if Christ brought an end to the Jewish Law, then Judaism had been severed from Christianity. Marcion understood the Jewish Law to contain unnecessary and arbitrary commandments, which resulted in punishment and death. That law may be applicable to the Jews, whose God is Yahweh, but it made no sense to the Christians, whose God was the Unknown God of mercy, grace, and love proclaimed by Jesus and Paul. These thoughts led him to the

conclusion that Christians needed to repudiate the Jewish scriptures and replace them with a New Testament, a Christian scripture that would include the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters.

Once Marcion had completed his critical analysis of the scriptures, he called a meeting, inviting a number of Christian elders from the church in Rome. He presented his systematic theology of two Gods and two faiths to them, challenging them to debate. They weren't impressed. They returned to him all monies he had donated to their church and threw him out.

So Marcion went home. But he was not defeated. Instead, he became an active Christian missionary, establishing Marcionite churches everywhere he went. Justin Martyr, writing in Rome in the middle of the second century, complains that Marcion was successfully teaching his views to "many people of every nation."⁹ Fifty years later Tertullian of Carthage wrote, "Marcion's heretical tradition has filled the whole world."¹⁰ His churches formed the bedrock of the Christian tradition in many regions of Asia Minor, representing the original form of Christianity in some of these locales. Later orthodox church leaders like Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (350 CE) had to warn travelers to be cautious about attending church services in an unknown village. It could be a Marcionite church they had wandered into.¹¹ There are even Arabic reports of Marcionite congregations in the East as late as the tenth century!¹² The success and longevity of the Marcionite tradition can be measured in terms of the huge efforts that other Christian leaders expended in writing polemic against them. Around 200 CE, Tertullian alone devoted five books to this purpose.

The Ebionite Church

At the opposite end of the spectrum was the Ebionite church. This was the Jewish Christian church most widespread in eastern Syria. The writings which preserve many of their traditions are called the *Pseudo-Clementines* (200 CE). They appear to have had their own version of the Gospel of Matthew, likely an Aramaic translation of the Greek original with midrashic flourishes. The name of these Christians is to be traced back to the Hebrew word for “the poor,” *ebyon*. They took seriously the ethic of poverty that had been the foundation of Jesus’ movement.

They are described by the Church Fathers as Jews who remained faithful to the Jewish Law, while also honoring Jesus.¹³ They believed, as the Jewish faith taught, in one God, and in the Jewish scriptures as revealed by the one God. They did not believe that Jesus was born from a virgin. In fact, their version of Matthew did not have the first two chapters. Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, chosen by God to be his prophet. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit entered Jesus, and at his death it left him.

Jesus’ job while on earth was to be the voice of God, instructing his followers how to live righteously according to the “original” Jewish Law. The Ebionites thought that the Jewish scripture had become corrupted over time by the interpolation of human opinion and erroneous judgments, including concessions from Moses himself. So Jesus, the True Prophet, was to point out the false messages corrupting the scripture, while teaching the original intent of the Jewish Law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The false passages included all references to God as a humanlike being with emotions or a body, all plural references to God (“us,” “we,” “our”), all references to the sacrificial Temple cult. The Ebionites, in the wake of the destruction of the Temple

in 70 CE, began to teach that Jesus had come to abolish all sacrifices.

As for their practices, they used baptism as their initiation ritual, which they thought cleansed the convert from his or her sinful past. Daily baths were used to keep themselves in a state of holiness. They circumcised their children and lived their life in observance of the “corrected” Mosaic Law. They worshiped on the Sabbath (Saturday) as well as the Lord’s Day (Sunday), and also kept the Jewish holidays. Particularly important to them was the celebration of Passover every year. They maintained a restrictive table fellowship. As Jews they refused to eat meals or even have conversations with other Christians, whom they considered to be Gentiles. As for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, he was loathed. They taught that his letters should be rejected by Christians. They called Paul the “Apostate,” the renegade from the Law.

The evidence suggests that they are the remnant of the form of Christianity original to Jerusalem, when James the brother of Jesus and the twelve apostles first established a church after Jesus’ death. But this Jewish form of Christianity did not take root in most parts of the Mediterranean world, where Gentiles dominated in terms of converts. One of the paradoxes of Christianity’s growth among the Gentiles and its deviant interpretation of the Jewish scriptures was its separation from the religion that gave it birth. So by the second century, the Ebionites, who carried on a version of the earliest form of Christianity, had become a small church dissimilar to the majority of other Christian churches. Justin Martyr from Rome wasn’t sure how to react to them. He thought it probably best for Christians to try to get along with them as “brothers,” as long as the Ebionites didn’t try to force the rest of the Christian population to follow the Jewish Law and didn’t refuse to eat at the same table with them.¹⁴

The Church of New Prophecy

The New Prophecy movement, also known as Montanism, was quite different from the ones I have so far described. It was a protest movement, wishing to reclaim the original form of Christianity, its prophetic and charismatic roots. Three Christian prophets were the leaders of this reform movement: a man named Montanus, and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla. Montanus was from a village called Pepuza in a province in Asia Minor known as Phrygia, and this is where their movement was centered. These three prophets knew the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, although they also wrote books of their own, based on their revelations. Only a smattering of their prophetic sayings has come down to us.

What were they protesting against? The secularization of the apostolic churches. Their aim was to restore Christianity to its original form as a religion ruled by the Holy Spirit and focused on the coming of the end of the world. The two women were considered to be the main prophets of the movement, the principal voices of the Holy Spirit. They claimed to be inspired by the "Paraclete," the name for the Holy Spirit found in the Gospel of John. Montanus himself claimed to be a manifestation of the Paraclete, whom Jesus had promised to send to the disciples after his death.¹⁵ His role as the manifestation of the Paraclete was to lead everyone to the Truth.¹⁶

The women's claim to be prophets is particularly illuminating given the fact that Montanism was a protest and reform movement. Our earliest records from Paul indicate that one of the offices within the oldest churches was that of the prophet. This was an office that women filled, as well as men.¹⁷ But as the apostolic churches became more secularized, they shut women out of their

traditional roles as prophets and leaders. So the New Prophecy movement reclaimed for women their leadership roles in prophetic offices.

