Three Figures of Judas (after Borges)

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Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine author whose short story “Three Versions of Judas” has been cited as anticipating the discussion concerning the Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos, opens his narrative with a reference to a scholar of Judas and early Christianity, Nils Runeberg: “In Asia Minor or in Alexandria, in the second century of our faith (when Basilides was assuming that the cosmos was a rash and malevolent improvisation engineered by defective angels), Nils Runeberg might have directed, with singular intellectual passion, one of the Gnostic monasteries.” If Borges were alive today, writing in the light of the discovery and publication of the Gospel of Judas, he might substitute one or more of our names in place of that of Nils Runeberg. Perhaps, considering the critical remarks directed at the National Geographic Society and the National Geographic translators, from serious scholarly questions to colorful warnings of damnation from a few of the faithful, Borges might name Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, or yours truly in this regard, especially since he goes on to write, “Dante would have destined him (the scholar), perhaps, for a fiery sepulcher.”

The first figure of Judas Iscariot to emerge from the examination of the Gospel of Judas may be termed Judas the human hero. Kasser’s early description, on behalf of those
of us working on the text, is apt. He writes about Judas, “We smile at the educational dialogue of the ‘Master’ (Rabbi) with his disciples of limited spiritual intelligence, and even with the most gifted among them, the human hero of this ‘Gospel,’ Judas the misunderstood—whatever his weaknesses.” Others, such as Bart Ehrman, and thereafter Karen King and Elaine Pagels, and more, concurred in this basically positive assessment of Judas in the Gospel of Judas, of course with particular qualifications and interpretations. Our initial understanding of Judas as human hero was based on the striking statements in the Gospel of Judas that give Judas a place of insight and distinction in the gospel. This is, after all, ΠΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ἩΙΟΥΔΑΣ, “The Gospel of Judas,” and the incipit describes the contents of the gospel as “The secret word of declaration (or revelation, ἀποφάσις, the same term used by Hippolytus of Rome in his discussion of the ἀπόφασις μεγάλη attributed to Simon Magus) by which Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot . . . .” Judas alone of the disciples has the correct profession of who Jesus is, a Sethian Gnostic profession—“You have come from the immortal aeon of Barbelo. And I am not worthy to utter the name of the one who has sent you”—and Jesus recognizes that Judas is reflecting upon the rest of the things that are exalted. Judas is singled out for the cosmological revelation that dominates the central portion of the Gospel of Judas. Judas has a special role as conversation partner with Jesus throughout the text, and near the end of the gospel, as Jesus announces that Judas will sacrifice the man who bears him, it becomes apparent that the true, spiritual Jesus, as in other Gnostic contexts, will escape the crucifixion. Jesus tells Judas that he has been informed of everything, and Jesus says, “Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. And the star that leads the way is your star.” A
few lines later, after a particularly vexing lacuna, the text concludes, in understated language, with Judas handing Jesus—or the mortal body Jesus has been using—over to the authorities.

This portrayal of Judas in the Gospel of Judas, we believed at the outset and still believe, coheres rather well both in content and in sequence of narrative scenes with what Irenaeus of Lyon has to say in his *Adversus haereses* about the Gospel of Judas, in the latter part of the second century.

I should point out that at the time the popular volume of the Gospel of Judas and the Coptic transcription on the web appeared—in record time, I might add, giving a bit of credit to the much maligned National Geographic Society—several interpretive issues were just beginning to be faced, issues that would become prominent in subsequent scholarly discussion of the Gospel of Judas. Here I mention four such issues.

1) One of the last fragments to be placed before the popular National Geographic volume went to press was the fragment in the middle of page 56 about “those [who] offer sacrifices to Saklas.” While there are lacunae before and after this small amount of text, this statement about sacrifice, in the context of the comment following this that Judas will sacrifice the man who bears Jesus, along with the other references to sacrifice in the Gospel of Judas, makes more emphatic the place of sacrifice and the critique of sacrifice in the gospel.

2) On the bottom of page 35, the transcription of the very faint ink traces proposed at the beginning by those working on the papyrus in Europe was ουν ὅμ ἧξε εκεμβυκ ἐμαυ, “It is possible for you to go there,” a reading that Gesine Robinson has indicated she still prefers. By the time that the critical edition of Codex
Tchacos was published, the preferred transcription was modified, with the input of Wolf-Peter Funk and others, to read ΟΥΧ ΖΙΝΑ ΧΕ ΕΚΕΒΩΚ ΕΜΑΥ, “not so that you will go there.” In any case, “there” refers to “the kingdom,” ΤΜΗΤΕΡΟ, and whether “kingdom” has a positive or a negative meaning in the Gospel of Judas is unclear.

