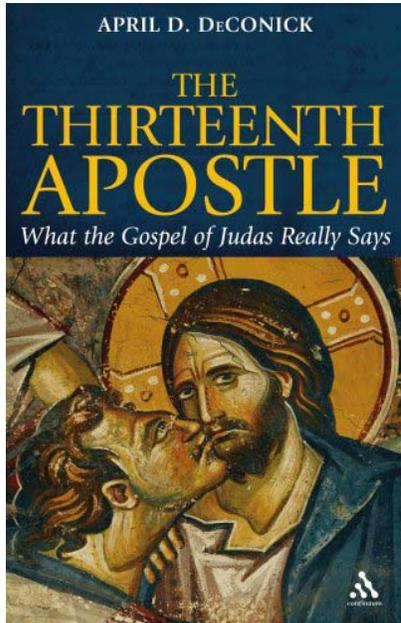


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DeConick, April D.

The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says

London: Continuum, 2007. Pp. xxi + 202. Cloth. \$19.95.
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Stephan Witetschek
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, United Kingdom

In the last two years there has been an impressive output of books on the newly published Gospel of Judas. Most of these books claim to address the general public, although they are, at the same time, contributions to the scholarly discussion about this text—a discussion that has by no means reached the point of establishing something like a consensus view about the Gospel of Judas. The volume under review is one of the earliest of these studies. It can be seen as the rather popular counterpart to DeConick's contribution to the congress volume *The Gospel of Judas in Context* (ed. M. Scopello) that is forthcoming in the series Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies.

A first glance at this book under review is, frankly, not likely to arouse great sympathies with a scholarly beholder. The subtitle “What the Gospel of Judas Really Says” gives the impression of some sensationalism, of a rather journalistic interest. Especially the adverb “really” suggests both a claim of truth and a sense of opposition against an established majority that do not seem very appropriate after only one year of—albeit quite intense—scholarly discussion (the preface dates from 11 March 2007). Moreover, since its discovery, Codex Tchacos has suffered severe damage to the point that on some pages

several lines are missing (on 41–42, even more than half the page); given this sad state of affairs, who could claim to know what a text like the Gospel of Judas “really” says?

But the volume is to be assessed not on the merits of its title but of its content. It consists of three main parts, followed by an epilogue (148–54), four valuable appendices (155–82), notes (183–93), and indices (195–202).

The first main part (1–42), “An Unfamiliar Story,” is an accessibly written survey of the variants of second-century Christianity: the “apostolic church,” Marcionites, Ebionites, Montanists, and Gnostics. Like numerous other recent authors, DeConick suggests that “Apostolic Christianity,” being one of many early Christian groups, happened to become the dominant form of Christianity only in “a complicated process, involving a web of factors, not the least of which was a Roman emperor, Constantine, who wanted a single agreed faith” (9). This general survey is followed by “A Gnostic Catechism,” or a chapter about the basic concepts of Gnosticism, especially in its Sethian variant. Both these chapters are written in an admirably plain and nontechnical style, which makes them useful for the nonprofessional reader and pleasantly refreshing for the academic.

The second main part (43–91), “Translation Matters,” comes to DeConick’s main motivation for writing this book. Already in the preface (xvii–xxi) she pointed to her increasing disagreement with the translation published under the auspices and on the website of the National Geographic Society in 2006 and, with some modifications, in the critical edition of 2007 (Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, Marvin Meyer, and François Gaudard, *The Gospel of Judas, Together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos: Critical Edition* [Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007], hereafter *Critical Edition*). In the first chapter of this part, “A Mistaken Gospel” (45–61), she discusses some crucial matters in some detail, then (62–91) offers her own English translation of the entire Gospel of Judas—as far as the text can be established. It is remarkable that here the page layout follows that of Codex Tchacos, so that the substantial gaps in the Coptic text are very clearly visible as gaps in the English translation, too.