Priscilla made particular prophecies about the end of the world that included the descent of Jerusalem from heaven to a specific hill she had identified in Phrygia, a prophecy based in part on the book of Revelation.¹⁸ She speculated about the date of its arrival, using references from Genesis 6.3 and 8.1–5 to predict its descent in the year 172 CE to the mountain where Noah's ark was believed to have come to rest. Once New Jerusalem descended upon this Phrygian hill, she claimed, a thousand-year reign of Christ would be established on earth.

So the Montanist prophets called out to Christians everywhere to set up a camp at the bottom of this hill and await the arrival of the new Jerusalem. Here, they thought, true Christianity would be established, ready for the coming of Christ's reign. In camp, the ethics were rigid. A strict code of asceticism was adopted to prepare for the great day. Wasn't it the 144,000 virgins who would be redeemed?¹⁹ So celibacy was practically demanded even within marriage, and second marriage completely forbidden. Rigorous fasting for one day a week was required and a diet of dry foods encouraged. The reason for the dry diet had to do with ancient physiology. The ancients believed that reducing fluids by mouth would decrease fluids that needed to be excreted not only as urine, but also as semen. So the dry diet was used to control sexual urges and encourage celibacy. Absolution of sin after baptism was completely refused, and penance for sins was severe. Martyrdom was encouraged because persecution was predicted as a sign of the end in Revelation, a book which also taught that the believer should die for his or her faith.

This apocalyptic movement was highly successful. The records

of the Church Fathers indicate that Christians abandoned their families, their work, and their property to come and camp out at the base of the mountain. Of course the movement failed and everyone went home once it was evident that the new Jerusalem wasn't going to descend on the mountain. However, the movement didn't die out; it turned into a church which continued for centuries. The Church of New Prophecy was able to survive and flourish because its members became door-to-door itinerant preachers. They weren't embarrassed by the failure of the prophecy. They just admitted that their calculations for the Last Day were wrong, and then they intensified their propaganda.

In this way they offered a rigorous and charismatic alternative to the apostolic Christian church, which was being criticized for loosening its standards on mandatory fasting and marriage. The Church of New Prophecy spread beyond Asia Minor, to Rome, Gaul, Syria, Thrace, and North Africa. We have a story in the Syrian traditions about John of Ephesus who, in the sixth century, apparently had had enough of them. He went to the main Montanist church in Pepuza and burnt the church to the ground along with the bones of the prophets Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla which were housed there, and the books they had written.²⁰

One of the most famous converts to the Church of New Prophecy was Tertullian, who is also famous for being one of the leading theologians within the Roman Catholic Church in the West. He was one of the early framers of Trinitarian thought and many of his ideas about the human and divine natures of Christ became the basis for western contributions to the Christological debate. Tertullian was attracted to the strict ethics of the Church of New Prophecy, as well as the strength of its Christians, who not only were willing to die grisly deaths as martyrs for the faith, but

actually did so. Some of these deaths are recorded in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity*. It appears that the Bishop of Rome was also impressed. Tertullian writes that the Bishop had "acknowledged the prophetic gifts of Montanus, Prisca [or: Priscilla], and Maximilla" and had "bestowed his peace on the churches of Asia and Phrygia." Later, though, Tertullian complains that the Bishop was persuaded by false accusations lodged against the prophets and their churches, and so turned against them. In anger, Tertullian says that the Paraclete was "put to flight" in Rome.²¹

The Gnostics

Perhaps the second-century Christians most difficult to describe are the "Gnostics" or "Knowers." The difficulty lies in the fact that they do not represent one group or one church. As we will see in the next chapter, there was no separate Gnostic church. Rather, these people formed lodges or seminaries where they would gather for instruction and initiation into God's mysteries. Some Gnostic groups identified more closely with apostolic churches than others, attending them on Sundays in addition to their lodge activities. Other Gnostic groups turned away from formal Christian worship altogether, and only attended lodge. Of the numerous Gnostic groups in the second century, three serve as good examples of the range of relationships Gnostic Christians had with apostolic Christians.

The Valentinian Gnostics called themselves "Christians." The Valentinian author of the *Gospel of Philip* said, "When we were Hebrews, we were orphans and had only our mother, but when we became Christians we had both father and mother."²² They appear to have been closely tied to the apostolic churches, attending them

regularly. In addition to these ordinary church services, the Valentinian Gnostics met as a "secret society" or a closed seminary circle. They formed conventicles led by famous Valentinian theologians – Valentinus, Theodotus, Marcus, Heracleon, and Ptolemy.

Valentinians held their rituals (baptism, anointing, eucharist) in common with the apostolic churches, although their interpretation of the effects of those rituals was unique to them. All rituals, they believed, had an esoteric purpose unknown to ordinary Christians. In addition they probably used further practices for initiation ceremonies in the Gnostic conventicle itself, but exactly what those were has yet to be fully recovered from the texts. It is likely that a second baptism was required. What this means is that the Valentinians straddled the fence. They fully participated in the rituals of the apostolic churches, which they attended regularly. At the same time, they engaged in ritual activities in their lodges or seminaries, which were for them an additional but separate sphere of communal worship. The modern example most comparable to the Valentinians might be Christians who also belong to the Mason Lodge or the ecumenical Bible study club.

