A Critical Note on the Meaning of in Gospel of Judas 33:1

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Résumé de l'article

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A CRITICAL NOTE ON THE MEANING OF apofasis IN GOSPEL OF JUDAS 33:1

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the meaning of the Greco-Coptic word apofasis in Gospel of Judas 33:1. The most common way of translating this noun is “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation”. Experts often refer to Simon Magus’ Apophasis megalē to legitimize this manner of translation. But in light of the use of παροικος ετηραι in the immediate context, this choice of words is difficult to support. Scholars seem to have overlooked another possible way of translating apofasis. This paper proposes that we understand apofasis as “denial”, “negation” or “exclusion”. This primary meaning is coherent with the narrative role of Judas and with this gospel as a whole.

The recent discovery of the Gospel of Judas has sparked quite some interest among scholars. At first, everyone embraced the idea that this gospel depicted Judas Iscariot as a close friend of Jesus, a hero who would liberate him from his mortal body in order to return to the Pleroma. This positive assessment of Judas stemmed from what some considered being a request on the part of Jesus (GosJud 56:17-20):1

1. Note 137 on page 43 of The Gospel of Judas reads as follows: “Judas is instructed by Jesus to help him by sacrificing the fleshly body (‘the man’) that clothes or bears the true spiritual self of Jesus. The death of Jesus, with the assistance of Judas, is taken to be the liberation of the spiritual person within” (see R. Kasser, M. Meyer, G. Wurst, ed., The Gospel of Judas, Washington, DC, National Geographic, 2006). In the following notes, the preliminary edition will be referred to as The Gospel of Judas (2006).

2. Judging by the photograph of page 56 of Codex Tchacos, the Coptic in lines 18 to 20 is quite visible and can be read without difficulty; see R. Kasser, G. Wurst, M. Meyer and F. Gaudard, The Gospel of

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But you will do more than all of them, for the man who bears me, you will sacrifice him.\(^3\)

However, a few weeks after the publication of the preliminary English translation by the National Geographic Society (NGS), doubts concerning this interpretation started to arise. Scholars began to seriously question the initial characterization of Judas Iscariot, to the point where some today adopt a completely different perspective: Judas Iscariot is no better in this gospel than the betrayer depicted in the canonical gospels.\(^4\)

This short paper focuses on the meaning of \textit{apofaseis} found in the first lines of the \textit{Gospel of Judas} (33:1-3). The manner in which one translates this noun can influence the way Judas Iscariot and the gospel as a whole is understood. In the first lines, the author gives us an important hermeneutical key. It is similar to what we find in the \textit{Gospel according to Thomas}, where the interpretative key is at the beginning of the text. In the introduction, \textit{Thomas} invites readers to seek the interpretation of the hidden words of Jesus. Unfortunately, most scholars strictly focus on the history of the text and never get around at interpreting the gospel. For many, \textit{Thomas} is seen as a collection of random sayings having no relationship to one another. But despite initial appearances, the \textit{Gospel according to Thomas} has a kind of logic that needs to be uncovered by the reader. How does one go about deciphering these hidden sayings? One must actively participate in constructing the meaning of the text itself. The \textit{Gospel according to Thomas} has a variety of interwoven themes. In order to uncover the meaning of a number of \textit{logoi}, one must carefully establish a correlation between various themes. This type of exegesis is done through what I call a network of meaning.\(^5\)

The opening lines of the \textit{Gospel of Judas} also give us a clue on how one should interpret the text. The beginning of the gospel reads as follows:

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4. In a public lecture given on May 10, 2006 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, I questioned the idea that Jesus asked Judas to betray him in order to be liberated from his physical body. It would be more accurate to say that Jesus knew that Judas would sacrifice him. This was a prophecy, not a command or a request on the part of Jesus. The Coptic future tense here should be understood as a prediction. But the most significant contribution that challenges the initial interpretation made by the NGS team of experts is credited to Louis Painchaud from Université Laval in Quebec. He has brilliantly argued against the positive characterization of Judas on a number of occasions in meetings held in Europe and Canada since August 2006. PAINCHAUD has recently published an article entitled: “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas”, \textit{Laval théologique et philosophique}, 63 (2006), p. 553-568.

