INTERPRETING JUDAS:
TEN PASSAGES IN THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

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The initial moments of translation and interpretation with any newly recovered text are exhilarating and challenging, but when the text has been reassembled from a box of papyrus fragments, as with the Gospel of Judas, the task of translation and interpretation presents special challenges. In this paper I wish to reflect upon ten passages that we have considered to be key passages for the interpretation of the Gospel of Judas, and these passages all contribute to our view of Judas Iscariot and his master Jesus as presented in the Gospel of Judas. A number of these passages are difficult to interpret, in part on account of the obscurity of expression in the Gospel of Judas, in part on account of the lacunae that remain in the text. We hope and trust that as time passes lacunae may be filled and obscurities may be illuminated. This paper, in turn, may help to illumine our efforts to interpret the message of the Gospel of Judas.

1. Judas as Protagonist in the Gospel of Judas (33,1–6)

In the incipit of the Gospel of Judas, it is established that Judas Iscariot is the central character engaging in discussion with Jesus in the text: “The secret word of declaration by which Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot, during eight days, three days before he celebrated Passover” (33,1–6). The focus of attention is directed toward Judas

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2 Portions of this paper have been revised in the light of discussions and conversations with colleagues, particularly in the context of the Paris conference.

3 All the Coptic passages and English translations cited here are from the Coptic transcription and English translation in the critical edition of Codex Tchacos (with occasional minor modification).
in these opening lines, and here only he of the group of disciples is mentioned in connection with the dialogue with Jesus that is to be recounted on the pages of the gospel. The central place of Judas in the text is confirmed by the titular subscript, Ἡ εὐαγγελία τῆς Ἰωάννας, “The Gospel of Judas” (58,27–28). In the title, the “good news” is said to be that of Judas, to be sure, but the gospel itself is not specifically attributed to Judas as the purported author, and the common pseudonymous attribution that a gospel is the good news “according to” (κατὰ or ἐν κατά) a given disciple or apostle is not provided here. Rather, this is the good news of Judas, perhaps about Judas or even for Judas – and the same sort of point may be made in the incipit, where it is announced that the secret word of declaration or revelation emerges from a conversation between Jesus and none other than Judas Iscariot, near the end of the earthly life of Jesus. Thus, in the Gospel of Judas, the days leading up to the time of the crucifixion of Jesus are not overshadowed by Judas performing an act of disloyalty and betrayal, as in the New Testament gospels. In the Gospel of Judas, the last days of Jesus with Judas are days of conversation and revelation.

Several issues in the interpretation of the incipit of the Gospel of Judas are perplexing, and we have struggled to come to a clear understanding. If the titular subscript uses the Christian technical term εὐαγγέλιον to depict the text, the incipit employs additional terms known from Gnostic and other early Christian texts. The opening of the Gospel of Judas calls the text a λόγος, more precisely παραγιγκυμον, and such a phrase calls to mind other “words” or “discourses,” and especially texts said to be secret words or discourses (Gospel of Thomas, Book of Thomas, Secret Book of John, Secret Book of James, etc.).¹ The Coptic of the incipit of the Gospel of Judas also makes use of the word, of Greek derivation, λογοφασις, which is employed by Hippolytus of Rome to designate a Simonian text entitled Megalē apophasis, “Great Exposition” (Elenchos 6.9.4–18.7). The reference in the incipit to “eight days” (ἤμεραι ἐκ ἡμηνίας ἑξάδες; 33,3–4) could mean a week; it is also somewhat reminiscent of the octave, an eight-day festival in the liturgical year. The incipit goes on to state that the conversation between Jesus and Judas takes place

¹ The Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas refer to ἡ ἑρμηνεία τῶν λόγων (Greek Thomas, οἱ λόγοι οἱ [ἀπόκρυφοι]), and the Secret Book of John and the Secret Book of James both use the word ἀπόκρυφον. Other texts, for example the Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth and the Second Discourse of Great Seth, make use of the Greek word λόγος or the Coptic word ῥάς to refer to the texts.