Some scholars have suggested that the Valentinians engaged in a special sexual initiation ritual called the "Bridal Chamber." But this is a misreading of the Valentinian traditions. The Valentinians believed that monogamous marriage is to be respected as a sacrament, that love-making must involve a prayerful (rather than lustful) orientation because it is a reflection of the eternal marriages between God's own male and female aspects. Love-making is also the procreative moment, so the Valentinians were also very concerned to maintain a prayerful orientation so that the children they conceived would contain within them a strong spirit rather than a weak one. Human marriage, they thought, anticipated an

end-of-the-world event known as the Bridal Chamber. At that final eschatological moment, all the perfected human spirits would marry angels. Together, the couples would enter the Godhead, which would become for them a bridal chamber. This vision of the end of time is a vision of mystical reunion with God, a sacred marriage between the human spirit and the great Father.

Valentinians believed that all Christians (Gnostic and apostolic) would be saved, although how this was accomplished depended on whether you were an initiated Gnostic Christian or not. Their interpretation of Jewish and Christian scripture tended to be allegorical, rather than subversive. They taught a distinctive Gnostic mythology with a creator god who would be redeemed by Jesus, rather than conquered. Many features of their beliefs are very close to those of the apostolic church. It is not always easy to separate their theology from Alexandrian Fathers like Origen. So closely were they tied to the apostolic churches that Valentinus himself was nominated in the election of the Bishop of Rome in the mid-second century and was only narrowly defeated.

The Basilidian Gnostics, however, expressed a different self-identification: "We are no longer Jews and not yet Christians." These Gnostics understood themselves to be outside the apostolic churches, although they do not appear to have harbored animosity toward them. Like the Valentinians, they formed conventicles, but unlike the Valentinians, the Basilidians were not connected to the worship houses of the apostolic Christians. They worshiped separately. One of the interesting fragments about the Basilidians reports that they observed their own liturgical calendar, celebrating Jesus' baptism (January 6th) in vigil the night of the 5th and reading scriptures.²³ This means that they are the first recorded Christians to have celebrated the festival we call today the "Epiphany of our Lord." These Gnostics appear to have

congregated in a seminary circle or lodge, taught by Basilides himself or one of his students. Basilides was a famous Christian philosopher in his day, and wrote the first commentaries on some of the texts that later would become part of the New Testament.

The Basilidians had a very extensive cosmology that included 365 heavens, one for every day of the year. All were populated by numerous powers and angels whose names the initiate had to learn. The chief of these powers was Abrasax, whose name in Greek letters has the numerical value 365, although the name “Abrasax” appears to be of Semitic origin, a secret paraphrase of one of the Jewish names for God. Basilides taught a variety of determinism that he got from reading Paul: that only a few (the Gnostics) are chosen to be saved. The rest of humanity would be destroyed at the end when God’s original intended order would be re-established. Christ came to liberate the elect from the grip of Abrasax and the world order he had erroneously set up. Salvation is for the soul alone, not the body, which is the creation of the powers that rule this world.

The most confrontational Gnostics appear to have been the Sethian Christians, those responsible for writing the *Gospel of Judas*. In the next chapter, I will describe their form of Gnostic Christianity in detail in order to give a full context for the religiosity of the *Gospel of Judas*. They understood themselves to be Gnostic Christians, the only type of Christian who could understand Jesus’ message. They were completely opposed to apostolic Christianity and did not consider the apostolic Christians to be real Christians.

So in the *Gospel of Judas*, we will find our familiar story turned upside down. Jesus mocks and criticizes the apostolic twelve, who are characterized as faithless and ignorant. Jesus’ voice is the Gnostic voice challenging the apostolic Christians to reassess their

faith, to listen to their own reason and consciences rather than blindly accept their faith because they thought it was handed down to them from the Twelve.

The *Gospel of Judas* has grown on me. It has taken me in. Studying the text in Coptic has made me change my mind about it and appreciate its bitter voice, a voice that was marginalized and then silenced for almost two thousand years. The *Gospel of Judas* is a very sophisticated Gospel written from a perspective we are not often exposed to – from the perspective of a Gnostic Christian in the mid-second century from the Sethian tradition. It is a voice and perspective representing the missing half of a conversation between sectarian Christians when Christianity was still in its youth.

The *Gospel of Judas* does not represent an actual historical dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, or between Jesus and Judas for that matter. In this Irenaeus was right: it is “fictitious history.” But as fictitious history, it is at one and the same time “fiction” and “non-fiction.” For those of us who really want to know what early Christianity was like, the *Gospel of Judas* is of tremendous historical value because it is a fictionalization of a conversation that the Sethian Christians were having with the apostolic Christians in the mid-second century. Jesus represents the voice of the Gnostics, while the twelve disciples are the voice of the apostolic Christians. Much can be gained from listening to their dialogue.

Some Christians in the past, like Bishop Irenaeus, wished to shut out this dissenting voice because it did not support the kind of religiosity, the kind of Christianity, that was their “truth.” But now that the *Gospel of Judas* has resurfaced in the twenty-first century, its voice can be silenced no longer. This book is written to liberate its voice and lend an ear to its “truth.”

CHAPTER 2

A Gnostic Catechism

As I translated the *Gospel of Judas*, I realized quite soon the sectarian nature of the Gospel and its affinity with a peculiar brand of ancient Gnosticism known as Sethianism. What this means, as we have seen, is that the *Gospel of Judas* was written by Christians who identified themselves outside and even against the apostolic Christianity of the second century CE. These peculiar Christians were esoterically minded. For them, God was not something to be intellectually comprehended by thinking about him. Rather, God is something to be experienced, directly apprehended by the believer. This form of “knowing” is what they called “gnosis.” This gnosis is not an intellectual knowledge, but knowledge by acquaintance – as in “getting to know” someone through an interpersonal relationship. This relationship is what changes us, they thought. It transforms us, they argued, and transfigures us. The God–Self relationship – gnosis – was an experience of transcendence, moving us from a state of separation, from the sinful mortal condition, to an eternal spiritual body and life united with God.

