

## **The Gospel of Judas, “Gnostics,” and “Sethians” An Emendation to My Argument in *The Gnostics***

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Is “Gnosticism” a viable category for re-writing the history of early Christianity? I think not. To my mind, Michael Williams and Karen King have made compelling cases that the category “Gnosticism” – whether it names an ancient religion equivalent to “Judaism” or “Christianity” or it functions as a typological category for the grouping of various teachers, writings, and movements – no longer works.<sup>1</sup> It distorts our understanding both of the literary sources that we assign to it and of the broader picture of pre-Constantinian Roman religion that it supports. I estimate that the number of scholars who have moved “beyond Gnosticism” is growing, but that it remains a minority for a number of reasons, among which must be that historians did not assign groups and materials to this category without any grounds for doing so: they do share certain significant teachings and characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The fourth- and fifth-century people who compiled the codices later found at Nag Hammadi did not make random selections – even if their religious and philosophical interests must not serve as the prism through which we reconstruct second- and third-century Christianities.<sup>3</sup>

It is that task – reconstructing and describing second- and third-century Christianities – that continues to interest and challenge many of us who have abandoned “Gnosticism.” I have argued for one way forward in *The Gnostics* of 2010.<sup>4</sup> On the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Hence Williams’s intriguing proposal of “biblical demiurgical traditions” as an alternative category in *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*.

<sup>3</sup> Williams pioneered the study of the Nag Hammadi codices as collections that fourth- or fifth-century religious persons in Egypt created for their own purposes (*Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, 235-262). Other examples include Lance Jenott and Elaine Pagels, “Antony’s Letters and Nag Hammadi Codex I: Sources of Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010): 557-589, and several essays by Michael Kaler, most recently “Finding a Safe Spot: An Attempt to Understand the Arrangement of Nag Hammadi Codex VI,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22 (2014): 197-217.

<sup>4</sup> David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

question of “Gnostics,” that book stands in a tradition that goes back at least to Richard Lipsius in the nineteenth century (and, one might argue, to Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century) and that in recent times includes Mark Edwards, Alastair Logan, and Bentley Layton.<sup>5</sup> This approach identifies one particular ancient Christian group as “the Gnostics” or “the Gnostic school of thought” and associates with that group a set of works that corresponds roughly to so-called “Sethian” literature. According to this view, although other ancient people certainly used the term “Gnostic” as a self-applauding designation (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, the Naassenes, Evagrius of Pontus), historians should identify only this group as “Gnostics” in the sectarian sense. Other people and writings traditionally called “Gnostic” – the *Gospel According to Thomas*, Valentinus and his school, Marcion, Mani and the Manichaeans, the Hermetists (whoever they were), Carpocrates, the Mandaeans, and all the other stuff from Nag Hammadi – should be liberated from “Gnosticism” and allowed to be their own idiosyncratic selves.

At the same, however, I argued that in describing pre-Nicene Christianity we should likewise discard or at least constantly interrogate the category variously called “the Great Church,” “(emerging) Catholicism,” “mainstream Christianity,” or “proto-orthodoxy.” Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and company should be liberated from “proto-orthodoxy” and allowed to be their own idiosyncratic selves. The post-Constantinian project of creating a “catholic” Church, characterized by uniform theologies, structures, and practices, did not appear out of nowhere in the fourth century, but the interpretation of selected earlier Christian persons and groups as representatives of such a Church functioned to legitimate that project and should not determine our understanding of those persons and groups.<sup>6</sup>

I shall not repeat my entire book here especially because, to my chagrin, it seems to be floating around the internet in scanned form. Instead, in this paper I want to correct my argument in that book by thinking about what the recently appearing *Gospel of Judas* means for our understanding of “Sethianism” and thus of the category “Gnostic” as I have advocated using it. While disagreement over the character of Judas in this

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<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Lipsius, *Die Quellen der ältesten Ketzergeschichte neu untersucht* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1875), esp. 191-220; M. J. Edwards, “Gnostics and Valentinians in the Church Fathers,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 40 (1989): 26-47; Edwards, “Neglected Texts in the Study of Gnosticism,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 41 (1990): 26-50; Alastair H. B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996); Logan, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough, eds., *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334-350.