3) On the bottom of page 46, the transcription and translation of the difficult Coptic reading proposed early on read, “In the last days they will curse (CΕΝΑΚΑΥΨ) your ascent (ΝΕΚΚΤΗ ΕΠΟΥΨΙ) to the holy [generation].” By the time of the critical edition, the preferred transcription and translation were changed, with the help of Wolf-Peter Funk and Peter Nagel, to read “In the last days they <will . . > to you, and you will not ascend on high (ΝΕΚΒΩΚ ΕΠΟΥΨΙ) to the holy [generation],” with the suggestion of a negative third future form of the verb ΒΩΚ and the assumption that an unknown amount of text has been lost. This transcriptional and translational solution should please no one; to be forced to assume that there is a scribal error or a textual mistake precisely at the point of a difficult reading is, in my opinion, a solution of desperation. My guess is that we shall hear more about this passage.

4) Near the bottom of page 57 of the Gospel of Judas, the text reads, “Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it” (ΑΥΨ ΑΨΨΨΚ [for ΑΨΒΨΚ] ΕΠΟΥΝ ΕΡΟΣ). In our earlier interpretation of this passage, we imagined that the probable antecedent of the pronominal ι in ΑΨΨΨΚ could be Judas. As we shall see, April DeConick assumes the same antecedent, and this functions as a key element in her argument. Sasagu Arai has proposed on the basis of meaning and Gesine Robinson and Birger Pearson on the basis of syntax (first perfect verbs joined through asyndeton continue the same subject, and ΑΨΨΨ plus the first perfect introduces a new subject) that
the understood subject of ἀγέω is actually Jesus, so that Jesus and not Judas enters the light cloud. I agree with their interpretation. This may suggest that the stars around the cloud are not wicked luminaries, as some have proposed, but that the disciples’ stars are around the person of Jesus in his ascent to the luminous good cloud, and Judas’ star leads the way. This may resemble something of an enthronement scene; and just as Judas leads the way in his profession of Jesus near the opening of the Gospel of Judas, so also he leads the way in the vision of the glorification of Jesus at the conclusion of the text.

In the media frenzy that accompanied the appearance of the Gospel of Judas in April 2006, a typical query about the Gospel of Judas raised by journalists eager for a headline or a story was, “Is this the real thing?” I’m not sure what is truly real, and there are a variety of metaphysical ways to describe a thing, but I suppose they meant to ask whether the depiction of Judas in the Gospel of Judas provides a historically authentic picture of Judas. Is this new Judas of the Gnostic gospel, called the human hero among the disciples, a more historically compelling candidate to be included among the first-century followers of Jesus? That is clearly what is meant when *The New Yorker*, with tongue in cheek, published a cartoon showing two men singing at a bar in the ancient Middle East, with drinks in front of them and arms around each other, accompanied by the caption, “Revisionist Theology—Happy hour in Galilee with Jesus and Judas.” In his valuable study on Judas Iscariot, entitled *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* William Klassen reads the accounts of Judas in the New Testament gospels in a new light, and he brings forward what he believes is anything but the quintessential betrayer of Christian lore. Klassen’s Judas does not betray Jesus, but rather, in that sense of παραδίδοναι, he hands him over, or introduces him, to the authorities, with an innocent and even
benevolent intent. Craig Evans, a member of the original National Geographic advisory team, continues to suggest, in his essay in the 2008 second edition of the National Geographic popular volume, that the Gospel of Judas may contain an expansion (Evans adds a goodly number of modifiers to qualify this) of a private arrangement and agreement between the historical Jesus and the historical Judas. It should be insisted, however, that the Gospel of Judas remains a second century composition, and it must be studied and evaluated chiefly on that basis.