Because of this Gnostic perspective, Sethians believed that God had mysteries that could only be known through revelation unmediated by the Church, mysteries not present in the Church’s simplistic creeds and petty bureaucracy or the bombastic pedagogy of its leaders. So they formed lodges and seminaries separate from the apostolic churches, where they would go to study, contemplate, pray, and receive initiation into the mysteries of the Kingdom of

God. From this vantage point, they challenged the theology and ritual practices of conventional Christianity, criticizing the apostolic Christians for their theological naïveté and ritual ineptitude.

What is Gnosticism?

Scholars today are struggling to answer the very stubborn question of what Gnosticism is. We have realized, after examining the Gnostic literature recovered in the 1940s from Nag Hammadi, Egypt, that the rubric “Gnosticism” is a misnomer. It is a modern term that contemporary scholars have invented, rather than a word that describes a historical religion. Scholars constructed the modern understanding of Gnosticism to help describe those groups in the ancient world whom the leaders of the apostolic churches identified as deviant or heretical. We understood these “heretical” Christians as participants within a larger religiosity, an umbrella religion we called Gnosticism. Gnosticism came to represent for us a form of religion in the ancient world that had turned against Judaism and Christianity, a perversion of traditional morality and piety as well as theology. It was described by scholars in the twentieth century as a form of religiosity characterized by a negative view of the world and human existence, succumbing to cosmic nihilism and deeply yearning for everything spiritual.

But this romantic vision has been called into question. Analysis of the Nag Hammadi texts has shown us that there was no generic Gnostic religion. This does not mean, however, that there were no Gnostics! Even though there was no Church of Gnosticism, there were a number of Jews and Christians who were esoterically oriented and yearned for Gnosis. Some of them formed conventicles, lodges or seminary circles apart from the synagogue

or church, while others attended synagogue or church while also being part of one of these secret societies. The communities they formed were not part of an umbrella Gnostic religion, but instead were sharply distinct from each other, especially in terms of social location, ritual performances, and even theological systems. In other words, the various Gnostic Christians wouldn't have understood themselves to be members of the same religious community even though there were features of their religiosity that they held in common.

So who were the Gnostics? Where did they come from? Bishop Irenaeus, living in the late second century, knew of at least two groups of Christians who called themselves the "Gnostics." He uses the term "Gnostics" with reference to a very early sectarian group the "Barbeloites" (named after the Mother aspect of the supreme God, Barbelo), which appears to be the same group as the "Sethians" (named after their biblical hero, Seth, son of Adam and Eve).¹ He also uses the term when describing a later Christian sectarian group, the Carpocratians (named after their founder, Carpocrates), whose leader in Rome during the late second century was a woman by the name of Marcellina.²

Since the Sethians appear to be the oldest known sectarians to use the word to describe themselves, the search for the elusive Gnostics best begins with Sethian literature. We are fortunate enough to possess a significant collection of literature written by Sethian Gnostics, discovered accidentally by an Egyptian peasant in 1945. He had been digging for fertilizer or *sabakh*, a nitrate-rich soil, near Nag Hammadi when his mattock struck a clay pot. The pot turned out to be a cache of fourth-century Coptic books. Much of the literature in these books is suppressed texts written by Christians like the Gnostics. Many of these texts are Sethian.

The World Created by Plato

What the Sethian literature from the Nag Hammadi collection reveals is that these Gnostics were both Jews and Christians who wished to combine the biblical tradition with Platonic philosophy, the "science" of the day. Platonic philosophy in this period conformed to Ptolemaic cosmology, which had been developing for centuries to replace the classical cosmos of ancient civilizations. The classical cosmos consisted of heaven, earth, and an underworld known as Hades or Sheol. By the early second century CE, this view was being eclipsed. Claudius Ptolemy is known to have given this cosmological revolution its systematic formulation. This geocentric vision of our universe survived until the Renaissance, when the modern Copernican cosmos was adopted. In the Ptolemaic system, the earth was understood to be the center of the universe, rather than the sun. The earth was surrounded by seven heavens which were envisioned as concentric rings, and each ring was associated with one of the seven planets or "stars": the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn (see Figure 3).

The Platonic philosophers in this era did not think that this universe was absolute Reality. Instead, absolute Reality consisted of what they called the world of Forms or Ideas, like justice, beauty, or goodness. While we as human beings are embodied and live in this universe, we can learn the effects of the Forms, but we cannot have direct knowledge of them, except perhaps in momentary flashes of recollection. This includes God, "the Good," who consists of the totality of the Forms. We can have no more than momentary intuitions of Reality, the Platonists said, because our universe is only a shadow or reflection of the perfect world of Forms.



Figure 4. The Ptolemaic Universe

The goal of human life was to rehabilitate the soul or *psyche*, which had become corrupted and weak when it separated from the Good and descended through the planetary realms, literally falling from the sky into the human body. To reinvigorate the soul, the human being must live in accordance with the most important virtues, relying on reason to subdue the soul's desires and emotions. Once the *psyche* was rehabilitated and released from the body at the moment of death, it would be pure enough and strong enough to ascend through the seven planetary realms and reunite with the Good.

Plato thought the rational soul or *psyche* was immortal and pre-existent. He believed that the soul originally came from the

heavenly world of Forms. During its pre-existence, while it resided in the upper world, the soul knew the Forms. It began to be weighed down by emotion and desire, however, and fell to the earth, where it was attached to a body. Once born in a body, the *psyche* existed in a state of forgetfulness. One of the reasons for the pious life is that it allows the soul rare opportunities to have brief flashes, sudden memories of the world of Forms.

Plato's understanding of cosmogony, how the world was created, was relatively simple. Plato describes the Good as the supreme and highest being. Below this is the creator god, the Demiurge or Craftsman, also known as Mind. The Demiurge is the one who creates this world out of disordered matter on the basis of a model he has in his mind, a model consisting of the ideal Forms above him. The Demiurge gives the universe its own soul, which the Platonists called the World-Soul or World-*Psyche*. So the cosmos is perceived by the Platonists to be a living organic being.