<sup>6</sup> For what it’s worth, I increasingly think that the crucial pre-Constantinian moment is the controversy over the lapsed that takes place in earnest in the 250s.

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

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

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

Although I expect that many and perhaps most of our seminar members are familiar with this story, for the sake of completeness, let me start with a short history of

“Sethianism.”<sup>7</sup> The current scholarly category of “Sethianism” was born in 1974 when Hans-Martin Schenke published an essay entitled “The Sethian System according to the Nag Hammadi Manuscripts.”<sup>8</sup> The discovery of so-called Gnostic manuscripts near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 had brought a flood of new data for scholars of Gnosticism to sort through. They could compare these new primary sources with the accounts that the heresiologists give of so-called Gnostic groups, which include descriptions of “Sethians.” Schenke noted that the heresiological descriptions of the Sethians, which first appear in the third century, are contradictory, although they share the assertion that Sethians celebrated their connection to Seth, Adam and Eve’s third son. Moreover, none of the newly discovered Nag Hammadi texts precisely match the church fathers’ accounts of “Sethians.” Therefore, Schenke concluded, our own category of Sethianism cannot be that of the church fathers.

Schenke then noted that several texts from Nag Hammadi likewise shared a preoccupation with Seth, and that several of them spoke of God’s elect, the truly saved religious people, as “the seed of Seth” or descendants of Seth. Moreover, several of these works seem to narrate, refer to, or presuppose the same mythological system. In his original article of 1974 and his expanded discussion of 1981, Schenke developed a list of mythological motifs and characters that he considered not only characteristic of but also distinctive of the Sethian system.<sup>9</sup> Schenke recognized that these motifs and characters could occur in works that were not Sethian, just as, say, the Christian characters Jesus and the Virgin Mary might appear in the Qur’an or other Muslim texts, but it was *how* such motifs and characters function within an overall mythological system that was decisive. Moreover, Schenke admitted that few if any Sethian works would feature *all* of the listed motifs. For reasons of genre and purpose, no Sethian work would necessarily feature the entire system, just as we would not expect every writing produced by a Presbyterian theologian or group to contain the entire body of Presbyterian doctrine and practice.

Schenke included in his list of Sethian evidence not only writings from Nag Hammadi and other manuscript hoards, but also testimonia from the church fathers that

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<sup>7</sup> For a longer and better account of the category’s history, see Tuomas Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 28-41.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke, “Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften,” in Peter Nagel, ed., *Studia Coptica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1974), 165-173. There were earlier discussions of “Sethians” in the twentieth century: see, for example, Carl Schmidt, *Plotinus Stellung nach dem Ursprung des Gnosticismus* (Leipzig, 1902).

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism,” in Bentley Layton, ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale...* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 2: 588-616.

appear to describe the same mythological system. Of the heresiological reports that Schenke included, only Epiphanius of Salamis attributes the system to a group called "Sethians," and Schenke did *not* include other descriptions of so-called "Sethians" because the systems they report did not match his reconstructed Sethian mythology. So the touchstone of what is genuinely "Sethian" is the system found in Schenke's text group, not the reports of ancient authors about "Sethians."

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

The texts of this group shed light upon one another if compared synoptically; and the proportion and relationship of common, shared material to special, unique material permits a process of deduction that leads to considerable insight not only into the development of the teaching they contain, but also into the history of the community that transmitted them.<sup>10</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>10</sup> Schenke, "Phenomenon and Significance," 589.

