

## A Brief Overview of the Contents of the *Gospel of Judas*

The text opens three days before Passover with Jesus in conversation with Judas. It calls itself the “secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas.”

In Scene 1, Jesus has a private conversation with Judas after laughing at the prayer of the twelve. The distinction made in scene 1 between the understanding of Judas and the other disciples suggests a severe critique of them. They work for “the other god.” The private telling of mysteries to Judas and not to the rest does recall *Thomas 13* where Thomas confesses Jesus as having an unutterable name, leading Jesus to have a private talk with Thomas that the others do not receive. Thomas refers to Jesus as having an unutterable name in *Thomas 13*, but in the *Gospel of Judas* the unutterable name belongs to the region of Barbelo and the god who sent Jesus. The laughing Jesus throughout this gospel also is a feature of some of the other missing gospel texts (like the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the laughing Jesus from above the cross).

Scene 2 has some important breaks in the text that make summarizing its entire argument pretty difficult. However, this section does continue this critique of the other eleven who represent this generation that will not see the generation that will ascend and rule.

Another critique surfaces in the parable of the priests before the altar. The eleven represent those who are a part of the generation of the lawless. In other words, there is a strong polemic against the remainder of the twelve throughout this text.

There also is in the response to Judas’s question about the (lack of) fruit of this generation, the clear separation of spirit from the rest of the person in salvation that is a clear indication of a Gnostic perspective. In Gnosticism, only the spirit is saved and ascends back to the heavenly realm. The body is destroyed, and there is no physical aspect to Salvation as in the Christian tradition reflected in 1 Corinthians 15. Another indication of Gnostic origin and perspective is that in this generation the corruptible Sophia is responsible for the creation. In a line that is broken, she appears to be associated with the hand that created mortal people (recalling texts like the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Apocryphon of John*).

But Judas will become associated with the thirteenth aeon for his act and will rule over others.

The next extended scene is about the creation and the creation of Sakla by Nebro. This Nebro is also known as *Yaldabaoth*, a name that appears in other Gnostic texts on creation. Nebro creates Sakla(s) as an assistant, often associated with the idea of the demiurge, an artisan-creative god. (The name *Sakla* is also spelled *Saklas* in places in the Coptic text.) With the help of other angels, Saklas created Adam and Eve, also known as Zoe. (Sakla and Sophia also appear in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, another second-century Gnostic text in more detailed description of this creation story background.)

Finally, Judas has a vision that pictures his own ascent. It is here that the now widely circulated citation of Judas as one who “will exceed all” and as the one who “will sacrifice the one that clothes me” appears. Judas makes the release of Jesus’ spirit back to the heavenly realm possible.

The last scene has Judas go and betray Jesus, receiving the money in the process. This is where the gospel ends.

In sum, this text has a developed Gnostic cosmology and a severe critique of the remaining twelve. As such, it gives evidence of being a polemical text where lines are drawn in the diverse and contested world that was second century Christianity. It does not reflect the theological expression of the first century and thus tells us nothing about the real Judas or Jesus. What it does give us is significant detail about this one strand of Gnosticism, known as Cainite Gnosticism. This movement tried to rehabilitate figures such as Cain, Korah, Esau, and the Sodomites. The rehabilitation of Cain explains the group’s name. The mention of Seth in the *Gospel of Judas* also indicates that this rehabilitating form of Gnosticism is also a strand of Sethian Gnosticism.