Because Plato understood the cosmos later to be an eternal living organism, Platonists believed that it was characterized by two movements which were understood to be simultaneous, inevitable and timeless. These movements are descent and ascent. Descent was understood by these Platonists to be the automatic creativity of the higher aspects of the cosmos generating the lower aspects. This generation was seen as a reflex action of the higher being forming a being immediately below himself. This creative process took place through an intellectual activity – contemplation. The higher being contemplated either himself (if he was all that existed) or the being just above him (if he was one of many that existed). This contemplation led to the downward generation of the next being or level of Reality. This downward procession is necessary and eternal. It is called “emanating” and the resulting being is called an “emanation.”

Even though the generated being is a reflection of whatever is contemplated, it is not as perfect as the contemplated being. It is only a mirror image or a copy. In our world, we might use the office copy-machine as an example. If I make a copy of the original, is the copy exactly like the original? Or is it less perfect? If I make a copy of the copy and so on, how degraded can it become and still be a copy of that original? The problem with the process of emanation is that an exact duplicate cannot be made, only a reflection of the original. This results in a created world that is not a perfect re-creation of Reality. It is a shadow reflection.

Ascent, the second natural movement of the universe according to the Platonists, is upward, the movement of the soul as it passes up through all the stages of being to its final union with the Good. This upward movement is also connected to contemplation. As the soul raises its sights to contemplate higher orders of being, it raises itself up. It experiences progressive transformation until it finally can reunite with God after death.

Bible Stories about Yahweh's Angel

This Platonic worldview was simply regarded as the true state of affairs for most ancient people living in the Mediterranean. It only became a problem for Jews (and later for Christians) because it did not coincide with the biblical tradition (in much the same way that the biblical tradition does not coincide with modern scientific theories of evolution) – the Genesis story tells us that God or Yahweh created the world, not a lesser Demiurge (or the Big Bang). Since these same Jews had assimilated the Jewish God to Plato's transcendent, perfect God, these same Jews also wrestled with their observations about the world we live in. It was far from perfect. In fact it was full of suffering and misery. They wondered how a perfect

God could create this imperfect world. Instead of questioning or denying the accuracy of the Platonic worldview, some first-century Jews embraced it and chose to combine Plato's concept of the Demiurge with a new interpretation of the Genesis story.

How did these truly ingenious religious thinkers do this? They turned to the biblical stories about a special angel called the Angel of Yahweh. This angel is utterly unique because it possesses God's sacred and personal name, Yahweh, and functions as God's personal manifestation on earth. He appears to Hagar by a spring in the wilderness, saying to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants . . . Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son." Hagar is stunned following the visitation. She calls out "the Name of Yahweh" who had spoken to her. She asks, "Have I really seen him and remained alive after seeing him?"³ Although this passage does not explicitly identify the Angel of Yahweh with Yahweh, it is susceptible to that interpretation. Hagar is convinced she has seen God himself, a vision that traditionally results in death.⁴

Another biblical story where this identification is quite pronounced is the account of Moses and the burning bush. In this narrative, the Angel of Yahweh appears to Moses in the burning bush, but whose voice speaks from the bush? Not the Angel's, but God's own voice calls forth, "Moses, Moses!" Moses hides his face because "he was afraid to look at God."⁵

In these and other biblical stories, God and his Angel appear to be interchangeable – or at least that was the conclusion drawn by some Jews in the first century after conducting these types of careful readings of their sacred scriptures. This premise allowed these Jews to infer further that it was this Angel named Yahweh, not God himself, who had created the world. When the word "Yahweh" appears in the creation story, it was understood to be a reference to this Angel, not God. They supported this argument by

pointing to passages that included plural references to God, like Genesis 1.26, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness.” Since God doesn’t exhibit human characteristics, while angels do, they also supported their argument by citing biblical passages that describe God in anthropomorphic terms, such as when Adam and Eve “heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of day.”⁶ This couldn’t be describing God, who doesn’t have feet, let alone walk. It must refer to the Yahweh Angel, they said.

This is the way the creator of the world became God’s Angel instead of God in the eyes of some first-century Jews. They didn’t seem to believe that monotheism was threatened, however, because God was still the only being worthy of worship. The Angel, they argued, was God’s personal manifestation anyway. This is how all their theological problems were solved – the Bible remained intact, the “scientific” explanation of the universe’s origin was retained, and the miseries of the world were explained.

Oppositional Gods in Gnostic Theology

What is so paradoxical is that this reasoning could *only* have occurred among people who were taught to believe every word of the Bible and to cling to the faith that “God is one.” Only these people would have been inclined to save the Genesis story of creation by reinterpreting it in this fashion, a reinterpretation that would ultimately lead to the bifurcation of God and Gnostic theological systems of oppositional gods.

We are not sure exactly when or how this speculation turned into “Gnosticism.” Some scholars argue that Gnostic oppositional theology was entirely a Jewish development and some that it was entirely Christian. My study of the materials has led me to think that it is both. As long as the Yahweh Angel remained connected to

God and acted as his agent, the theological system was not yet Gnostic. But as time passed and speculation continued, these religious thinkers would put pressure on this understanding until it collapsed and a complete split between God and his Angel occurred. The creator Angel came to be perceived as either a revolutionary, warring against the supreme God, or hubristic, prideful and ignorant of the presence of the supreme God.