In the case of “Sethianism,” only very few scholars have questioned the basic textual group that Schenke created. There have been and doubtless will continue to be debates about whether specific texts should be included and whether and how the text group should be related to other text groups and individual works.<sup>11</sup> But nearly all scholars of Gnosticism have recognized the utility of “Sethianism” for illuminating the frequently puzzling mythological details in individual works. This includes even the scholars who have been most critical of the prevailing concept of Gnosticism, such as Williams and King.<sup>12</sup>

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

Most historians, however, have agreed that, despite the mythological character of the works, the Sethian text group must have come from a religious community of some kind. They point to such features as sectarian self-identifying language and references

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Bentley Layton has argued for including *Thunder: Perfect Intellect* (“The Riddle of the Thunder [NHC VI,2]: The Function of Paradox in a Gnostic Text from Nag Hammadi,” in C. W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr. eds., *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986], 37-54), but Paul-Hubert Poirier disagrees (“Introduction to *Thunder*,” in Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Version* [New York: HarperOne, 2007], 367-371). I have argued for removing the *Untitled Treatise* from the Bruce Codex from the group (“The Body as/at the Boundary of Gnosis,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 [2009]: 195-214). Anne McGuire (and many others) has argued that Valentinus and his followers adapted the Sethian myth (“Valentinus and the *Gnōstikē Hairesis*: An Investigation of Valentinus’s Place in the History of Gnosticism,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1983), while Simone Pétrement (and very few others) has argued the opposite (*Le Dieu séparé: les origines du gnosticisme* [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1984]). For a more thorough-going reassessment of Sethian literature and its relationship to other texts, see Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered*.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Williams, “Sethianism,” in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics”* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 32-63; King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 158-162.

to a shared ritual of baptism. And a kind of orthodox view of Sethian origins and development has emerged, based on Schenke's own hypothetical reconstruction of the sect's history. The orthodox scholarly narrative of Sethian history has had a crucial effect on how we understand the origin and character of Gnosticism and its relationship to Christianity. And so I need to tell this story as historians understand it.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

Certainly scholars argue about details of this basic story. But the key features of the standard history of Sethianism are its non-Christian origin and essence. Christian

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<sup>13</sup> The orthodox narrative of Sethian history originated in the articles of Schenke and has been most fully, precisely, and persuasively articulated by John D. Turner in several works, especially *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval; Leuven: Peeters, 2001). It shows up briefly in textbooks: e.g., Birger Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 99-100.

elements of Sethian mythology, such as references to Jesus and the apostles, were secondary, added after the development of Sethianism's basic ideas. Thus, the Sethians easily shed them when being "Christian" became less viable or attractive. This hypothesis holds great explanatory power at the level of the text group, for it enables scholars to place Sethian texts in a rough chronological order, and it invests their unity in mythological features that undeniably appear throughout the text group, in which however the prominence of indisputably Christian motifs conspicuously varies.

Moreover, this hypothesis liberates Gnosticism from its identity as a Christian heresy: I suppose that it may now be a Jewish heresy. But more deeply, Sethian Gnosticism does not represent a rebellion against specific Christian doctrines, but arises, on the one hand, from a profound sense of alienation from the created world as it is, its political structures, and its God and, on the other, from a profound confidence in the divine nature of humanity and the solidarity of the ultimate God with human beings.

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

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



Another Sethian document that lends itself to source criticism is the *Revelation of Adam*. In this work Adam reveals his personal history and future events to his son Seth. For about the first half of the text, Adam sticks fairly closely to Genesis, but then he describes the advent of a savior, recites a hymn that explains the savior's incarnation, and warns of a coming eschatological crisis. This last portion of the work includes some biblical imagery, but draws more on pagan mythology and may allude vaguely to Jesus and other Christian ideas. Here again, many scholars conclude, we see two original sources somewhat awkwardly joined together and attributed to Adam – one source reflects Jewish speculation on Genesis and the importance of Seth, while the other reflects non-Jewish or specifically Christian syncretistic adaptation of pagan motifs to explain the incarnation of a savior figure. The combination of these two traditions again speaks to the secondary Christianization of an originally Jewish Gnostic community.

Other texts in the group have less obvious interior diversity, but they too can be subjected to source analysis, especially if the historian seeks to reconstruct a highly precise literary – and thus social – history of Sethianism.

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

Not surprisingly, the publication of the *Gospel of Judas* has elicited similar interpretive strategies from scholars of Sethianism, but before turning to it, I should report that scholars have challenged both the standard narrative of Sethian history and the source critical analyses that support it.<sup>14</sup> For example, some have challenged the source-critical analysis of the *Secret Book According to John* that identifies the frame story as secondary and the revelation discourse as lacking Christian elements.<sup>15</sup> At the level of

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<sup>14</sup> Most recently Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). So too Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered*.

