
The Thirteenth Apostle

What the Gospel of Judas Really Says

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To
Wade Allen Greiner

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."