How did belief in this split between the supreme God and his Angel arise? The first factor was scriptural. Jews and Christians who were familiar with the scriptures knew that Yahweh is described in terms that aren’t very flattering. He himself admits to being “jealous” in one of the Ten Commandments – “I the Lord your God am a jealous God” – making generations of children suffer for the wickedness and sins of their fathers.⁷ Because of Yahweh’s jealousy, he was also known as a god of anger, destroying entire communities of people who stirred up his wrath.⁸ He himself says in Isaiah, “I make weal and create woe, I am Yahweh.”⁹ He also appears ignorant on occasion. In the Garden of Eden, didn’t Yahweh have to call out to Adam and Eve and ask them “Where are you?” because he didn’t know their whereabouts?¹⁰ A literal reading of these types of scriptural references came to play an important role in Gnostic characterizations of the Demiurge as oppositional and even evil.

The second factor was an interpenetration of the Jewish story about the revolt of Lucifer and his angels with the developing story about the Yahweh creator Angel, who was jealous, angry, and ignorant. These religious thinkers began to toy with the idea that the Demiurge Angel, like Lucifer, might have been acting in rebellion against the supreme God. If he was jealous, angry, and ignorant, was he like Lucifer, who led a revolt and was thrown down from the high places? Not all Gnostic systems understood the

Demiurge to be demonic, but certainly some Gnostic systems did, including Sethianism in its earliest phase. All Gnostic systems, however, did impose some of the elements from the Lucifer mythology onto their narratives about the Demiurge, particularly Lucifer's opposition to God.

The third factor was a theoretical consequence of the overlap of Platonic and Jewish mythology. The Platonic God was completely transcendent, beyond the universe. Yahweh lived at the top of the universe, in the seventh heaven. Once God was split into the supreme God and the Yahweh Angel, the supreme God was elevated to a transcendent realm far beyond the seventh heaven, leaving the Yahweh Angel spatially abandoned and ignorant of anything beyond the seventh heaven of the cosmos. This separation and large spatial gap between God and his Angel left room for speculation about how the separation between the two occurred.

Ultimately, these three factors led to the creation of a Gnostic theology of oppositional gods. The hallmark of this theology centers on an ongoing and momentous war between the supreme God and an arrogant, ignorant Demiurge who claims, as the scripture says, "there is no god besides me."¹¹ He creates the heavens and the earth and everything in it out of ignorance, or in revolt when a voice above him reveals that he is not alone.

God's Original Sin and Fall

The large spatial gap between God and his Angel not only invited speculation about how they became separated. The Gnostics also wondered who lived in between. In their theoretical speculations, they began filling the gap between the transcendent supreme God and the Yahweh Demiurge with a multitude of divine emanations called Aeons. These emanations were aspects or characteristics of

God that make up his Totality, a concept known as God's Fullness or Pleroma. Essentially this means that the Godhead is not a Trinity, as many Christians believe today. Rather the Gnostic Godhead consisted of a number of Aeons, which were all the various aspects of God living as a collective: aspects like Life, Truth, Thought, and Intention.

The most important Aeon for the Gnostic story was the last emanation, the female emanation Sophia, God's Wisdom. She was well known to Jews and Christians from their scriptures, and they found her story appealing since she was an angelic being who lived with God but who descended into lower and lower realms, even to earth.

Sophia was known as an angelic being who was very exalted, dwelling in the clouds of heaven.¹² In the Jewish scriptures, she has her own throne in the clouds, she speaks out in God's court, and she is sent down to Israel to reveal God's wisdom to human beings. A beautiful hymn is preserved in the Wisdom of Ben Sirach telling her story of lofty living and earthly lodging:

Sophia will praise herself,
 And will glory in the midst of her people.
 In the assembly of the Most High
 She will open her mouth,
 And in the presence of his host she will glory,
 "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
 and covered the earth like a mist.
 I dwelt in high places,
 And my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
 Alone I have made the circuit of the vault of heaven
 And have walked in the depths of the abyss.
 In the waves of the sea, in the whole earth,

And in every people and nation I have gotten a possession.

Among all these I sought a resting place.

I sought in whose territory I might lodge."¹³

Sophia is described as the Holy Spirit who “pervades and penetrates all things.” She is called “a pure emanation of the Glory of the Almighty,” a “breath of the Power of God,” a “reflection of eternal light,” an “immaculate mirror” of God’s activity, and “an image of God’s goodness.”¹⁴ She was brought forth by God before the creation of the world, and she herself helped to create the world and everything in it.¹⁵ Sophia is “a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; fortunate are those who embrace her.”¹⁶ She holds life in her hands, reveals God’s insights to human beings, and protects and strengthens generations of human beings beginning with Adam.¹⁷ She is even known as God’s spouse, “an initiate in the knowledge of God, and an associate in his works.”¹⁸

Because she is known in scripture to descend from heaven into the world and interact with humans, in Gnostic systems this Aeon becomes the one who crosses boundaries. She leaves the Pleroma and initiates the process of creation in the lower realms. Her fall out of the Pleroma is the moment in the emanation process that “errors out,” so to speak, just as the process of serial photocopying eventually results in a copy that is no longer readable. Her movement out of the Pleroma is perceived as a downward spiral or “fall” into denser and denser realms of being. Her leaking spirit eventually lodges in human bodies, vessels of imprisonment and redemption.

This means that “original sin” does not occur in the Garden of Eden as a fault of human beings. Rather the original sin occurred in the Pleroma prior to the creation of the world, and this error led to God rupturing and Sophia falling out. The Gnostics speculated

about what sin God could possibly commit, what sin could inevitably lead to his rupture. Since God existed as a single being, there are only two activities he could be involved in – thinking about himself, or giving pleasure to himself. The Gnostics toyed with both these paradigms, and their stories are penetrated with both images. Their descriptions of the emanation process include contemplative activities like thinking and reflecting, as well as erotic activities like masturbation and procreative sex.