A CRITICAL NOTE ON THE MEANING OF \textit{apofasis} IN GOSPEL OF JUDAS 33:1

Before I specifically examine the expression \textit{apofasis}, a few words need to be said on some of the difficulties encountered in the opening phrase.\footnote{The English translation is that of M. MEYER and F. GAUDARD, \textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 185.} For example, one must determine the antecedent of the relative \textit{Hht}. The final preposition \textit{Nth} can shed light on the matter, since the masculine pronominal suffix \textit{-k} can only point to \textit{ploro} and not to \textit{apofasis} which is feminine. \textit{Apofasis} is in fact the determinative of \textit{ploro} \textit{etH} (\textit{the secret word}). The relative \textit{Hht} (\textit{which}) then clearly refers to the \textit{ploro} (\textit{word}).\footnote{G. WURST points out briefly some of the difficulties of this opening phrase in \textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 179. A similar remark was made in a footnote in NGS’s 2006 preliminary edition, and use equivalent words meaning “revelation”.} There is also the necessity of figuring out the syntactical role of \textit{Hht}. Here again, \textit{Nth} can be of some help. We know, for example, that this preposition (\textit{in}) expresses notions of place (\textit{in}, \textit{within}), time (\textit{at}, \textit{during}) and instrument (\textit{by}, \textit{through}). Because of this, the syntactical role of \textit{Hht} will be to mark a circumstance. We should then translate the phrase as follows : the secret word of the \textit{apofasis} by which (or in which; during which) Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot. Jesus did not tell the secret word to Judas; rather, he spoke in conversion with Judas by the secret word which the author understands to be an \textit{apofasis}. But what exactly is the meaning of \textit{apofasis} in GosJud 33:1? This is what I intend to examine here.

In the critical edition, M. Meyer and F. Gaudard translated the Greco-Coptic term \textit{apofasis} (\textit{apófasis}) by the word “declaration”.\footnote{G. Wurst, in his introduction to the \textit{GosJud}, appeals to Hippolytus’ \textit{Refutatio omnium haeresium} by indicating that \textit{apofasis} can mean “declaration”, “explanation” and even “revelation”.
\footnote{A plurality of meanings for \textit{apófasis} is confirmed by the ways it is rendered in the \textit{Refutatio}. At times, some will translate \textit{apofasis} by “the secret account of the revelation” ; see \textit{The Gospel of Judas} (2006), p. 19.} It seems that in his \textit{Refutatio}, Hippolytus quoted from the \textit{Apophasis megalē} (\textit{ἡ μεγάλη ἀπόφασις}), a work he attributed to Simon Magus.\footnote{For more on the \textit{Apophasis megalē} see J.-M.A. Salles-Dabaride, \textit{Recherches sur Simon le Mage. 1. L’Apophasis megalē}, Paris, Gabalda (coll. “Cahiers de la revue biblique”), 10, 1969.} The English translation is that of M. MEYER and F. GAUDARD, \textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 185.} Other translations follow the NGS’s 2006 preliminary translation at \url{http://www.copticia.ch/EvJudas-tra.pdf}.

\footnote{The English translation is that of M. MEYER and F. GAUDARD, \textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 185.} \footnote{G. WURST points out briefly some of the difficulties of this opening phrase in \textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 179-180. I will not comment on problems concerning the “eight days” and “three days” in the lines following the opening statement : \textit{ἡ τε οἰκονομία θεοῦ ἐγέρθη ἐν ἡμείς ἐκτὸς ἐνώπιόν μας}. Cherix offers various ways to interpret this difficult line ; see comments in his French translation at \url{http://www.copticia.ch/EvJudas-tra.pdf}.} \footnote{In their 2006 NGS edition, KASSER, MEYER, WURST and GAUDARD translated \textit{ploro} \textit{etH} \textit{apofasis} by “the secret account of the revelation” ; see \textit{The Gospel of Judas} (2006), p. 19. As for the word \textit{apofasis}, Cherix translates it as “discours” or “réponse”, and Karen L. KING’s new English translation refers to it as a “pronouncement” (\textit{Reading Judas}, p. 109). Other translations follow the NGS’s 2006 edition and use equivalent words meaning “revelation”.}
ἀπόφασις with the expressions “decision” (Ref. IV 17.7 ; 19.5)12 or “revelation” (Ref V 9.20).13 Simon Magus’ Apophasis megalē (Ref VI 9.16 ; 11.4 ; 14.26 ; 18.6) is also understood as a “revelation”14 or an “announcement”.15 These different ways of translating ἀπόφασις all point in the same direction. According to the LSJ,16 the noun ἀπόφασις refers to a “sentence” (i.e. declaration) or a “decision”17, and derives from the verb ἀποφαίνω which means “to show forth”, “display” or “declare”.18 But at the same time, the LSJ considers the primary meaning of ἀπόφασις to be “denial”, “negation”19 and even “exclusion”.20 In this case the noun would derive from ἀπόφημι.21 An example of this use is found in Aristotle’s De interpretatione where he clearly defines ἀπόφασις as “denial” or “negation”.22 This is also the case in his Metaphysics23 and in many of his other works.24 Ἀπόφασις also has the meaning of “denial” or “negation” in some Patristic texts, especially when it is used in negative theology as...
the only true way of speaking about the attributes of God. Negative theology, also called Apophatic theology, endeavors to describe God in negative terms. It expresses what God is not rather than what he is. Apophatic theology uses denial statements in order to talk about the attributes of God, i.e., God is not evil, God is not darkness, God is not hate, etc.

