THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF THE SO-CALLED 'GOSPEL' OF JUDAS

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the so-called Judas 'Gospel'. It demonstrates that this is, broadly speaking, a Gnostic writing, even though it is difficult to define the concept of 'Gnosticism'. It commences by outlining the intricate history of the find, moves on to the transmission history of this Coptic writing. It focuses on the composition of the 'Gospel' and demonstrates that it was fundamentally influenced by Jewish cosmological thought.

Introduction

Just before Passover 2006 the National Geographic Society announced the imminent publication of a 'Gospel' that was written in an ancient language, Coptic, which is the abbreviation for aigyptios (Lambdin 1983:vii). This was one of the most epochmaking finds to be made in the Nile Valley, second only to the astonishing discovery of the Nag Hammadi corpus of texts in 1945 (Robinson 1972:1). It has been the talking-point of many discussions and controversies. In the process many issues have been addressed. One has to do with the question of whether this is in fact a Gnostic text and if so, what brand of Gnosticism is at issue (King 2003). Its relationship to Christianity and, more specifically, whether it should be seen as a gospel, as is indicated in the final word of the text, is another issue (Ehrman 2007). A crucial question is to ascertain what impact this discovery would have on Christianity, and whether the claim by Pagels and King (2007) – 'it will shake Christianity to its foundations' – in fact holds true.2

* It is an honour to dedicate this contribution to Prof. P.J. Conradié. He taught me Greek, thereby laying the foundation for later Septuagintal (Cook 1997) and Coptic studies.
2 See note 1 for the website.
It stands to reason that these problems urgently need to be addressed. However, this contribution is far less ambitious and it will concentrate on the composition of this Coptic document in order to determine to what extent it has been influenced by Jewish thought. This aspect is, nevertheless, fundamental and will have a bearing upon all of the aspects mentioned.

The problem

The so-called gospel of Judas exhibits signs of being influenced by various religious systems. It is immediately evident that it was fundamentally influenced by Hellenism. The fact that it is written in a language that is the end-result of a dramatic Hellenistic impact in Egypt, namely Coptic (Egyptian in Greek with a number of Demotic signs) instead of Egyptian is surely determinative in this regard. The author(s) also had first-hand knowledge of Platonism. There is a direct reference to the fact that each generation is ruled by angels of the stars (cf. page 5, verses 1-12) and, in fact, each one has its own star (page 9, verses 6-9).

That the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (OT) played a role in the background to this writing is also evident. There are direct references to the temple and to other passages in the OT. However, as stated above, not much attention has been given to the Israelite/Judaic background of this writing. It is the intention of this contribution to address this desideratum. However, firstly, it is necessary to deal with the intricate history of this Coptic text.

The history of the find

As to be expected, this aspect has received extensive attention in the press and elsewhere. A relatively objective, or rather less sensationalising account is found in Kasser et al. (2006:47-76). This shadowy story runs from the original discovery in 1978 of texts by tomb excavators at Jebel Qararar along the Nile, approximately 60 km from Al Minya (Kasser et al. 2006:50), through to their publication in 2006. The codex changed hands several times – originally it was apparently sold to a certain Hanna from Heliopolis, a dealer in antiquities, from whom it was stolen but later recovered. Hanna

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3 I use the numbering of the electronic text mentioned and will translate into Arabic numbers, commencing with the Gospel itself without the rest of the codex.

4 It should be remembered that the term 'Jewish' applies only after the Babylonian exile.
made contact with Ludwig Koenen, from the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan, who in turn involved Jim Robinson from Claremont, California. He in turn sent Stephen Emmel, at the time one of his students, to Geneva, where he had access to the codex for a short period of time. He immediately realised the significance of the find. However, Hanna was not satisfied with the sum offered and the planned deal fell through. He apparently deposited the codex in a safe-deposit box in Hickville, New York, where it was kept, and unfortunately severely damaged, until 2000, when Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, a dealer in ancient art from Zurich, bought the codex from Hanna. It changed hands a few times yet again, but fortunately in 2001 the Swiss-based company, the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art in Basel, became involved and saw to it that the precious discovery was preserved for posterity. This foundation contacted Rodolphe Kasser, who was shocked by the damage caused to the codex, but nevertheless accepted the task of preparing and publishing this Coptic text. Kasser announced his planned project on 1 July 2004 at the Eighth Congress of the International Association for Coptic Studies in Paris. He kept his promise and by 2006 the editio princeps of all the texts of codex Tchacos was published under the auspices of the National Geographic Society (Kasser et al. 2006:75).

