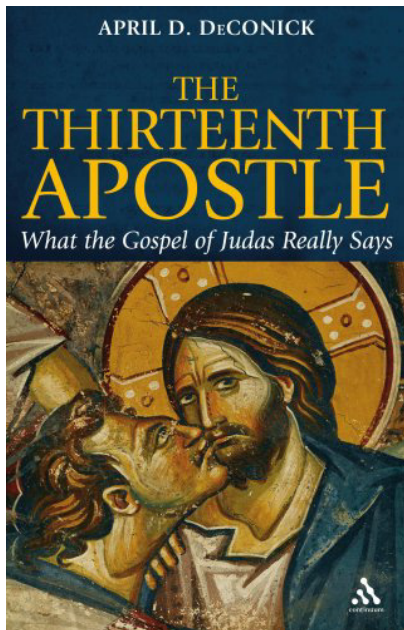


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**DeConick, April D.**

*The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*

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When the Gospel of Judas made its public re-entry into the world two years ago, most of us, myself included, were intrigued by the idea that now at last we had immediate access to a version of Judas Iscariot radically different from the traditional one: Judas not as a devil in disguise or “the greatest of all sinners” (next to Paul, that is), but Judas as a real hero and a truly enlightened figure. The initial enthusiasm, to be sure, was not entirely misplaced, for there is in fact a steady line of tradition that thinks of Judas in such positive, subversive terms. In principle, there is nothing surprising in having such a heroic description of Judas, except that this Gospel seemed to provide tangible evidence that this was the case at such a very early stage in history, when the ink of the New Testament had hardly dried.

Almost from the start, April DeConick has been critical of the obscure procedures of how the Gospel of Judas was introduced to the public and of the translation offered by the editors and translators of the National Geographic team. In this book she forcefully challenges their—in her eyes, highly prejudiced—interpretation. In brief, she understands the Gospel of Judas as “an ancient Gnostic parody” of apostolic (proto-orthodox) Christianity, to be situated in the tradition of the Sethians, a gnostic splinter party that,

like other early Christian branches, was strongly opposed to apostolic Christianity with its atonement theology and its devotion to the Creator God. Contrary to most scholars of the first hour, DeConick argues that the author of this Gospel not only ridicules the twelve apostles but also understands Judas in fully negative, demonic terms: “Judas’ tragedy is used by the Sethian author to criticize and mock his apostolic brothers and sisters, who do not themselves realize that the demonic disciple they curse is in fact the one who made possible their atonement” (124). In other words, the figure of Judas is not essentially different from the dark figure of the (latest strata of the) canonical Gospels and the early Christian tradition from Papias onwards. It is telling that, in the Gospel of Judas, Judas is associated, if not identified, with Ialdabaoth, the lesser, evil god of gnostic belief.

In the first two chapters DeConick sketches the wide diversity of early Christianity and gives an excellent survey of gnostic (Sethian) thinking, very useful for introductory courses on early Christianity. In chapters 3 and 4 she discusses the six major translation matters that led her to a radical reassessment of the Gospel of Judas and provides her own English translation of the Coptic. Chapters 5–7 describe Judas’s role as confessor, demon, and sacrificer, leading up to chapter 8, where the narrative and ideology of the Gospel of Judas are neatly summarized. The book contains four appendixes: (1) an annotated bibliography for further reading; (2) a synopsis of Sethian literature; (3) the testimony from the church fathers on the Gospel of Judas; and (4) a question-and-answer section.

DeConick’s reassessment of the Judas figure hinges much on six alternative translations that she advances in opposition to the *first* English translation of the National Geographic team. She published her book when the long-awaited *Critical Edition* of Rodolphe Kasser and Gregor Wurst, including a *revised* English translation, had just been released. She makes a passing reference to it on pages 56 and 187 (with Kasser’s name incorrectly spelled!) but further ignores in her book the substantial revisions made by the team (but see her comments at the online *SBL Forum*, “More on the Gospel Truth”: <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=743>).

