As far as we can see, the first person in history bearing testimony to a Gospel of Judas is Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 180–185 CE). Oftentimes in recent publications his testimony has been mentioned and sometimes it is even discussed at length. The passage in question, however, seems to be worth a close rereading, both in the context of Irenaeus’ Against Heresies and in relation to other patristic testimonies.

Irenaeus speaks about a Gospel of Judas at the end of his first book Against Heresies, in a passage immediately following his description of the ancestors of the Valentinians. After his overview of gnostic doctrines from the arch-heretic Simon Magus up to and including the Gnostics who usually are termed ‘Ophites’, he concludes in Adv. haer. 1,30,15: ‘Such are the opinions current among those people, from which opinions, like the Lernaean hydra, a many-headed beast has been generated: the school of Valentinus (…)’.

Irenaeus proceeds by speaking of alii, ‘others’, that is to say: other Gnostics. The full passage in question, in the modern editions and translations rather misleadingly printed as the first paragraph of a new

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1 Adv. haer., quoted here according to the critical edition (with French translation, introduction, notes, and appendices) of Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979. The older editions of Massuet 1710, Stieren 1848–1853 and, in particular, Harvey 1857, have been consulted as well.


3 Cf. the parallel introduction of the (in later tradition) so-called Ophites in Adv. haer. 1,30,1 (Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 364): ‘Ali autem…’.
chapter,⁴ runs in a fairly literal (if not clumsy) Latin rendering⁵ of the lost Greek text as follows:

Alíi autem rursus Cain a superiore Principalitate dicunt, et Esau et Core et Sodomitas et omnes tales cognatos suos confitentur: et propter hoc a Factore impugnatos, nemicem ex eis malum accepisse. Sophia enim illud quod proprium ex ea erat abripiet ex eis ad semetipsum. Et haec Iudam proditorem diligenter cognouisset, et solum prae ceteris cognoscentem ueritatem, perfecisset proditionis mysterium: per quem et terræ et caelestia omnia dissoluta dicunt. Et confi(n)ctionem adferunt huiusmodi, Iudæ Euangelium illud uocantes.⁶

An English translation that is as literal as possible may run as follows:

And others again declare (that) Cain (was) from the superior Principle, and they confess that Esau and Korah and the Sodomites and all such people are their cognates: and for this reason attacked by the Creator, none of them has suffered harm. For Sophia snatched away that which belonged to her out of them to herself. And Judas, the betrayer, they say, had got a thorough knowledge of these things; and he alone, knowing the truth above all the others, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal. Through him all things, both earthly and heavenly, have been dissolved, as they say. And they adduce a composed work to this effect, which they call ‘the Gospel of Judas’.

⁴ The division in chapters and paragraphs with their (sub)headings does not stem from Irenæus, but has been added later. On the so-called Latin ‘argumenta’, based on Greek manuscripts now lost, and their subsequent insertion as chapter headings in the Latin manuscripts, see the various remarks by Doutreleau in Rousseau-Doutreleau 1979, 30 ff., and, moreover, the corresponding expositions mainly pertinent to the edition of the other books of Adv. haer. in previous volumes of the SC (e.g. SC 100, 186–191; SC 210, 47–48). Still important is the seminal study by Loofs 1890.—Oftentimes in recent discussions the complicated question of the chapter headings has not been taken into account, with the result that some scholars maintain on the basis of Irenæus’ testimony (i.e., in actual fact, on the later added chapter heading) that the Gos. Jud. stems from the so-called Cainites while others argue that in this respect Irenæus is wrong. But, strictly speaking, Irenæus himself does not speak of ‘Cainites’ in the famous ‘paragraph’ in which he makes mention of the Gos. Jud. The link between this text and Cainite Gnostics is found in later antique testimonies (or may be inferred from them; see below) and, in particular, is suggested by the chapter headings in many modern editions and translations.

⁵ In all likelihood the translation stems from a person who had little command of Latin but an excellent mastery of Greek. See e.g. Doutreleau’s remarks—for an important part based upon the studies of Lundström—in the various SC-volumes. The literalness of the translation (which, moreover, rather easily can be retransferred into Greek) fully warrants for being the basis of our analysis.