Such interpretive subtleties may not always be appreciated by the media, and the questions that arise from the way in which some of the media handled the Gospel of Judas require serious attention on the part of scholars. Many of us, in some way, have collaborated with the media at one time or another, and it may be argued that much good can come from responsible communication about the world of antiquity, or of religion, or even of the Gospel of Judas, through television, radio, the print media, and the internet. It may be asserted that the public has a right to know. Perhaps we can make a contribution to establishing greater religious literacy through our involvement with the media. Yet questions, including questions surrounding the media and the Gospel of Judas, remain. Just how compatible is the style of communication popularized by the media with our more qualified statements? Can our comments be reduced to a series of twenty- to thirty-second sound bytes? Can our narratives and interpretations be adequately packaged in eight- or ten-minute acts of a television program, with an opening attention-getter for each act to get the viewers going and a closing teaser to keep them from channel-surfing elsewhere? Can stories—say, a second-century Gnostic interpretation of Judas—be legitimately recreated and dramatized, employing Aramaic and first-century themes,
without misconstruing the account altogether? Can we—or, how can we—work with organizations that have deep pockets and effective means of communication but employ approaches different from what we are accustomed to? In the case of the National Geographic Society, their financial strength may have helped to save a papyrus codex from destruction, but like Sinatra, they do it their way.

These are questions and issues that demand our attention. We do well to consider them together, with thoughtfulness, civility, and collegiality.

A second figure of Judas Iscariot derived from the Gospel of Judas became public at a conference on Judas’ Gospel held at the Sorbonne in Paris in late 2006. There April DeConick, apparently taking the lead from the statement of Jesus in the Gospel of Judas where he laughs and addresses Judas as the “thirteenth daimon,” presented a paper in which she offers a remarkably different interpretation of Judas. According to DeConick, Judas is no human hero in the Gospel of Judas; on the contrary, he is an evil demon. Already at the Sorbonne, John Turner and Louis Painchaud offered similar interpretations of the figure of Judas, and Birger Pearson, Gesine Robinson, and others have joined in with variations on the theme of the evil character of Judas in the text. DeConick points to the term δαιμον, translated with the neutral word “spirit” by Kasser, Wurst, and Meyer, and she insists that Jesus designates Judas not as the thirteenth spirit, in a Platonic sense, but the thirteenth demon, in a Judeo-Christian sense. Further, the apparently insightful statements of Judas in the gospel are merely the fiendish fulminations of a demonic force who, like the demons in the New Testament and particularly the Gospel of Mark, know who Jesus is but are opposed to his work and are combated by his work. DeConick interprets the later transcriptions on papyrus pages 35 and 46, discussed previously, as
indications that Judas’ destiny is that he is to be deprived of the kingdom. As Jesus declares to Judas, according to DeConick, “You will not ascend on high to the holy [generation].” Instead, Judas’ star will rule over the thirteenth aeon, and that locale is judged to be the home of the demiurge. DeConick and others—all of us, in reality—focus upon the utterance of Jesus to Judas about the betrayal or handing over of Jesus, on page 56: “But you will exceed (Knap ξουο) all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me.” DeConick prefers to translate the expression Π ξουο in a strongly negative sense (the lines before include the clause “everything that is evil” after a substantial lacuna): “Yet you will do worse that all of them. For the man that clothes me, you will sacrifice.” Judas is responsible for the sacrificial death of the human Jesus; he is thus responsible for the sorry business of the sacrificial cult and sacrificial atonement in the emerging orthodox church.

Finally, Judas in the Gospel of Judas lifts up his eyes and sees the light cloud, and, according to DeConick, he—Judas—enters it. The cloud is taken to be the domain of Yaldabaoth, the megalomaniacal demiurge, and in it, the thirteenth aeon, Judas ends his demonic life as the lackey of the demiurge. In this world he was embroiled with the sordid affairs of the demiurge. In the next world he is in bed with the demiurge.

April DeConick has published her view of Judas the evil demon in The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says. DeConick sees the Gospel of Judas not as good news but as gospel parody. She concludes, “What does the Gospel of Judas really say? If we follow the story-line from beginning to end, what it means is different depending on your perspective. If you are Judas, it is a story of tragedy, of a human being who became entangled in the snares of the archons who rule this world. If you are an
apostolic Christian, it is a story of ridicule, a representation of your faith as based on faithless apostles and a demon-sponsored atonement. If you are a Sethian Christian, it is a story of humor, of laughter at the ignorance of Christians not in the know.”

