STOP SACRIFICING!
The metaphor of sacrifice in the *Gospel of Judas*

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The *Gospel of Judas* describes itself as follows:

The hidden word of pronouncement
about which Jesus spoke with Judas Iscariot,
in the eight days
before (the) three days
before he celebrated Passover.

This incipit tells the reader up front that the work contains esoteric information that cannot be found in the public accounts of Jesus’ life. The essence of that hidden information is ‘apophasis’, or ‘pronouncement’ as Karen King translates.¹ This translation is well chosen, for the *Gospel of Judas* is as much a verdict pronounced over ‘apostolic’ Christianity and its sacrifices, as a declaration of an alternative gnostic Christian view of reality.²

The temporal indications, which locate the discourse before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, are clear from a grammatical point of view. The problem, however, is that Jesus does not celebrate a Passover meal in the *Gospel of Judas*. At the end of the work, Jesus does go into a guest room, but only to pray. In fact, the author shows a Jesus who does not want to participate in the eucharistic meal of his disciples and who opposes sacrificing. Both are denounced as worship of Saklas. It seems impossible that this Jesus would ever celebrate the Jewish Passover.

Perhaps the original Greek played on the resemblance between *pascha* and *paschein* (suffering).³ It is also possible that the temporal

¹ Pagels-King 2007.
² As both groups would primarily designate themselves as Christian, I have only capitalized this term. I add the adjective *gnostic* for Christians who denounce the biblical demiurge (the defining concept in Williams 1996). I use the adjective *apostolic* for those Christians whom the author of the *Gospel of Judas* describes as followers of the apostles (34.14–16).
³ Cf. Melito of Sardis *On Pascha* 46.
indications in the incipit have a symbolic and rhetorical function: the eight days may point to the Octave of Easter in early Christianity and the three days to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus, according to the author, revealed everything before Judas had Jesus arrested and before Jesus suffered as the Passover lamb of apostolic Christianity. This would fit well with what Jesus tells Judas at the end of the revelation: “you will sacrifice the man who bears me.”

The metaphor of human sacrifice is not only applied to the crucifixion of Jesus. It also appears in the third scene, where the apostles describe their dream to Jesus. Twelve priests sacrifice people, even women and children, on an altar in a great house. Although these priests invoke Jesus’ name over their sacrifices, they commit all kinds of abominable acts. Jesus then explains that the apostles themselves are these twelve priests and calls out to them: “Stop sacrificing!”

But what is meant with this metaphor of human sacrifice? Elaine Pagels and Karen King argue that it refers to martyrdom. They see the incitement to martyrdom by church leaders as a central concern of the author of the Gospel of Judas, which would explain the anger and polemics of the author towards apostolic Christian leaders. Accordingly, the women and children sacrificed in the apostles’ dream “no doubt represent the martyrs of the author’s own day whom church leaders encouraged to die for their faith.”

The purpose of this article is to cast some doubt on this interpretation, which I call the martyrdom hypothesis. I will argue that there are better grounds to interpret the Gospel of Judas as a polemic against apostolic Christian sacramental practices, with baptism as a re-enactment of Jesus’ own “passover.” I will conclude this article with the implications of this alternative interpretation for our understanding of the text’s narrative.

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4 Cf. Barn. 15.8,9, Justin Martyr Dial. 24.1, 41.4, and 138.1.
7 Gos. Jud. 41.1–2.
8 Possibly the first publication in which the martyrdom hypothesis appeared was by Iricinschi-Jenott-Townsend 2006. The possibility was also suggested as a secondary meaning (in addition to the eucharist) by Kerchove 2008, 311–330.