So original sin has nothing to do with disobedient humans, but exists from the beginning within God’s very own nature. It is narcissism – pride, vanity, and curiosity about himself. A very good example of this thinking can be found in the Sethian *Apocryphon of John*. The beginning of the emanation process is narcissistic – God looks into a pool of water, admiring himself. However, what he sees is his “spirit,” his female image. Because she embodies his own desire and vanity, he acts, either pulling back from her or pushing her away. When he does this, she emerges as the “first power” shining in God’s light. Her name is Barbelo, who is the “womb of everything.” She is called “Mother–Father,” the “Holy Spirit,” and the “Androgynous One.” From her emanate other divine aspects of God.¹⁹

The expansion of the Sethian Godhead is quite complicated, and the Sethian literature preserves many variations on this process. But there are some features common to all versions of the myth (displayed in Fig. 4). First, the Pleroma consists of three major Aeons – the Father, the Mother, and the Son. Second, these Aeons are all androgynous. The Father is an invisible “Spirit,” who sees his female image when he peers into the reflecting pool. The Mother is the “first man,” “thrice-male,” “Womb,” and “Triple Androgynous Name.” The Son is the “Self-Generated,” “First-Born,” and “Only-Begotten.” Third, the Father, Mother, and Son

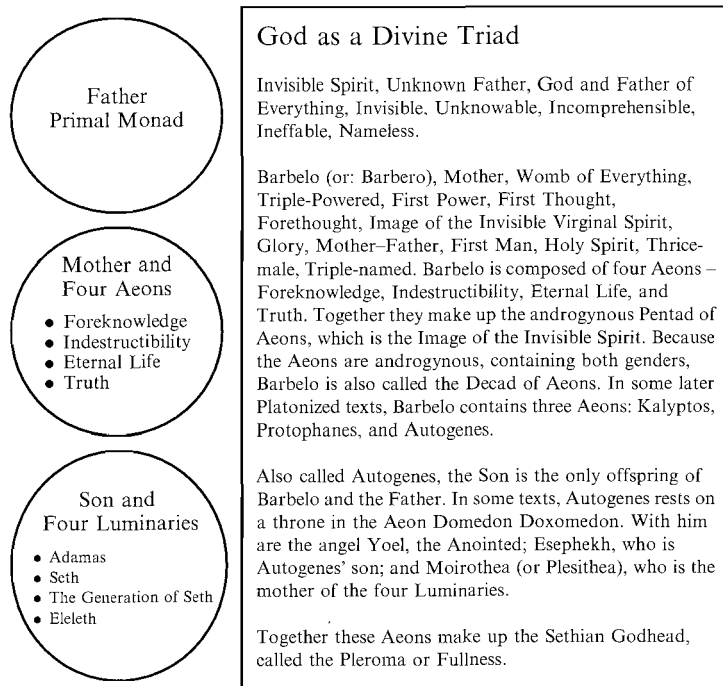


Figure 5. *The Sethian Godhead*

contain within themselves a number of other Aeons, as well as light-beings called Luminaries.

The *Gospel of Judas* narrates its version of the expansion of the Sethian Pleroma in a very abbreviated form. Jesus reveals that “there exists a great and boundless Aeon, whose extent no generation of angels has seen, [in] which is the great Invisible Spirit, that no eye of an angel has seen, no thought of the heart has comprehended, nor was it called by any name.”²⁰ We also are told that “the immortal Aeon of Barbelo” exists.²¹ As for the Son, Jesus tells us that he came into being when a cloud of light appeared and the Father said, “Let an angel come into being as my assistant.”

The Son is born from the cloud, the “Self-Generated One, the God of Light.”²² Within the Son exist the standard Sethian realms of four Luminaries (Adamas, Seth, the Generation of Seth, and Eleleth) and a plethora of assistant angels, Aeons, and heavens.²³ The final Aeon to be generated within Eleleth is Sophia.²⁴

The Gnostic Created Order

In the typical Sethian narrative of creation, it is Ialdabaoth who emerges as the prime creator god responsible for crafting our entire universe, from the top heaven to the spherical earth to the bottom abyss. The texts which relate the stories of his origin are quite ugly. His mother is Sophia and he is a monster because of the way Sophia generates him. Her androgyne splits, her female aspect wishing to create something without consulting her male aspect. So what she produces is imperfect: it isn't whole. The consequences of her desire take the form of a lion-faced serpent, with fire in his eyes. Sophia casts him away from herself, surrounds him with a luminous cloud to hide him, and names him Ialdabaoth.²⁵

Ialdabaoth becomes strong and arrogant, and steals some of his mother's spirit before descending into lower regions. Residing in his cloud, his operations headquarters, he creates more assistants to help him rule over these lower regions. The names of his primary assistants who live with him in his cloud and work on his behalf are usually Saklas and Nebruel. These assistants are known as “Archons” or rulers. Ialdabaoth and his assistants create twelve more great Archons to rule the twelve realms below their cloud – the seven heavens and the five abysses. Each of these Archons in turn creates a number of lesser angels as assistants to populate their own realms.

In the *Gospel of Judas*, Ialdabaoth's identity is fused with

Nebruel, whom the author points out is also named “Apostate,” meaning “Renegade” or “Traitor.” He lives in the same cloud as Saklas. The two of them produce twelve Archons to populate the seven heavens and the five abysses. The *Gospel of Judas* only mentions the names of the five Archons who rule over the underworld – Atheth,²⁶ Harmathoth, Galila, Yobel, and Adonaios.²⁷ These Archons are the usual suspects who rule over the abysses in the Sethian myth.

After the Archons are produced, the typical Sethian narrative turns to the creation of the human being whose form is patterned after an image or likeness, either Ialdabaoth’s own, or a reflection beamed down from above. This human being cannot stand, however, but writhes around on the ground like a worm. So Sophia whispers in Ialdabaoth’s ear, secretly telling him to blow his breath into the nostrils of his creature. When he does this, he unknowingly disperses his share of his mother’s stolen spirit within the human *psyche* or soul. Since Ialdabaoth has breathed out the Spirit, he no longer possesses it. Its dispersal within the human being will make it possible for Sophia to retrieve it. But this also means that Ialdabaoth can fight for it too. So the human being becomes the battleground of the gods.

