FATE INDELIBLE

The Gospel of Judas and Horoscopic Astrology

Grant Adamson

In a 1940 article, folklorist Wayland Hand showed that as late as the mid 1800s it was not uncommon for Europeans to speculate about the birthday of Judas. The date, most often given as April 1 or April 7, was of course generally inauspicious, and it was believed that whoever happened to be born on the same day as Judas would die as he did. Hand argues that such speculation was more than a matter of “mere idle curiosity.” Rather it “represents an attempt…to view the dire deed of Judas in terms of a predetermined fate, of which the birthday itself becomes, consciously or unconsciously, the outward symbol.” While doubting the attribution of his earliest source to the thirteenth-century Catholic sage Albertus Magnus, Hand is confident that the speculation goes back at least to the 1500s, arising “[o]ut of the great wealth of magic and superstition and out of the maze of religious, astrological, and hermetic lore that circulated in all levels of society from the time of the humanistic revival, orally as well as in divers almanacs, peasants’ weather forecasts, dream and fortune books, medical prescriptions, herbals, horoscopes, chiromantic handbooks, etc., etc.”1 These same types of lore (if not much of the very lore itself that Hand mentions here) circulated in all levels of society and among all peoples throughout the Roman Empire, Hellenistic astrology being virtually inseparable from Hermetism and magic. So it should come as no surprise that the long lost Gospel of Judas, reportedly discovered in the 1970s and first published by the National Geographic Society in April (!) 2006, incorporates astrological teaching on nearly every page.

One of the most obvious astrological references in the Gospel of Judas is found on the penultimate page of the manuscript. After telling Judas that he will exceed all others in wickedness by sacrificing Jesus to Saklas, the Savior’s final words to his betrayer are as follows:2

---

1 Hand 1940, 1–4.
Behold, everything has been told to you.

Look up and see the cloud and the light in it and the stars surrounding it.

The leading star is your star.

Featuring prominently on the cover of the original publication of the *Gospel of Judas*, these lines have been badly misinterpreted, along with those that come after them, in which it is said that Judas looked up and “he” entered the cloud. For scholars who see Judas in this second-century Sethian text as a positive figure, either wholly or in part, 57,15–26 is a key passage. In their view, it is the moment of his transfiguration, enlightenment, liberation, or redemption.

A recently published example of this view appears in Seonyoung Kim’s article from the volume of proceedings of the 2006 Sorbonne conference. In the first section of the article, Kim rightly distinguishes “the negative function of the stars” in the *Gospel of Judas* from both the role of the young gods in the *Timaeus* and the system of beneficent and maleficent planets in Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*. Yet, discussing 57,15–26 in the third section of the article, Kim seems to forget this distinction. In an attempt to deal with the apparent disconnect between the star that “leads the way” for Judas at the end of the text and the star in a previous passage that deceives Judas into thinking he could join the holy generation in the divine realm beyond the visible cosmos, Kim writes:

[T]he character of the Judas’s star [sic] is not the same as in an earlier part of the text. Clearly, while interpreting Judas’s own vision, Jesus said, ‘Your star has led you astray (45,13–14).’ Judas was deceived by his star and misunderstood his vision. However, in the latter part of the text, preceding the scene of Judas’s entering into the luminous cloud (57,22–23), Jesus said, ‘It is your star that leads the way (57,19–20).’ [Kim’s footnote here reads: Literally, he is his star.] A sudden change in the characteristic

---

4 Refer to Kasser et al. 2006a, 10, 44 n. 143, 100–1, 164–5, 169; Ehrman 2006b, 96, 180; Pagels-King 2007, 90, 98, 164; also Gathercole 2007a, 107–8, 111–13; and now the somewhat less assertive statements, that is, excepting Ehrman’s, in Kasser et al. 2008, 16, 52 n. 156, 87–88, 145, 154.