<sup>15</sup> Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe: Narrative and Cosmology in the "Apocryphon of John"* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Jean-Daniel Dubois, "La tradition johannique dans l'Apocryphe de Jean," *Adamantius* 18 (2012): 108-117.

social and religious history, all three ancient non-Sethian authors who (according to the hypothesis) show knowledge of Sethian mythology or literature – namely, Irenaeus of Lyons, Porphyry of Tyre, and Epiphanius of Salamis – identify the writers and readers of this literature as Christians – false Christians, say Irenaeus and Epiphanius, but Christians nonetheless. We have no external evidence that confirms the existence of a non-Christian Sethian community. Finally, one of the most distinctive features of Sethian mythology is that it does not merely depict the God of Genesis, the God who created this universe, as a lower demiurgic deity, inferior to the ultimate first principle – nearly all philosophically inclined Jews and Christians of the first centuries of our era did that. Rather, they identify him as an evil, malicious, and ignorant being, named Ialdabaōth or Saklas – that is, as satanic. How likely is it, really, that thoughtful Jews, no matter how influenced by Platonism or how discouraged by political events, would make this kind of identification? Is it not more plausible to imagine an intermediary step such as the proclamation of the temporary nature and inferior status of the Law in the preaching of Paul or the sharp contrast between Moses and Jesus found in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus tells skeptical Jews that their father is Satan?<sup>16</sup>

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

Scholars noticed the Sethian features of the *Gospel of Judas* as soon as it appeared.<sup>17</sup> The work identifies the ultimate god as “the great invisible spirit” and includes the Barbēlō aeon, the Self-Originate and its four attendants, the divine Adamas, and the race of Seth in its godhead – all distinctively Sethian ideas. This world is created by Saklas, who is distinct from Ialdabaōth, but there is precedent for this in Sethian literature. Moreover, like the *Secret Book According to John*, the gospel contains a revelation discourse that focuses on the complexity of the godhead and the creation of humanity, embedded within a dialogue between Jesus and a disciple, here Judas.

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<sup>16</sup> This is the argument of Pétrement, *Le Dieu séparé*, but scholars who have not followed her reconstruction of Gnosticism’s history have also made this point (Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 37).

<sup>17</sup> I have used the edition of Lance Jenott, *The “Gospel of Judas”: Coptic Text, Translation, and Historical Interpretation of the “Betrayal Gospel”* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

Finally, also like the *Secret Book*, Irenaeus seems to confirm the existence of the *Gospel of Judas* in the middle of the second century. He gives its title, and his brief and sketchy description of its contents matches the gospel that we have fairly well. I shall return to this point below.

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

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

So, on the one hand, Marvin Meyer argued that the *Gospel of Judas* comes from, as he put it, "when the Sethians were young."<sup>18</sup> He accepted that Irenaeus knew pretty much the text that we have, and he believed that the revelation discourse comes from Sethianism's origins outside Christianity, in what he called "Jewish Gnosis." Its underdeveloped version of the Sethian myth, moreover, suggests that it may be even older than what we find in the *Secret Book According to John*. Both works, however, show how the Sethian myth was secondarily Christianized – and quite early.

On the other hand, Gesene Schenke Robinson and John Turner argue that the *Gospel of Judas* was originally Christian, but was secondarily Sethianized and must come

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<sup>18</sup> Marvin Meyer, "When the Sethians were Young: The *Gospel of Judas* in the Second Century," in April DeConick, ed., *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex ...* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 58-74.

from the third century.<sup>19</sup> Both, then, must claim that the *Gospel of Judas* known to Irenaeus in 180 cannot be the text that we now have; rather, Irenaeus must have known an earlier version of the *Gospel of Judas* or even a different text altogether. In part, they make this claim based on what Irenaeus does *not* say about the gospel; that is, both argue that if Irenaeus knew the text that we have, he would have summarized and/or criticized certain features about which he is silent. These include the gospel's highly negative portrayal of the disciples other than Judas and the specifically Sethian aspects of the gospel's mythology.