On the sidewalk in San Diego at the 2007 SBL Annual Meeting, April and I discussed what might happen with the competing figures of Judas in the years to come. Time, naturally will tell, but I ventured a guess, in the spirit of Kasser’s Judas as “human hero . . . whatever his weaknesses,” that in the future a more nuanced figure of Judas would come forward, one who is understood to be neither supremely good nor supremely evil in the Gospel of Judas. After all, there is no formal demonology in the Gospel of Judas or anywhere in Codex Tchacos, and the word δαίμων is used, as far as we can tell from the papyrus text currently available, only one time in the entire codex. Elsewhere in Gnostic literature, in the Pistis Sophia, Sophia compares herself to a spirit or demon, and she does so in two languages (Greek δαίμων and Coptic ውቅኝopus); in Pseudo-Tertullian, Wisdom (sapientia) is also described as an erring spirit or demon (daemon). In the Pistis Sophia and the Books of Jeu there are literally dozens of references to the thirteenth aeon, and these are the only Gnostic sources I know of, besides the Gospel of Judas, that refer precisely to “the thirteenth aeon.” In the Pistis Sophia it is maintained that in this world below Sophia is persecuted at the hands of the archons of the twelve aeons, and though she is separated from it, she will return to her dwelling place in “the thirteenth aeon, the place of righteousness.” To be sure, the thirteenth aeon retains a somewhat ambiguous quality in the Pistis Sophia, yet it remains the salvific goal of Sophia throughout the text. This becomes all the more interesting when we note, with Irenaeus, that in the second century, around the time that the Gospel of Judas was being
composed, some Gnostics (apparently Valentinians, according to Irenaeus) were comparing Sophia and her sufferings in this world with Judas and his passion.

With these parallel texts in mind, we may be able to fashion a more qualified understanding of the figure in the Gospel of Judas. Like Sophia in other texts and traditions, Judas in the Gospel of Judas is separated from the divine realms above, even though he knows and professes the mysteries of the divine and the origin and nature of the savior. He goes through grief and persecution as a daimon confined in this world below, and, conversely, he is enlightened with revelations that no human being will ever see. And at last he will be on his way, much like Sophia, and like the Gnostic readers of the text, to the enlightened aeon of Gnostic expectation. That is the good news of the Gospel of Judas.

In this way the story of Judas in this gospel—Judas as neither the perfect hero nor the vile demon—may be compared to the myth of Sophia, and the Judas narrative may recall the story of the soul of any Gnostic who is in this mortal world, experiences the vicissitudes of life in this world, and longs for transcendence through gnosis.

The persistent question of the journalists, “Is this the real thing?” collides with the reality of the Gospel of Judas as a second century text reflecting, in some manner, the Sethian Gnostic issues of the time in tension with the theology and life of the great church. The fact is, in the Gospel of Judas, and even before the Gospel of Judas, there may be little real evidence for any concrete historical Judas at all, and hence a third figure of Judas Iscariot begins to take shape: Judas the fictional betrayer, portrayed variously in the accounts of the Gospel of Judas, the New Testament gospels, and the other texts from the second century and on that choose to use Judas for their own purposes.
Judas the fictional betrayer, as presented by John Shelby Spong and others, may be understood in part or as a whole to be a literary creation. The figure of the betrayer who turns against those who are close to him is a recognizable and poignant character in literature from ancient texts to modern artistic creations. In the New Testament gospels and beyond, the tale of Judas as betrayer is told and retold with increasing clarity and animosity as the years pass, and Judas develops in much of Christian literature and art into one of the most memorable traitors in history. Dante recognizes him as such, and places him, with Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Caesar, in the lowest circle of hell.

Yet who Judas might be besides the betrayer of Jesus is unclear in the New Testament gospels, and there is hardly anything historical to grab onto in the gospel accounts. That there might have been a Judas—or Judah, Yehuda—in the circle of acquaintances around the historical Jesus is quite likely, considering that the name Yehuda was common in Jewish history. It is said in the New Testament that Jesus had a brother named Judas, and men named Judas are mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. According to Luke’s lists of the twelve in the gospel (6:16) and Acts (1:13), there was another disciple of Jesus besides Iscariot named Judas: Judas son of James. The other synoptic lists do not mention him but list Thaddeus or Lebbeus instead, and John mentions a Judas who is not Iscariot. On the basis of the variations of the synoptic lists of the twelve, Dennis MacDonald has proposed that the author of the Gospel of Mark “based his list of the twelve on an earlier list found in the sayings source Q (cf. Luke 6:12-15 [with its peculiar inclusion of Judas son of James]), to which he added the name Iscariot and the phrase ‘who betrayed him.’ ” The meaning of the name Iscariot remains
elusive, and suggestions for the translation of Judas Iscariot range from Judas “man of Kerioth” to Judas “into the city,” with plenty of options in between.

A most reasonable conclusion can be drawn, that although there may have been a person named Judas among the friends of Jesus, the gripping tale of Judas the betrayer of his master may be a matter of literary fiction.