It may suffice to point only to a few of these translation matters. The first and decisive for DeConick’s interpretation is the rendering of the loanword ΔΔΙΜΩΝ on page 44, line 21. In the *Critical Edition* it is translated into English by the rather general term “spirit,” while DeConick chooses the clearly negative rendering “demon”—just as, by the way, R. Kasser in his French translation in the *Critical Edition* (237–52, here 244): “ô toi, le treizième démon.” This translation is certainly more precise and avoids some potential misunderstandings.

In the case of 46,25–47,1, DeConick goes at some length to criticize the reading published in the preliminary edition and translation on the website of National Geographic in 2006. Then, however, she reports that the editors have changed their mind on the issue and that the revised reading of the *Critical Edition* now agrees with hers (54–57). This makes her elaborate criticism of the “old” reading appear somewhat outdated.

Preliminary Coptic text 2006	Preliminary translation 2006	DeConick
ϸϵⲛⲁⲕ'ⲁⲩⲱ <ⲛ>ⲛⲉⲕⲕⲧⲏ ϵⲡⲱⲱⲓ ϵⲧⲉ[ⲛⲉⲁ ⲉⲧ]ⲟⲩⲩⲁⲃⲃ	... they will curse your ascent to the holy [generation].	They [...] to you. And you will not ascend to the holy [generation].
<i>Critical Edition</i> 2007	<i>Critical Edition</i> 2007	
ϸϵ<ⲛⲁ- >ⲛⲁⲕ'ⲁⲩⲱ ⲛⲉⲕⲃⲱⲕ ϵⲡⲱⲱⲓ ϵⲧⲉ[ⲛⲉⲁ ⲉⲧ]ⲟⲩⲩⲁⲃⲃ	... they <will --- > to you, and (that?) you will not ascend on high to the holy [generation].	

Another passage that is decisive for the interpretation of the *Gospel of Judas* as a whole is 56,17–21:

Coptic text	<i>Critical Edition</i>	DeConick
[...] ϩⲱⲃⲛⲓⲙ ⲉ[ϩ]ϩⲟⲩⲟⲩ ⲛⲧⲟⲕ ⲁⲉ ⲕⲛⲁⲣ̄ ϩⲟⲩⲟ ⲉⲣⲟⲩⲟⲩ ⲧⲏⲣⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ Ⲓⲁⲣ ⲉⲧⲣⲑⲟⲣⲉⲓ ⲙ̄ⲙⲟⲉⲓ ^{vac} ⲕⲛⲁⲣ̄ ⲑⲩⲥⲓ ⲁⲥⲉ ⲙ̄ⲙⲟⲩ.	... everything that is evil. But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man who bears me.	... everything that is evil. Yet you will do worse than all of them. For the man that clothes me, you will sacrifice him.

What is controversial here is the translation of ϫ-ϩⲟⲩⲟ. The most cautious rendering would be “you will be/do more than all of them.” But, as DeConick states (57), the precise interpretation depends on the context, and the context is not so easy to determine. In lines 12–13, Jesus speaks of those who offer sacrifices to Saklas, then three lines are heavily damaged, and immediately before our sentence there is a reference to “everything that is evil.” So it is not exactly clear whether “all of them” still refers to those who offer sacrifices to the evil deity Saklas (in which case “to be/do more” could indeed mean “to be/do worse”) or whether another subject could have been introduced in the now lost lines. Fortunately, the lines after this crucial sentence are better preserved. There Jesus speaks of

Judas in a quite enthusiastic manner. These lines, however, contain one more critical point (56,23):

Coptic text	Preliminary translation 2006	DeConick
ΑΥΩ ΠΕΚΚΙΟΥ ΔΨΧΩΒΕ	... and your star has shone brightly, and your star has ascended, ...
	<i>Critical Edition 2007</i>	
	... and your star has passed by, ...	