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

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

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

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<sup>19</sup> Gesine Schenke Robinson, "The *Gospel of Judas*: Its Protagonist, its Composition, and its Community," in DeConick, ed., *Codex Judas Papers*, 75-74; John Turner, "The Sethian Myth in the *Gospel of Judas*: Soteriology or Demonology?" in DeConick, ed., *Codex Judas Papers*, 95-133.

whose Sethian themes are not yet fully developed, the *Gospel of Judas* in its present form appears to be a quite late and distant offshoot of Sethianism.<sup>20</sup>

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

What these scholars and the others who have engaged this problem seem to have forgotten is this: *we made up Sethianism and its history*. Sethianism is a modern category, a text group that we scholars have created. That these texts belong together, that they can be placed in a chronological order, and that they reflect the religious history of a specific group of people are all ideas that we have invented. These are powerful ideas, which have made the surviving texts easier to understand and contextualize – but again, Sethianism and its history are modern creations.<sup>21</sup>

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

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

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<sup>20</sup> Schenke Robinson, "*Gospel of Judas*," 89.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Jenott's discussion of this issue (*Gospel of Judas*, 71-74): he criticizes the notion of "'fully developed' and 'genuine' Sethian thought" and eschews any "unilinear model of development" of the Sethian myth.

And furthermore – they say – Judas the betrayer was thoroughly acquainted with these things; and he alone was acquainted with the truth as no others were, and (so) accomplished the mystery of the betrayal. By him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thrown into dissolution. And they bring forth a fabricated work to this effect, which they entitle *The Gospel of Judas*.<sup>22</sup>

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

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

Third, Irenaeus says that by Judas's act "all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thrown into dissolution." In our gospel, after Jesus tells Judas that he will sacrifice the human being he inhabits, he announces that "the thrones of the aeons have been defeated, and the kings have become weak, and the races of the angels have grieved, . . . the ruler is destroyed."<sup>23</sup> This sounds very much like what Irenaeus describes – the dissolution of the present world order, both earthly and heavenly.

So, brief as it is, Irenaeus's description of the *Gospel of Judas* that circulated before 180 matches our newly discovered work. He does not say anything about the work that rules out our gospel. Any hypothesis, therefore, that argues against identifying our *Gospel of Judas* as a Coptic translation of the Greek work known to Irenaeus must rely on Irenaeus's failure to mention other aspects of the gospel. It seems to me, then, that we ought to identify our gospel as a translation of that known to Irenaeus unless other evidence from antiquity compels us to do otherwise.<sup>24</sup>

Irenaeus mentions the *Gospel of Judas* toward the end of the first book of *Against the Heresies*, which is devoted to a genealogy of heretical teachers and groups, the purpose of which is to expose the diabolical origins of the Valentinian school of

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<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.31.1 (trans. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987], 181).

<sup>23</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 57:4-10.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jenott, *Gospel of Judas*, 5-6.

Christianity. Irenaeus does not present these heresies in chronological order, but he concludes his catalogue of heresies with his account of “a multitude of Gnostics,” whom he identifies as the immediate intellectual predecessors of Valentinus and his school. Irenaeus first narrates what “some of them” say (1.29), then what “others” of them say (1.30), and finally what still “others” say (1.31). Later heresiologists concluded that Irenaeus was in fact describing three distinct groups and gave them specific names, but Irenaeus seems to see all of them as related manifestations of the group whose teachings Valentinus adapted, a group that he earlier refers to as “the Gnostic school of thought (or heresy)” (1.11).

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

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

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

Consider the most significant features that the *Secret Book According to John* and the *Gospel of Judas* share. First, they both feature a revelation dialogue between Jesus or Christ and a disciple, which provides information about God, the origin of the cosmos, the structure and population of the heavens, and the origin and early history of humanity. In each case, the divine revealer departs at the conclusion of the dialogue – confusingly so in the *Gospel of Judas* because in the next scene Jesus is praying in a “guest room” and Judas is betraying him.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 58:5-26.

