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

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article tente de mettre en lumière le sens du terme gréco-copte dans l’Évangile de Judas 33,1. La manière la plus courante de traduire ce vocable est « déclaration », « explication » ou « révélation ». Les experts font souvent référence à l’Apophasis megalē de Simon le Mage pour justifier cette façon de traduire l’expression en question. Mais on peut difficilement valider un tel choix de mots, en raison de l’emploi de dans le contexte immédiat. Les chercheurs ne semblent pas avoir remarqué une autre façon possible de traduire . Cet article propose de comprendre comme signifiant « déni », « négation » ou « exclusion ». Cette signification première est tout à fait cohérente avec la fonction narrative du personnage de Judas, ainsi qu’avec l’ensemble de cet évangile.
A CRITICAL NOTE ON THE MEANING OF *ἀποφάσις* IN *GOSPEL OF JUDAS* 33:1

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the meaning of the Greco-Coptic word *ἀποφάσις* 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 *πλογός* et *ηχός* in the immediate context, this choice of words is difficult to support. Scholars seem to have overlooked another possible way of translating *ἀποφάσις*. This paper proposes that we understand *ἀποφάσις* 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):

> Προς τὸν ἔρευν τής πρωτοῦ γάρ ἐτής ἡμῶν καὶ ἐγκαθαρίζει ἡμῶν?

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. Gaubard, *The Gospel of*
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 ἀποφάσις found in the first lines of the 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 Gospel according to Thomas, where the interpretative key is at the beginning of the text. In the introduction, 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 interpreting the gospel. For many, Thomas is seen as a collection of random sayings having no relationship to one another. But despite initial appearances, the 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 Gospel according to Thomas has a variety of interwoven themes. In order to uncover the meaning of a number of logos, 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 Gospel of Judas also give us a clue on how one should interpret the text. The beginning of the gospel reads as follows:


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”, Laval théologique et philosophique, 63 (2006), p. 553-568.

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

The secret word of declaration by which Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot.6

Before I specifically examine the expression ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ, a few words need to be said on some of the difficulties encountered in the opening phrase.7 For example, one must determine the antecedent of the relative ΝΤΑ. The final preposition ΝΗΤΩΡ can shed light on the matter, since the masculine pronominal suffix -ς can only point to ΠΛΟΓΟΣ and not to ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ which is feminine. ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ is in fact the determinative of ΠΛΟΓΟΣ ETΣΗΣ (the secret word). The relative ΝΤΑ (which) then clearly refers to the ΛΟΓΟΣ (word).8 There is also the necessity of figuring out the syntactical role of ΝΤΑ. Here again, ΝΗΤΩΡ can be of some help. We know, for example, that this preposition (ΝΗΤΩΡ) expresses notions of place (in, within), time (at, during) and instrument (by, through). Because of this, the syntactical role of ΝΤΑ will be to mark a circumstance. We should then translate the phrase as follows: the secret word of the ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ 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 conversation with Judas by the secret word which the author understands to be an ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ. But what exactly is the meaning of ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ 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 ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ (ἀπόφασις) by the word “declaration”.9 G. Wurst, in his introduction to the GosJud, appeals to Hippolytus’ Refutatio omnium haeresium by indicating that ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ can mean “declaration”, “explanation” and even “revelation”.10 It seems that in his Refutatio, Hippolytus quoted from the Apophasis megalē (ἡ μεγάλη ἀπόφασις), a work he attributed to Simon Magus.11 A plurality of meanings for ἀπόφασις is confirmed by the ways it is rendered in the Refutatio. At times, some will translate

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7. G. WURST points out briefly some of the difficulties of this opening phrase in 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: ΝΕΟΥΜΕΝ ΝΡΟΟΥ ΣΑ ΟΗ ΝΟΟΗΜΗ ΝΡΟΟΥ ΕΜΠΑΤΕΙ ΠΑΧΑΧΑ. Cherix offers various ways to interpret this difficult line; see comments in his French preliminary translation at http://www.coptica.ch/EvJudas-tra.pdf.
The ancient Greek verb ἀπόφασις with the expressions “decision” (Ref. IV 17:7 ; 19:5)\(^{12}\) or “revelation” (Ref V 9:20)\(^{13}\) Simon Magnus’ *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 interpretazione* where he clearly defines ἀπόφασις as “denial” or “negation”\(^{22}\). This is also the case in his *Metaphysics*\(^{23}\) 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

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15. *The Refutation of all Heresies* 6.6.9 (ANF 5:76-77). It is interesting to note that SALLES-DBADIE translates the Greek dative τῇ ἀποφάσει (Ref VI 11:4 ; 14:26 ; 18:6) into French as “l’Apophasis” ; see *Recherches sur Simon le Mage*, p. 17, 25, 27.


17. Other more remote meanings of ἀπόφασις are “catalogue”, “inventory”, “assertion”, “judgment”, “answer” and “oracle” ; see LSJ, p. 226. K.L. KING has partially noticed the ambiguity of the word *apophasis*. She states that *apophasis* has a double connotation. It could be understood as “something declared openly” (which justifies King’s use of “pronouncement”) or as a “court judgment” (see Reading Judas, p. 123). But this double connotation strictly derives from the verb ἀποφαίνω. She has omitted a more important variant of *apophasis*, one that stems from ἀπόφημι. This other variant opens up new possibilities of interpretation.