The transmission history

The papyrus codex that was discovered in 1978 in Middle Egypt is now designated codex Tchacos. According to Kasser et al. (2006:49), codex Tchacos consists of a book of 66 pages with four tractates: 1. A version of the Letter of Peter to Philip (pp. 1-9), also known from Nag Hammadi codex VIII; 2. a text called 'James' (pp. 10-32). This is a version of the 1st Revelation of James from Nag Hammadi codex V; 3. the all-important so-called 'Gospel' of Judas (pp. 35-58), a Coptic text previously unknown; and 4. a severely damaged text entitled the Book of Allogenes, the name of the main character (pp. 59-66).

It soon became clear that this Coptic text had had an intricate transmission history. The Coptic text has been studied by means of the appropriate scientific methods, which established a date of circa 3rd century CE. This 'heretic' writing is mentioned by Irenaeus in his treatise Adversus

5 'I strongly urge you to acquire this Gnostic text. It is of the utmost scholarly worth, comparable in every way to any of the Nag Hammadi codices' (Kasser et al. 2006:62).
6 Ehrman 2006:81 mentions a date of 280 CE.
Haereses, circa 180 CE (Van Oort 2006:13). Unfortunately we have no primary evidence of this original, which would naturally have had to be a Greek version (Wurst 2006:122). One therefore has to distinguish between the original Greek version, probably written in Palestine,7 and the later Coptic version, with its reception history, that was found in Middle Egypt.

The contents

The codex has a rather strange introduction; it opens with a private and secret discussion between Jesus and the apostle Judas. The situation is set as taking place during eight days (a week) including, more specifically, three days before Passover. In addition to the incipit there are three clearly-demarcated scenes and a conclusion (Kasser et al. 2006):

Scene 1: Jesus in dialogue with his disciples, including the prayer of thanksgiving or the passover (πασχα) (page 1, verse 6). In this scene Jesus also speaks with Judas privately before disappearing.

Scene 2: Jesus appears to the disciples again. They see the temple and discuss it.

Scene 3: Judas recounts a vision he had and Jesus responds. This scene is the most extensive of the story and Jesus deals with the cosmos, cosmology, chaos, the underworld, rulers and angels, the creation of humanity, the wicked etc.

Conclusion: Finally, the conclusion contains the gist of the treatise, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas.

Composition

This codex is seemingly a Gnostic document, even though it is admittedly not easy to define exactly what is meant by Gnosticism (Marjanen 2005a). Williams (2005:62), for one, is extremely sceptical of attempts to define Gnosticism and suggests applying the term ‘demiurgy’. I will not deal with this complex issue in the present context; however, measured against specific criteria one could argue that Judas exhibits Gnostic characteristics. The issue of secrecy, one of the main characteristics of Gnosticism, is found extensively in the document. As a matter of fact, the opening statement refers

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7 One of the implications of this article is, inter alia, that the Jewish background to this text is an indication that, in fact, it originally came to be written in Palestine.
directly to secret words. He also began to speak to them about mysteries (μυστήριον) that were beyond this world and that would take place at the end (page 1, verses 15-18). On page 3, verses 21-25 Jesus calls Judas aside in order to lead him into these mysteries: ‘Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom (μυστήριον Νυμνηερο).’ And on page 14 in verses 1-6 reference is again made to these mysteries: ‘Come that I may teach you about {secrets} no person {has} ever seen.’

The concept of knowledge forms an integral part of the treatise. Jesus makes it clear that they do not know him: ‘How do you know (ετερνοούνε) me? Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me’ (verses 15-16). Secret knowledge (gnosis) makes out a significant part of Gnostic systems (Pearson 2005:90). Gnosis is fundamental to salvation; in Pearson’s view it is to Gnosticism what faith is to Christianity (Pearson 2005:82). In the Judas document Judas is ‘saved’ by the secret knowledge he receives from Jesus.