Second, they share a set of theological or mythical motifs that they arrange into a similar story. An unknowable ultimate source, the Invisible Spirit, emanates two other divine hypostases, the Barbēlō (or a “luminous cloud”) and the Self-Originate aeon, the latter of which has four attendants.<sup>26</sup> From these emanate multiple other divine aeons, among which are heavenly prototypes of Adam and the posterity of his son Seth. The universe in which we live, in contrast, is created and ruled by a hostile power, named Ialdabaōth and/or Saklas, who is identified as the god of Genesis. At the top of the hierarchy within this cosmos preside twelve rulers, doubtless corresponding to the twelve signs of the Zodiac, for both works closely identify the power structure of this universe with the heavenly bodies. Five names of rulers occur in both works in the same order – only five because that is as many as the *Gospel of Judas* names.<sup>27</sup>

Third, both works identify the saved people as a *genea*, a “race” – for example, “the immovable race” in the *Secret Book* and “the strong and holy race” in the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>28</sup> Both works place in the spiritual realm an archetypal progeny of Seth: “the seed of Seth” in the *Secret Book* and “the incorruptible race of Seth” in the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>29</sup> Neither, however, explicitly identifies human beings in the material realm as the descendants of Seth. The name “Seth” appears only three times in the entire *Secret Book*, and the *Gospel of Judas* speaks of a final exaltation of (perhaps a portion of) “the great race of Adam.”<sup>30</sup> Given the prominence of Adam in both works and the lesser role of Seth, the name “Sethian” does not seem the most apt choice for these materials.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, both works refer to “the perfect (τέλειος) human being,” with whom the saved are associated, early in the narratives. In the *Secret Book* the Savior tells John to share what he is about to reveal with persons from “the immovable race of the perfect human being.”<sup>32</sup> In his first dialogue with the disciples, Jesus challenges them to “represent the perfect human being.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Judas’s statement to Jesus early in the gospel – “I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of the Barbēlō. But as for the one who sent you, I am not worthy to say his name” (35:17-21) – refers explicitly to the Barbēlō and obliquely to the Invisible Spirit. In his later cosmological revelation, Jesus refers explicitly to the Invisible Spirit and obliquely to the Barbēlō (“a luminous cloud”) (47:14-21).

<sup>27</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 52:3-14; *Ap. John* BG 40:5-9 par.

<sup>28</sup> *Ap. John* BG 73:9-10 par.; *Gos. Jud.* 36:25-26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ap. John* BG 36:3-4 par.; *Gos. Jud.* 49:5-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Secret Book*; in addition to the previous citation, BG 35:21; 63:14 par. *Gos. Jud.* 57:11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Schenke himself remarked on the artificial nature of the name “Sethian”: his text group could, he wrote, just as easily be called the “X-group” (“Phenomenon and Significance,” 590).

<sup>32</sup> *Ap. John* BG 22:15-16; II 2:24-25.

<sup>33</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 35:3-4.



The two works also differ in significant ways, as I mentioned above. In the *Gospel's* opening dialogue, Judas makes a confession of Jesus' identity similar to Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi in the Synoptic Gospels: "I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of the Barbēlō. But as for the one who sent you, I am not worthy to say his name."<sup>34</sup> Despite the prominence of the Barbēlō in this important statement, the *Gospel of Judas* gives remarkably less attention to that aeon in its theology than does the *Secret Book*, leaving it unnamed as a "luminous cloud" in Jesus' later revelation.<sup>35</sup>

Even more significant, however, is that the two works differ in how the rulers of this cosmos originated. Famously, in the *Secret Book*, Ialdabaōth comes into being when the aeon Wisdom attempts to think without the consent of her male consort: Ialdabaōth is a kind of glitch in divine thought, an error. In the *Gospel of Judas*, however, one of the immortals, most likely Ēlēlēth, calls Ialdabaōth and his fellow rulers into being.<sup>36</sup> This scenario appears also in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, which shares other key features with *Judas*.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the error and fall of the aeon Sophia, which scholars have tended to highlight as a central feature of Gnosticism, was only one of seemingly two possible Gnostic explanations for how the imperfect lower divinities originated from the serene perfection of the Entirety.