18. According to LSJ, p. 225 and Bailly, p. 249, ἀπόφασις from ἀποφαίνω is also equivalent to ἀπόφημι which means “declaration” or “statement”.

19. It would seem that some late Latin writers have also retained the idea that *apophasis* means denial or negation, see ISIDORE OF SEVILLE’S *Etymologiarum Lib. II Caput XXVII.3* (Migne 82, p. 145).

20. Ἀπόφασις is also used to refer to the *exclusion* of something, see LSJ, p. 225.

21. We can understand ἀπόφασις as the opposite of καταφάσις (affirmation), LSJ, p. 225 ; Bailly, p. 250.


23. See *Metaph.* 990b ; 1004a ; 1007a-b ; 1008a ; 1011b ; 1012a ; 1022b ; 1027b ; 1029a ; 1046b ; 1056a ; 1058a ; 1062a ; 1089b. An exception to this is the use of ἀπόφασις as an equivalent of ἀπόφημι (statement) in *Metaph.* 1079a ; see W.D. ROSS, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Vol. II*, London, Clarendon Press, 1958 (1924), p. 384. In a broader sense, H.G. APOSTLE defines *apophasis* as “something that does not belong to something else” ; see his *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, London, Indiana University Press, 1966, p. 456.

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 ἀποφασίς, one must keep in mind that the noun can have a plurality of meanings. If one decides that ἀποφασίς comes from ἀποφαίνω, then expressions like “declaration”, “explanation” and “revelation” make sense. If, however, we argue that the noun derives from ἀπόφημι, the translation would be “denial”, “negation” and “exclusion”. How then should we understand ἀποφασίς in the first lines of the Gospel of Judas? Those who wish to make a case for ἀποφασίς as “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation” need to carefully consider the meaning of πλογος ετηθι. Because of the immediate context, it is difficult to understand ἀποφασίς as a “declaration” or an “explanation”. According to the LSJ, λόγος already carries with it ideas such as “statement”, “sentence” and “explanation”. This clearly overlaps in meaning with ἀποφασίς as deriving from ἀποφαίνω (to show forth, display, or declare). The same could be said of ἀποφασίς as “revelation”. The formulation πλογος ετηθι re- calls the famous ἱνώγει ΕΩΗΠ (οἱ 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 πλογος ετηθι. 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 ἀποφασίς to inform the reader of that fact. We automatically assume the revelatory character of the Gnostic dialogue when reading πλογος ετηθι. The basic nature of the Gnostic secret word is “revelation”. It then seems redundant to translate ἀποφασίς as “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation” in the context of an expression such as πλογος ετηθι. However, if one understands ἀποφασίς 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 ἀπόφασις as “denial” or “negation”: τὰς ἀπόφασις ἀντικειμένας εἶναι ταῖς καταφάσεις… (the denials oppose themselves to the affirmations…). For other examples, see Lampe, p. 219.


27. See LSJ, p. 1057-1059.


29. PAINECHAUD 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 ἀποφασις 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. ἀποφασις 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 (Δαίμων; GosJud 44:21). Jesus also tells Judas that he has been misled into thinking he could enter the house of the holy generation (Gos Jud 45:14-19). Still during the revelation, Jesus informs Judas that he was duped by his star (GosJud 45:13-14). Judas will eventually realize that he was purposely distanced from the holy generation and will never be part of it (GosJud 46:16-18). 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.

2. As I already mentioned, we should certainly not interpret 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 (GosJud 38:16ff; 39:26-40:1), and Jesus specifically orders his disciples to stop making sacrifices (GosJud 41:1-6). Before the prediction of Judas’ demise in GosJud 56:17-20, the text characterizes those who offer sacrifices to Saklas as evildoers.

30. This is similar to what is found in the Fourth Gospel. However, the expression used to characterize Judas in John 6:70 is διάβολος and not δαίμων. On the other hand, some have established a connection between the Δαίμων and Socrates’ own personal daimon in Plato (Symposium 202c-203a). Whatever the connection one wishes to make, Judas, the thirteenth Δαίμων, 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 (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”, Science et Esprit, 55 (2003), p. 263-284.


32. To deny actually means to "say no". It is important to note that the New Testament uses the Greek word ἀρνέομαι 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 (ἀποφασις) when referring to "denial".

33. The role of sacrifices in 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 (κναφ ζογο εροοϋ τήρο), 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* (παραδδωμι; Matt 26:46; Mk 14:14; Lk 22:21; John 6:71). This is also what happens in our text when Judas *hands over* (παραδειμα) 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 *αποφαςις*. 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’ *παραδειμα* of his master at the end of the gospel. Through his betrayal, Judas does exactly what Jesus predicted in GosJud 56:17-20. The *παραδειμα* is a reaction to the *αποφαςις*.

In conclusion, we have seen how our understanding of *αποφαςις* can influence our interpretation of the GosJud as a whole. Deriving from the verb ἀποφασίω, the noun *αποφαςις* 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 παγος ετης. In the opening lines of the GosJud, *αποφαςις* 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 *αποφαςις*. 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.