Even though the Hebrew Bible/OT functions prominently in the treatise, the contents have a different, seemingly Gnostic, tenor. In his discussions with the disciples, Jesus distinguishes between their God and his God. They, in fact, think he is ‘the son of our (my italics) god (περνογοτε)’ (page 2, verse 12). In his turn he speaks of your god (περνογοτε) (page 2, verse 10) ‘who is within you’ (verse 17). From the whole of the document it is clear that this is a reference to the god of the OT, the so-called Demiurge, who is seen as the bad god who created the imperfect world. According to Pearson (2005:83), this is characteristic of Gnosticism.

Humanity is, moreover, divided into various generations originating from different realms. Judas himself actually mentions the fact that Jesus is from the immortal realm of Barbelo (page 3, verse 18). According to Kasser (2006:23), this is terminology used in Sethian Gnosticism and indicates that Jesus is from the divine realm and is the son of God. Other evidence of Sethian Gnostic origins is the direct reference to Yaldabaoth, which in Aramaic probably means ‘child of chaos’ (Kasser et al. 2006:37). Christ is, moreover, brought into connection with Seth in verses 5 and 6 on page 20.

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8 I make use of the translation by Kasser et al. 2006.
9 See also Pearson 2005:85; Meyer 2006:140; and Van Oort 2006:27-30 on Sethian Gnosticism.
10 See also Pearson 2005:85.
The best piece of evidence of the Gnostic background to this writing is the betrayal of Jesus by Judas: 'But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me' (γὰρ ἐτὸ πνεύματι καὶ αὐτὸς θυσίας λαμπρά εἰπε) (page 24, verses 19-21). This represents a unique interpretation of the death of Christ. Judas, in fact, executed a good deed by assisting Jesus to be saved from this realm, since by betraying him he ensured that Jesus would be freed from the earthly realm and be joined with his father in the divine, heavenly realm.

Now that it has been demonstrated that the Judas document could be taken as a Gnostic writing, it remains to address the issue of what brand of Gnosticism it is.

The Jewish background

As stated already, there is more than one hint of possible Jewish influence in the text. The temple plays a prominent, if different, role in this text. The temple is still the place to which sacrificial offerings are brought. However, Jesus offers a strange, metaphorical interpretation of these sacrificial acts.

'They [said, "We have seen] a great [house with a large] altar (Θυσιαστήριον) [in it, and] twelve men – they are the priests, we would say – and a name; and a crowd of people waiting at the altar, [until] the priests […] and receive] the offerings. [But] we kept waiting.” [Jesus said], “What are [the priests] like?” They [said, “Some …] two weeks; [some] sacrifice their own children, others their wives, in praise [and] humility with each other; some sleep with men; some are involved in [slaughter]; some commit a multitude of sins and deeds of lawlessness. And the men who stand [before] the altar invoke your [name], and in all the deeds of their deficiency, the sacrifices are brought to completion […]”' (page 6).

This is an extraordinary description of sacrifice. It is clear that the author(s) intended placing those who sacrificed and the bystanders in a bad light. A clear antithetical intention against these persons is evident. In his interpretation of these acts Jesus pertinently distances himself from them: 'Truly I say to you, all the priests who stand before the altar invoke my name’, and ‘[…] they have planted trees without fruit, in my name, in a shameful manner’ (page 7, verses 6-17). In verses 18 and 19 Jesus also identifies those who received the offerings at the altars as the twelve disciples who serve 'your god', the Demiurge.

From the rest of the document it becomes clear that Judas is treated differently by Jesus. After talking to the disciples, he departs and Scene 3
concerns a meeting between Jesus and Judas. In the ensuing private discussion Judas refers to Jesus as ‘Rabbi’ (ςαββαί) (page 10, verse 12), which is different from the usual title, namely, ‘master’ (καζ). This could be another piece of evidence of Jewish influence. Again Jesus separates Judas from the others by inviting him aside ‘that I may teach you about [secrets] no person has ever seen’ (page 14, verses 1-3). Then follows a section in which Jesus teaches Judas about cosmology, the spirit and the self-generated. Judas is seen in a different light by Jesus since, says Judas, ‘you have set me apart for that generation.’ Jesus answers and says, ‘You will become the thirteenth.’ This is a reference to Judas becoming an outsider among the apostles, after being rejected. On page 12 in verse 21 it is also stated that he is the thirteenth demon (Δαμων) (Kasser et al. 2006:32).