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

Gnostic Christianity, I suggest, did not originate in some particularly grave sense of alienation from this world and its God, but in the very elements that generated diversity and debate among second-century Christians – the nature of authority and the

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<sup>34</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 35:15-21.

<sup>35</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 47:14-21.

<sup>36</sup> *Gos. Jud.* 51:3-15.

<sup>37</sup> *Gos. Eg.* III 56:22-59:9; see Jenott, *Gospel of Judas*, 94-99.

legacy of the original apostles, the practice and meaning of rituals like baptism and the eucharist, the persistence of or end to revelatory experiences of the Savior, the status of the Jewish scriptures and their God when the Law is no longer observed among Gentile believers. To be sure, the Gnostics lie at one “extreme” end of the spectrum of Christian approaches to these questions, but they do lie on that spectrum.

This proposal modifies, in light of the appearance of *Judas*, the method for identifying evidence for the Gnostic school of thought that Bentley Layton first articulated in 1995, well before the appearance of the *Gospel of Judas*, and which I defended in my book.<sup>38</sup> In his original essay Layton advocated placing at the center of any historical reconstruction of the Gnostics Irenaeus’s description of the so-called Gnostic school of thought, as well as that of Porphyry, and the literature that they associate with the people whom they call Gnostics, namely, *The Secret Book According to John*, *Zōstrianos*, *Foreigner (Allogēnēs)*, and the *Book of Zoroaster* (excerpted in the *Secret Book*).<sup>39</sup> For Layton’s scheme, Schenke’s Sethian hypothesis provided a crucial step by which the data assigned to the Gnostics could be expanded beyond that which Irenaeus and Porphyry provide: because the works gathered from Irenaeus and Porphyry teach or assume Schenke’s Sethian myth, the remaining works in the Sethian text group could be assigned to the Gnostics (hence the works in the section “Classic Gnostic Scripture” in Layton’s *The Gnostic Scriptures*).<sup>40</sup> I argued for this proposal in my own book on the Gnostics, but unlike Layton, I wrote after the appearance of the *Gospel of Judas* and should not have fallen victim to the error of assessing whether *Judas* belongs within the Sethian group.<sup>41</sup> I failed to realize that the text group itself needs to be revised in light of this new piece of data.

Now some historians would abandon the project that I advocate. Instead, they justly fear the creation of reified categories and groups that would obscure the hybridity and fluidity of pre-Nicene Christianity.<sup>42</sup> I am very sympathetic to this position, but I am reminded of the question some feminist historians asked in the 1980s and 1990s: Why, just as historical women were being rediscovered, did the academy decide to do

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<sup>38</sup> Layton, “Prolegomena.”

<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey S. Smith challenges this use of Irenaeus and Porphyry to identify actual groups because Irenaeus’s account is so rhetorically distorted and has influenced Porphyry (*Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2014]), but he ignores or discounts how the coherence of the works that their witnesses identify provides external confirmation of their evidence.

<sup>40</sup> Layton, “Prolegomena,” 342-343.

<sup>41</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 37-41.

<sup>42</sup> I take this to be the position of King in *What is Gnosticism?* See also her “Which Early Christianity?” in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 66-84.

away with subjectivity and so with women? In a similar way, I am worried that, just as sources have appeared that allow us to reconstruct better the teachings and practices of the so-called "heretics," we will deprive them of much of what we consider the essentials of religion in general and of Christianity in particular – community, ritual, patterns of authority, and tradition.

If historians of pre-Nicene Christianity are going to make any progress in reconstructing the social and intellectual history of Christians, then we must make use of groups of literary works that seem to reflect the same religious and social traditions. But we must recognize also that the categories that we create we have in fact created. We must be open to the possibility that new data may require the dismantling of old textual groups, the creation of new ones, and the revision of our theories of historical development. Some of us have concluded that the Nag Hammadi treatises should lead us to discard the category "Gnosticism." Now I suggest that the *Gospel of Judas* should lead us to reconsider the category "Sethianism." I am not ready, however, to give up categories altogether: whether the Judas of this new text is a hero or a villain, he might be able to teach us a few things about the history of the diverse groups that made up what we call early Christianity.