When translating the Greco-Coptic word \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \), one must keep in mind that the noun can have a plurality of meanings. If one decides that \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) comes from \( \text{ἀποφαίνω} \), then expressions like “declaration”, “explanation” and “revelation” make sense. If, however, we argue that the noun derives from \( \text{ἀπόφημι} \), the translation would be “denial”, “negation” and “exclusion”. How then should we understand \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) in the first lines of the Gospel of Judas? Those who wish to make a case for \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) as “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation” need to carefully consider the meaning of \( \text{πλογος \ έτηηπ} \). Because of the immediate context, it is difficult to understand \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) as a “declaration” or an “explanation”. According to the LSJ, \( \text{λογος} \) already carries with it ideas such as “statement”, “sentence” and “explanation”. This clearly overlaps in meaning with \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) as deriving from \( \text{ἀποφαίνω} \) (to show forth, display, or declare). The same could be said of \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) as “revelation”. The formulation \( \text{πλογος \ έτηηπ} \) recalls the famous \( \text{ὅι \ λόγοι \ οἱ \ ἀπόκρυφοι} \) found in the incipit of the Gospel according to Thomas. There is no doubt that Thomas is a collection of “revealed” secret sayings. The reader needs to find their interpretation, not seek the content of the revelation which has already been given. The same thing can be said of \( \text{πλογος \ έτηηπ} \). The GosJud is a “revelation”. Jesus does reveal to Judas the mysteries of the kingdom (GosJud 35:21-25 ; 46:8 ; 47:1-4). But there is really no need to use \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) to inform the reader of that fact. We automatically assume the revelatory character of the Gnostic dialogue when reading \( \text{πλογος \ έτηηπ} \). The basic nature of the Gnostic secret word is “revelation”. It then seems redundant to translate \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) as “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation” in the context of an expression such as \( \text{πλογος \ έτηηπ} \). However, if one understands \( \text{ἀποφάσις} \) as “denial”, this certainly eliminates some of the confusion. In that case, the first lines of the Judas gospel would read as follows:

25. The PSEUDO-DENYS’ Mystical Theology 1.2 uses \( \text{ἀπόφασις} \) as “denial” or “negation” : τὰς \( \text{ἀπόφασες} \) ἀντικειμένας εἶναι ταῖς καταφάσεσιν… (the denials oppose themselves to the affirmations…). For other examples, see Lampe, p. 219.


27. See LSJ, p. 1057-1059.


29. PAINCHAUD states that the GosJud clearly displays the characteristics of Gnostic dialogues of revelation; see “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas”, p. 555.
The secret word of the denial by which Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot. The Gospel of Judas would then be the secret word of the denial. This way of understanding \textit{\textasciitilde{a}pofaci\textasciitilde{c}ic} is coherent with the rest of the gospel. As a matter of fact, the idea of denial does explain several statements and actions therein:

1. \textit{\textasciitilde{a}pofaci\textasciitilde{c}ic} is first and foremost Jesus’ denial of Judas. This can be seen in several places. For example, when Jesus reveals the mysteries of the kingdom to Judas, he calls him a demon (\textit{\textasciitilde{d}aim\textasciitilde{w}n} ; \textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 44:21).\textsuperscript{30} Jesus also tells Judas that he has been misled into thinking he could enter the house of the holy generation (\textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 45:14-19). Still during the revelation, Jesus informs Judas that he was duped by his star (\textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 45:13-14). Judas will eventually realize that he was purposely distanced from the holy generation and will never be part of it (\textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 46:16-18).\textsuperscript{31} By denying Judas access to the holy generation, Jesus shows that the betrayer is not his favorite disciple. Here, Jesus says no to Judas; he denies Judas the status and salvation he had come to believe for himself.\textsuperscript{32}

2. As I already mentioned, we should certainly not interpret \textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 56:17-20 as a command or a request. Jesus simply predicts that Judas will sacrifice the man that bears him: “But you will do more than all of them, for the man who bears me, you will sacrifice him.” In the Gospel of Judas, sacrifices are always seen in a negative light (\textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 38:16ff; 39:26-40:1), and Jesus specifically orders his disciples to stop making sacrifices (\textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 41:1-6).\textsuperscript{33} Before the prediction of Judas’ demise in \textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 56:17-20, the text characterizes those who offer sacrifices to Saklas as evildoers