First, DeConick argues that Judas’s address as *daimon* in Gos. Jud. 44 line 21 should be taken *malo sensu*, “demon, evil spirit,” not as in the first English translation of the National Geographic team, “spirit.” Demon, after all, is the normal understanding of the word in the Jewish-Christian environment of the time and in the larger narrative context of the Gospel: Judas is “the thirteenth demon,” next to the twelve (!) apostolic demons who represent apostolic Christianity (48–51). The *Critical Edition* now also has “you thirteenth daimon” (207). Second, DeConick prefers “You have separated me from that generation” (46 lines 17–18) to “You have set me apart for that generation” (51–52), and this is acknowledged as a possible translation by the *Critical Edition* in a note on page 211. The translation coheres with the larger narrative picture, in which Judas is singled

out for revelatory purposes (35 lines 23–25: “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom”), and conforms to a Coptic idiom. Third, DeConick understands page 46 lines 6–7 as Judas’s reply to the fate foretold him by Jesus, namely, that he will be denied access to the kingdom of God and instead be a ruler of the evil Archons: “At no time may my seed control the archons!” The *Critical Edition* retains its original translation in terms of a question, “Could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers?” (211). Fourth, at the bottom of the same page the Coptic is difficult and seems to require emendation. DeConick reconstructs the text as follows: “You will *not* ascend to the holy [generation]” (46 line 25–47 line 1, emphasis added). The *Critical Edition* now also reads the text as a negation of Judas’s ascent (211). Fifth, following the suggestion of Stephen Emmel, DeConick suggests the translation “You will do worse than all of them” on page 56 lines 17–18, instead of “You will exceed all of them” (unchanged in the *Critical Edition*; it may be taken as “you will exceed all of them in evil”). Sixth, DeConick prefers the translation “Your star has ascended” (56 line 23) to “Your star has shone brilliantly” and suggests that this matches well with Sethian thinking. At first, the translators seem to have derived ⲁⲩⲭⲟⲃⲉ (*ajōbe*) from ⲟⲩⲃⲉ (*šibe*) “change, transform, be changed,” instead of ⲭⲟⲃⲉ (*jōōbe*) “pass through, by.” The *Critical Edition* has now corrected its translation to read “Your star has passed by” (231), which in context makes good sense.

All this, DeConick argues, results in a completely different evaluation of the role of Judas in the narrative. She has, I think, a point in noting the coherency of the translations, although it is a pity she failed to interact in her book with the revised and more cautious translation of the *Critical Edition*. Nevertheless, her overall thesis is convincing. It provides us with a coherent narrative description that fits the historical milieu much better than the somewhat idiosyncratic and subversive interpretation of Judas as an enlightened hero of the National Geographic team. A demonized Judas coheres very well with nascent Christianity’s coming to terms with the embarrassing Judas affair, beginning in the Gospel tradition and Papias. By implication, attempts to rehabilitate the historical figure of Judas seem to have taken a longer and more complicated trajectory than is usually assumed.

What lies in the background, DeConick argues, is a second-century debate about religious authority (144). Is authority a matter of clinging to outward apostolic tradition, as the proto-orthodox thought, or is it a matter of inward spiritual insight, as the gnostics believed? The question about authority seems to be already an issue in the Gospel of Mark. Although it is difficult if not impossible to look into the author’s head, one can easily see how early readers of Mark would use his well-known negative portrayal of the Twelve for apologetic purposes: the Twelve are certainly *not* authoritative. Luke, as one of Mark’s early readers, fervently defends the apostolic twelve and redraws the Markan

picture into a more positive portrait (see my *Judas and the Choice of Matthias*, 2004). In the Gospel of Judas, this debate seems to be continued, and its author clearly sides with Mark against Luke.

Finally, there are two matters still unresolved. First, it is remarkable that Irenaeus, Pseudo-Tertullian, and Epiphanius do not link the Gospel of Judas to the Sethians but to the Cainites. They argue that the Gospel stands in the line of those who identify themselves with Cain, Esau, Korah, the Sodomites and other such villains, not with Seth, who in the biblical tradition was a respected person. Perhaps Irenaeus was simply misinformed or deliberately confused the two as a rhetorical strategy. At any rate, it is a strange divergence that demands clarification. Second, there is a measure of textual uncertainty in Irenaeus precisely at the point where the Gospel of Judas is referred to (*Adv. Haer.* 1.31.1). The Greek manuscripts refer to a Gospel somehow associated with Judas (προφέρουσι δὲ αὐτοῦ καὶ εὐαγγέλιον); the Latin versions more explicitly refer to a book called “Gospel of Judas” (*Judae Evangelium illud vocantes*). Has the Latin translator perhaps *added* the reference to the Gospel of Judas? If so, when and why? All this may have significant repercussions for the dating of the Gospel of Judas and may even cast doubt on whether Irenaeus was referring to it at all. So let the debate continue!