DeConick rightly criticizes the free rendering in the preliminary translation, published on the website of National Geographic in April 2006. Meanwhile, however, the *Critical Edition* translates more literally “your star has passed by,” and in his French translation R. Kasser renders the phrase: “ton étoile a surpassé (ses rivales)” (*Critical Edition*, 251; see also n. 88)—maybe DeConick’s book has appeared too quickly to take this change into account. Be that as it may, her translation makes very good sense as poetic praise of Judas. However, she understands the ascending of Judas’s star in a decidedly negative sense: “It is astrological lingo.... This means that Judas is locked into this fate. He will bring about Jesus’ death, and there is nothing he can do to stop his involvement in the affair” (59). What she does not mention is a possible reference to Num 24:17.

The third main part (93–147), “Good Old Judas?” moves from the philological to the literary and theological level and points out some aspects of Judas as presented in the Gospel of Judas. There are three aspects, held together by the notion that Judas is a demon in the very worst sense (see above). As “Judas the Confessor” (95–108), he tells the (Sethian Gnostic) truth about Jesus, which at first seems to be quite laudable and certainly appropriate for him as the “hero” of this Gospel, similarly to the role of Thomas in Gos. Thom. 13. But DeConick draws a line from Judas’s confession back to “correct” confessions uttered by demons, as in Mark 5:6–7, and to Peter being rebuked as “Satan” immediately after his christological confession (Mark 8:27–33). Thus, DeConick understands the Gospel of Judas as a very subtle critique of “apostolic Christianity.” But can this critique work with an evil, demonic Judas? “Judas the Demon” (109–24), in DeConick’s view, is in fact absolutely on the evil side—especially since he is the Thirteenth (44,21). As such, he can, in Sethian mythology, be connected with Ialdabaoth, the Demiurge, which is his tragic fate. In effect, Judas’s fate is to be “Judas the Sacrificer” (125–39). He is instrumental in the Archons’ plot to destroy Jesus, and thus his historical

role is transposed to a metaphysical level: Judas has sacrificed Jesus to the Archons, to Saklas; the plot failed because of the power of Jesus' spirit that prevented the Archons from keeping him. The last chapter, "An Ancient Gnostic Parody" (140–47), gathers the main interpretative lines of this study: Judas stands on the evil side; he is about to sacrifice Jesus to the Archons; and therefore the worship of the "apostolic Christians," which is based on this sacrifice, is ultimately offered to the Archons. Judas is thus at the service of a fundamental criticism of "apostolic Christianity."

On the whole, this book does not leave the reviewer entirely satisfied, maybe because DeConick is trying to do two things at the same time: On the one hand, her study wants to inform the general public about this newly published Gospel. Here she shows that it is possible and worthwhile to write about a scholarly subject in an engaging and readable manner, and she does a very good job in making her translation decisions as transparent as possible. Nevertheless, a reader who has next to no idea about Coptic will probably read the arguments on pages 45–61 only with increasing bewilderment—or just skip them and acknowledge only the results on pages 60–61. On the other hand, this book wants to contribute to the scholarly debate on philological and theological issues that do need to be addressed, a debate that has only begun (indeed, her criticisms have at some points been overtaken by the development of the *Critical Edition*). On this level, the argumentation does not always appear as thorough and convincing as might be desirable; it may be hoped that the forthcoming congress contribution (see above) will provide some coptological support.

After all, however, a question remains that DeConick's book does not answer: If Judas is such a demonic villain in this text, why is he at the same time the hero of the text, to the point of lending his name to it? In other words, are we to understand the Gospel of *Judas* as a fundamental subversion of the Gospel genre itself (i.e., one can make a Gospel of everything)? Would this not also discredit the gnostic mythology expressed in the Gospel of Judas? Or could it not be that the prominent role of Judas in this text—he is privileged over against the Twelve—does indeed insinuate a rather positive understanding of this figure? There are a number of topics to be addressed in future scholarly debate on the Gospel of Judas; DeConick's book is one impulse for this.