The *Gospel of Judas* is very fragmentary at this point in its recounting of the Sethian story, but we hear that Saklas and his assistants were involved in the creation of Adam and Eve. Jesus and Judas engage in dialogue about the human spirit. According to this dialogue, Sophia is not the one who tricks Ialdabaoth to breathe the stolen spirit into the human’s nostrils. Rather, the text just assumes that two types of spirit exist. These spirits are similar to the types mentioned in other Sethian literature. According to the *Apocryphon of John*, the Archons create a “counterfeit” spirit resembling Sophia’s but which they use to pollute some of the

human souls.²⁸ In the *Gospel of Judas*, the better of the two spirits (equivalent to Sophia’s spirit) is guarded by Gabriel, and given by him only to Gnostic babies, the generation without a king. The lesser type of spirit (equivalent to the counterfeit spirit) is given by Michael to the rest of the human generations, whose king is Ialdabaoth. The human generations with the counterfeit spirit are completely under the influence of the stars and fate. They will perish along with their stars.²⁹

Gnostic Liberation

So God is at fault, but through no fault of his own. The flaw that leads to his rupture is an essential part of his nature – his unavoidable reflection upon himself, his self-absorption, his curiosity about his own being. Since the “fall” happened because of God rather than because of human error, the traditional interpretation of the creation story made no sense. So that interpretation was reversed in highly subversive ways, at least in the Sethian narrative. It became a paradigm for the enfeeblement of the spirit as well as its liberation. It is a story of trickery and skirmishes between Sophia and Ialdabaoth, who both want to retrieve her spirit for themselves. Ialdabaoth works to keep human beings distracted and ignorant of the supreme God and their true nature so that the spirit will not know about the supreme God, nor be able to find its way home. Sophia works along with an Illuminator sent down from the Father to redeem the spirit and return it to the supreme God, to repair the rupture, to assist God in saving himself.

So when Eve listens to the snake, this is a good thing, a moment of redemption when her spirit is awakened from its slumber. In Christian Sethian texts, the snake sometimes is said to

be Christ himself come down from the upper Aeon, granting Eve and Adam gnosis when they eat of the Tree. So the *Gospel of Judas* relates, "God caused gnosis to be [given] to Adam and those with him, so that the Archons of Chaos and Hades would not rule over them."³⁰

In the typical Sethian story, this makes Ialdabaoth irate. So he casts Adam and Eve out of Paradise into yet lower realms of the world. This changes Adam and Eve's bodies to very coarse matter and further corrupts and enfeebles their souls. They forget completely about the supreme God. They learn about sex and become distracted, bearing children – a process that further distributes the spirit, making its retrieval by God exponentially more difficult. Cain and Abel die before they bear children. So this activity falls to Seth and Norea, who become the primal ancestors of all humankind. God intervenes in their lives in various ways. Seth and Norea receive instruction from the Illuminator about the supreme God, their true nature, and the presumptuousness of Ialdabaoth.

The Demiurge again is enraged and plans a flood to wipe them out. But before he can do this, Seth writes down on stone tablets, to preserve them from the flood, the secret rituals and liturgies God taught them to use, liturgies that would release their spirits and allow them to return to God. The Sethian Christians claimed that the tablets did survive the flood. They possessed a manuscript copy of this liturgy supposedly written by Seth, a beautiful threefold hymn collection called the *Three Steles of Seth*. A copy of this text is in the Nag Hammadi collection.

This war game between God and Ialdabaoth continued throughout human history. For every move God made to redeem the spirit (when God sent down an Aeon as an Illuminator) Ialdabaoth made a countermove to stop it. God's redemptive move

always involved an awakening of the human spirit, instruction about the presence of the supreme God and how to get back to him. In the Sethian tradition, the way to get back to him involved a cluster of elaborate initiation rituals they called the "Five Seals." These rituals released the spirit so that it could practice ascending out of the cosmic realms, and journey into the Aeons of the Pleroma.

The Sethian Gnostics appear to have held these initiation ceremonies in their lodges or seminaries, using baptism, anointing, prayer, hymn-singing, intonation and contemplation to make these dangerous spirit journeys. At each level of ascent, these baptisms, anointings and intonations were repeated several times, with the result that the person would experience a gradual transformation of the spirit as it journeyed upward. Often we find in their texts the intonation of the seven vowels. The Greeks believed that these vowels corresponded to the sounds of the planets, each of which had its own tone. Pronounced together, they produced the harmony of the seven spheres. These harmonies were frequently pronounced by Egyptian priests in temples and were meant to charm the gods. The Sethians used other intonations in conjunction with these, including calling out the names of the Aeons to capture their power for the ascent. Ultimately, these practices were trial runs, progressively showing the spirit its way out of the cosmos, its way home. At death, when the spirit was liberated from the body, it was free to ascend through the cosmic girdle and into the upper Aeon, coming to rest in God's bosom.

Where does Jesus' death fit into this story? In Sethian Christianity, Jesus is the last Illuminator, who descends from the Father, provides instruction about the supreme God, and shares with his Gnostic followers the ceremony of the "Five Seals." His advent is God's best move in the war game, and his crucifixion is

Ialdabaoth's worst countermove. For when Ialdabaoth crucifies Jesus, his countermove is his final ploy. Much to his surprise, his move releases Jesus' powerful spirit from his body. Unlike other human spirits, Jesus' spirit cannot be detained by Ialdabaoth. It is different. It is an Aeon. Jesus' spirit shoots up through the cosmic atmosphere, carving out a path to the Upper Kingdom and conquering the Archons along the way. In this way, Jesus brings about the end of Ialdabaoth's control over the human spirit, and God saves himself.