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

André Gagné

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 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 évangel.
A CRITICAL NOTE ON THE MEANING OF apofaxis IN GOSPEL OF JUDAS 33:1

André Gagné
Department of Religious Studies
University of Sudbury

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the meaning of the Greco-Coptic word apofaxis 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 megalex to legitimize this manner of translation. But in light of the use of παρος ετηγην in the immediate context, this choice of words is difficult to support. Scholars seem to have overlooked another possible way of translating apofaxis. This paper proposes that we understand apofaxis 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):

\[ \text{πτοκ δε καρη γων εροου θρου πρωμε γαρ ετη φορει ημοει καρη εγιανε ημοφι} \]

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 fleshy 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...
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 \( \text{αποφασις} \) 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 at 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 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 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 he 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.

ΠΛΟΓΟ[Θ] ΕΤΩΘ ΝΤΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ Ν[Θ]Α ΜΗ ΩΑΞΕ ΜΗ ΙΟΥΑΣ [ΜΙ]ΚΑΡΙΚΟΣ-
ΘΗ[Θ] ΝΗΤΗΘ

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 ΝΗΤΗΘ can shed light on the matter, since the masculine pronominal suffix -Θ can only point to ΠΛΟΓΟ and not to ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ which is feminine. ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ is in fact the determinative of ΠΛΟΓΟ and not to ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ which is feminine. ΑΠΟΦΑΣΙΣ is in fact the determinative of ΠΛΟΓΟ (the secret word). The relative ΝΤΑ (which) then clearly refers to the ΛΟΓΟ (word).8 There is also the necessity of figuring out the syntactical role of ΝΤΑ. Here again, ΝΗΤΗΘ can be of some help. We know, for example, that this preposition (Θ) 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 ἀπό-
φασις), 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: ἡ ἑβδομάδα ἡ ἀρχή τοῦ ἡμερο-

9. In their 2006 NGS edition, KASSER, MEYER, WURST and GAUDARD translated ΠΛΟΓΟ[Θ] ΕΤΩΘ ΝΤΑ-

10. The Gospel of Judas. Critical Edition, p. 179. A similar remark was made in a footnote in NGS’s 2006 edition saying that ἀπόφασις can also mean “declaration”, “explanation” or “statement”; see The Gospel of Ju-

11. For more on the Apophasis megalē see J.-M. A. SALLES-DARADIE, Recherches sur Simon le Mage. 1. L’Apo-

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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

15. The Refutation of all Heresies 6.6.9 (ANF 5:76-77). It is interesting to note that SALLES-DABADIE 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, 57.
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 ἀπόψημι. 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 Etymologiae 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 ἀπόψημι as an equivalent of ἀπόφασις (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.
24. For an extensive list of references see, O. GIGON, Aristotelis opera / ex recensione Immanuel Bekkeri / edit-
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 άποφασις, one must keep in mind that the noun can have a plurality of meanings. If one decides that άποφασις 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 ἁποφασις in the first lines of the Gospel of Judas? Those who wish to make a case for ἁποφασις as “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation” need to carefully consider the meaning of πλαγος ετησι. Because of the immediate context, it is difficult to understand ἁποφασις as a “declaration” or an “explanation”. According to the LSJ, λόγος already carries with it ideas such as “statement”, “sentence” and “explanation”.2 This clearly overlaps in meaning with ἁποφασις as deriving from ἀποφαίνω (to show forth, display, or declare). The same could be said of ἁποφασις as “revelation”. The formulation πλαγος ετησι recalls the famous οἱ λόγοι οἱ ἀπόκρυφοι found in the incipit of the Gospel according to Thomas.2 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 πλαγος ετησι. 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 ἁποφασις to inform the reader of that fact. We automatically assume the revelatory character of the Gnostic dialogue when reading πλαγος ετησι. The basic nature of the Gnostic secret word is “revelation”.29 It then seems redundant to translate ἁποφασις as “declaration”, “explanation” or “revelation” in the context of an expression such as πλαγος ετησι. However, if one understands ἁποφασις 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 ἁποφάσεις as “denial” or “negation”: τὰς ἁποφάσεις ἄντικαθίσταται (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.
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 δαιμών. On the other hand, some have established a connection between the δαιμών and Socrates’ own personal daimon in PLATO (Symposium 202e-203a). Whatever the connection one wishes to make, Judas, the thirteenth δαιμών, 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 ἀποφασις 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.
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(GosJud 56:12-16). Judas will do more than all of them (\textit{knaP goy o eprooy thPoy}), 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 \textit{handing over} or \textit{betrayal} (παραδίδωμι; Matt 26:46; Mk 14:14; Lk 22:21; John 6:71). This is also what happens in our text when Judas \textit{hands over} (παραδίδου) 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 \textit{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 \textit{apofasic}. This secret word is to be understood as a denial or refusal. As a result, Judas negatively responds to Jesus’ \textit{denial} of him. This clearly explains Judas’ \textit{paradidou} of his master at the end of the gospel. Through his betrayal, Judas does exactly what Jesus predicted in GosJud 56:17-20. The \textit{paradidou} is a reaction to the \textit{apofasic}.

In conclusion, we have seen how our understanding of \textit{apofasic} can influence our interpretation of the GosJud as a whole. Deriving from the verb \textit{ἀποφαίνω}, the noun \textit{apofasic} 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 παραδίδωμι. In the opening lines of the GosJud, \textit{apofasic} most probably derives from \textit{ἀπόφημι} and should be translated as “denial” (or “exclusion”). This fits perfectly with the overall thrust of the gospel: Judas is \textit{denied} access to the holy generation and deprived of true salvation. As we have seen, Judas realizes that he was separated from (\textit{denied, excluded}) from that generation (GosJud 46:16-18). His “denial” or “exclusion” from the holy generation is actually what constitutes the \textit{apofasic}. He violently retaliates by \textit{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.