\textsuperscript{30} This is similar to what is found in the Fourth Gospel. However, the expression used to characterize Judas in John 6:70 is διαβόλος and not δαίμων. On the other hand, some have established a connection between the \textit{\textasciitilde{d}aim\textasciitilde{w}n} and Socrates’ own personal daimon in PLATO (\textit{Symposium} 202e-203a). Whatever the connection one wishes to make, Judas, the thirteenth \textit{\textasciitilde{d}aim\textasciitilde{w}n}, will be denied access to the place reserved for the saints. This is certainly not a positive outcome for Judas! It seems that in his vision, Judas was duped by his erring star into thinking that he could live with the saints and holy angels in the eon (\textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 45:1-23). For more on the characterization of Judas Iscariot in the New Testament and especially in the Fourth Gospel, see A. GAGNÉ, “Caractérisation des figures de Satan et de Judas dans le IVᵉ évangile : stratégie narrative et déploiement des intrigues de conflit”, \textit{Science et Esprit}, 55 (2003), p. 263-284.

\textsuperscript{31} The Coptic reads: \textit{kptp\~{e} te\textsc{tes} te\textsc{tim}ai}. For \textit{\textsc{gosjud}} 46:16-18, M. MEYER and F. GAUDARD translate: “[...] you have set me apart for that generation” (\textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 211). KASSER’s French translation is clearly more precise and corresponds to the Coptic reading: “[...] que tu m’aies écarté de cette génération-là?” (http://www.coptica.ch/EvJudas-tra.pdf). KASSER’s French translation in the critical edition corrects the English with the following: “[...] que tu m’aies séparé de cette génération-là” (\textit{The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition}, p. 245). There is, however, a discrete note in the English translation of the critical edition recognizing the meaning of “[...] from that generation”. The correct translation of \textit{t\textsc{p}tp\~{e} e-} is clearly “separate from” and not “separate for”; see W.E. CRUM, \textit{Coptic Dictionary}, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939, 271 b. PAINCHAUD had also noticed this problem, “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas”, p. 561.

\textsuperscript{32} To deny actually means to “say no”. It is important to note that the New Testament uses the Greek word ὀρθέω when it speaks of “denial” (Matt 19:33; Lk 12:9; John 13:38; Acts 4:16; 2 Tim 2:12-13). This being said, nothing prevents the author of the Gospel of Judas from using another word (\textit{\textasciitilde{a}pofaci\textasciitilde{c}ic}) when referring to “denial”.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{33} The role of sacrifices in \textit{\textsc{gosjud}} is explained by PAINCHAUD in “À propos de la (re)découverte de l’Évangile de Judas”, p. 557-558.
(GosJud 56:12-16). Judas will do more than all of them (καὶ ἄγω ἐρωτάνει τὸν ἥρων), that is, more evil than those who sacrifice to Saklas. According to Jesus, the pinnacle of wickedness is to sacrifice the man that bears him. How will Judas accomplish such an evil deed? The canonical gospels refer to Judas’ action as that of handing over or betrayal (παραδίδωμι; Matt 26:46; Mk 14:14; Lk 22:21; John 6:71). This is also what happens in our text when Judas hands over (παραδίδομεν) Jesus to the high priests and scribes (GosJud 58:9-26). But why would Judas actually decide to hand over Jesus after having received this revelation from him? The reason seems obvious: Judas has been denied access to the place reserved for the holy, making it impossible for him to ascend to the holy generation (GosJud 45:12-24; 46:24-47:1). He was displeased with the content of the revelation. This secret word or revelation didn’t turn out to his advantage, since it was an ἀποφάσις. This secret word is to be understood as a denial or refusal. As a result, Judas negatively responds to Jesus’ denial of him. This clearly explains Judas’ παραδίδομεν of his master at the end of the gospel. Through his betrayal, Judas does exactly what Jesus predicted in GosJud 56:17-20. The παραδίδομεν is a reaction to the ἀποφάσις.

In conclusion, we have seen how our understanding of ἀποφάσις can influence our interpretation of the GosJud as a whole. Deriving from the verb ἀποφαίνω, the noun ἀποφάσις can certainly mean “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation”. It is difficult to make sense of such a choice of words in the GosJud, since these expressions are redundant with the use of παράγως εἶπεν. In the opening lines of the GosJud, ἀποφάσις most probably derives from ἀπόφημι and should be translated as “denial” (or “exclusion”). This fits perfectly with the overall thrust of the gospel: Judas is denied access to the holy generation and deprived of true salvation. As we have seen, Judas realizes that he was separated from (denied, excluded) from that generation (GosJud 46:16-18). His “denial” or “exclusion” from the holy generation is actually what constitutes the ἀποφάσις. He violently retaliates by handing over his master to the Jewish authorities (GosJud 58:9-26). This way, Judas finds himself fulfilling what was prophesied by Jesus in GosJud 56:17-20.