Dennis MacDonald believes that to be the case. He has advanced the theory that Mark and other early Christian authors after Mark are dependent upon Homer for their presentations of Judas as well as other characters in the gospel stories. Mark, like others following him, adopted and adapted themes, through mimesis, from the blind bard, and this resulted in an interpretation of Jesus seen in the image of Achilles. In his evaluation of the story of Judas, MacDonald concludes that the figure of Judas is modeled after the despicable character of Melanthius the goatherd, who betrayed Odysseus and paid a painful price for his act of treachery. MacDonald has discovered one Greek account among others in world literature that paints a graphic picture of betrayal, and he applies this to the story of Judas Iscariot in the Gospel of Mark and other early Christian literature. I suspect that MacDonald may well be on the right road, but he may have taken the wrong exit.

There is another significant set of parallels to the figure of Judas the fictional betrayer of Jesus in ancient literature, and these parallels are closer to the religious and cultural home of early Christianity. I would guess that if a thoughtful and informed person on the street in first century Galilee were asked who was the most infamous betrayer he or she had heard of, the answer would most likely be Judas, but the person would have another Judas in mind: Judas (Ἰωδάς, according to the Septuagint), Judah,
Yehuda the son of Jacob and brother of Joseph. The story of the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers is told in Genesis 37, and the key player in betrayal is Judas. According to the story, the twelve brothers are in conversation, and the brothers of Joseph, weary of his dreams and favored status, determine to kill him, or at least throw him into a cistern. It is Judas (Judah) in the story who comes up with the scheme of selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites, and that is what they do, for twenty pieces of silver—not thirty, as in Matthew’s account of Judas and Jesus, but pieces of silver nonetheless (on thirty pieces, see passages in Exodus and Zechariah). In other Jewish literature, including the Genesis Rabbah and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Judas (or Judah) is widely discussed. He is depicted as a man of strength and power who accomplished heroic things, and he is said to be the leader of his brothers. The Genesis Rabbah maintains that Jacob thought Judah might have killed Joseph, and he is blamed for not having done what he could have done on behalf of Joseph: he could have carried Joseph home on his shoulders. In the Testament of Judah he is linked to the sin of avarice—compare the presentation of Judas Iscariot—and he himself goes on at length to discuss the evils of avarice and the love of money and his own sorry record in this regard. (Louis Painchaud also sees a parallel in phraseology—“what is the advantage . . .?”—between the Gospel of Judas and the story of Judah and his brothers in Genesis 37:26.)

All in all, the account of Judas the son of Jacob, also one of twelve, also a betrayer, provides astonishing evidence of this Judas as the literary predecessor of Judas Iscariot, and the story of Judas the betrayer of Jesus may be a retelling of the age-old story, also rehearsed in Jewish tradition, of brother turning against brother and friend turning against friend.
Borges provided an epigraph for his “Three Versions of Judas”: “There seemed a certainty in degradation.” This citation is taken from T. E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia,” in his autobiography, The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. There the expanded passage reads as follows: “I liked the things underneath me and took my pleasures and adventures downward. There seemed a certainty in degradation, a final safety. Man could rise to any height, but there was an animal level beneath which he could not fall. It was a satisfaction on which to rest.”

Critics have commented on what these words meant to Lawrence and what they meant to Borges. Conceivably they may also apply to our study of Judas. In the Christian tradition, beyond the gospel of Judas—and some would say, also in the Gospel of Judas—the figure of Judas falls into a degradation that leaves him, in theology and imagination, in the depths of wickedness and evil beyond which he cannot fall. He is the traditional disciple of treachery—therein lies our revulsion to him, and our fascination and satisfaction with him. It may yet turn out, with our study of the Gospel of Judas and the figures of Judas in the New Testament gospels and elsewhere, that Judas will not remain in degradation forever. Perhaps Judas may at last be seen as a much more complex character in the tradition, who reflects the diverse values of the developing religious and cultural heritage.

We are not finished with the study of Judas and the Gospel of Judas. Fifteen to twenty percent of the Gospel of Judas has been missing, leaving lacunae, as the archons would have it, in some of the most crucial places. Now, after a bankruptcy trial, it seems as if some of the fragments have been found—but the litigation goes on and the attorneys continue to weigh in. There may be hope that the fragments could be released in the
relatively near future. Then we begin again. Some questions will be answered, some new perspectives will emerge. Stay tuned.