The reference to an Old Testament figure, Nebro, probably refers to Nebruel, which could be related to Nimrod (Kasser et al. 2006:37). However, the most convincing evidence of Jewish thought is located in verses 14-17 on page 19: “Then Saklas said to his angels (my italics), “Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image”” (τοτε νεκρος νοστακλας φτιαχθεῖται ἐς τὸν εἰκόνα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ αἰώνος τοῦ κόσμου). The phrase in italics, ‘to his angels’, is an explicit attempt to address the apparent anomaly that the text refers to the plural form ‘let us make’ in the Hebrew. This verse has been the basis of many attempts to clear this apparent anomaly and is the locus classicus of the doctrine regarding God in many theological circles. One issue at stake is the trinity of God. A representative example occurs in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Gen. 1:26):

**MT**

Let us make man according to our likeness and our image ...

**Ps-Jon.**

And God said to the angels who minister before him and who were created on the second day of the creation of the world: ‘Let us make man in our image according to our likeness …’

Two issues are addressed in this midrashic addition. The first has to do with the fact that a plural is used in the form נאלאים in the Hebrew. This is a long-standing problem in Jewish circles. In Christian circles this verse has been

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11 I have used the text by Ginsburger 1903.
interpreted as a reference to the triune God: father, son and spirit. This reading has been rejected by Jews. Some Church Fathers in fact interpreted this reference to the angels who minister before God as a clear haeresis.\footnote{Cf. Justin the Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, 62 C and D. See my discussion in Cook 1983; and De Villiers 2007:123.}

According to these views, the addition was deliberately added in order to counter these Christian interpretations.

The Septuagint has addressed this verse somewhat differently by removing the apparent anomaly between this verse and Gen. 2.18, where the singular form in the Hebrew יֵעֵש (‘ish) is rendered by means of the plural ποιήσας ὑμῖν αὐτό. Clearly another issue is at stake: internal harmonising.

The second issue concerns the angels. There are many exegetical traditions in rabbinic sources about the creation of the angels. A prominent problem is the question as to when they were in fact created. Genesis Rabbah\footnote{I use the translations from Freedman & Simon 1939.} 1.3 has a representative quote in this regard: Rabbi Johanan answered: 'They were created on the second day, as it is written, Who layest the beams of Thine upper chambers in the waters (Ps. 104:3), followed by, Who makest the spirits Thine angels (Ps. 104:4).’ Rabbi Hanina, on the other hand, answered as follows: ‘They were created on the fifth day, as is written, And let fowl fly above the earth (Gen. 1:20) and it is written, And with twain he did fly (Isa. 6:2).’

Clearly the addition in Ps-Jon. corresponds with the view of Rabbi Johanan. But this is another problem, which will not be dealt with in the present context. Nevertheless, the striking feature of this Coptic text is that it corresponds with a pertinent Jewish view on creation, namely that God is one and not plural!

**Conclusion**

There are also additional examples of possible Jewish influence in the Coptic text. However, the examples discussed thus far must suffice. There can be no doubt that the so-called ‘Gospel’ of Judas was fundamentally influenced by Jewish thought. This Jewish flavouring would have been added in Palestine and not in Egypt, since Jewish perspectives had less of an impact in Egypt. This inference is in line with conclusions drawn by Pearson (2005:87) to the effect that ‘Gnosticism originated in Judaism, and that it developed in various ways and in various places in close symbiosis with Christianity.’ Another characteristic of this text that struck me is the deliberate intention of its author(s) to attack the ‘orthodox’ view of the
disciples. Jesus is depicted on a few occasions as laughing (pages 2, verses 2-5 and 12, verse 19) at the religious practices (εγχαίρετα on page 2) of the disciples. The deliberate repositioning of Judas Iscariot in a positive light, contrary to the picture drawn in the New Testament, is also striking.

Finally, a study of the original Judas text can contribute towards our knowledge of the original languages as well. I discovered a number of examples where the translator(s) was either negligent, inconsistent, creative, or used words representative of specific dialects. On page 8, verse 8 reads παρίστα and later in verse 10 the form is παρίστα, both related to the Greek verb παριστάμε. Another issue is the language in which the text was written. That it is not Sahidic Coptic proper is clear from, *inter alia*, the application of Bohairic words, such as 2ποτ in line 20 on page 1. But these issues are the theme for another project.

Bibliography

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