

DRAFT

Christianity's Other Betrayal

The Gospel of Judas and the Origins of Christian Homophobia

Will Roscoe, Ph.D.

"The most important archaeological discovery of the past sixty years..."¹

"One of the great textual finds of the modern age..."²

"The discovery of the Gospel of Judas is astonishing..."³



Such were the breathless accolades generated on behalf of the National Geographic's early 2006 release of a purported lost gospel—a media blitz worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster that include simultaneous release of two books, broadcast of a television documentary, and a website launch. Indeed, the story told of the document's discovery and restoration is almost incredible.

In 1978, a clandestine outing in the deserts of middle Egypt retrieved a fragile but complete papyrus manuscript—clearly ancient and of inestimable value. In Cairo, it came into the hands of an especially avaricious

¹Bart Ehrman, online.

²Brian Handwerk for *National Geographic News*, April 6, 2006, news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/04/0406_060406_gospel_2.html.

³Elaine Pagels, jacket of *The Gospel of Judas*.

antiquities dealer. But as he was about to display the artifact to his first prospective buyer, it was stolen. Some years passed. Eventually, through channels also clandestine, the dealer recovered the papyrus, and the quest for the highest bidder began in earnest. Over the next two decades the fragile manuscript crisscrossed continents and oceans, and, in the process, was thoroughly manhandled – stored for a time a freezer, folded in half and stuffed into a safe deposit box, where it languished through the humid summers of Long Island, until finally, its bindings disintegrated, its pages were reshuffled and sold off in hunks .

In 2000, the distraught papyrus was acquired by a reputable antiquities dealer, who turned it over to a Swiss foundation. By then it had been reduced to a heap of blackened scraps, each brittle flake at risk danger of crumbling into dust at the slightest touch.

A partnership was formed between the National Geographic and preservation experts, and an effort begun to stabilize and reassemble the fragments, jigsaw fashion, back into something that could be read once again. Five years of heroic labor eventually recovered an almost complete manuscript, unseen for nearly seventeen hundred years. The papyrus, dubbed the Codex Tchacos, contains parts of three ancient writings and a complete copy of a fourth. Radiocarbon dating indicates that it was manufactured sometime between 220 and 340 C.E. The major part is a text in Coptic, a descendent of the language spoken by the pharaohs. Its title is nothing less than scandalous: the Gospel of Judas.

Around 180 C.E., Irenaeus, an early Christian bishop at Lyon, described a group of Gnostics who considered Cain, along with Esau, Korah, and the Sodomites, as their spiritual forbears. These Old Testament villains, they asserted, had been assailed by the “Creator” – meaning the Jewish God of the Tanukh, or Old Testament – but none had been injured because of the power they possessed. Judas the traitor knew of these secrets, and by them was able to accomplish something that the Cainites called, according to Irenaeus, “the mystery of the betrayal.” Indeed, Irenaeus adds, they “produce a fictitious

history of this kind, which they style the *Gospel of Judas*.”⁴

This appears to be the very text preserved in the Codex Tchachos. Given the time at which Irenaeus wrote, the Gospel of Judas was probably composed between 140 and 160 C.E., probably in Greek. The Coptic version preserved in the Codex Tchacos is a translation of this original text.

⁴Exactly what should be deduced from this passage of Irenaeus is ambiguous. With actual writings by Gnostics at hand, thanks to the discovery of the Nag Hamadi texts and, now, the Gospel of Judas, it is clear that Irenaeus was either poorly informed about the groups he criticized or misrepresented them purposively. The reference to the Gospel of Judas occurs within a larger discussion of the “school of Valentinus” and “those who are of the school of Valentinus.” Later authors, dependent on Irenaeus, speak of the “Cainites” as a sect, but Irenaeus only says, “Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above...” (31:1). Which “others” and their precise relationship with “the school of Valentinus,” the subject of the previous paragraph is unclear. In fact, Irenaeus does not claim to have read the Gospel of Judas himself, nor does he say that this gospel was actually written by these “others,” only that they cite it in support of their views concerning Judas (see Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*). Indeed, some of the beliefs he attributes to the “Cainites” are not documented in the actual Gospel of Judas; there’s nothing, for example, about “Cain, Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons.”

However, immediately following his reference to the Gospel of Judas, Irenaeus cites a “collection of their writings,” which is in his possession. Quoting from these writings, he accuses these “others” of engaging in libertinism and magical operations involving angels – the very practices that the Gospel of Judas denounces. As Irenaeus writes, “They also hold, like Carpocrates, that men cannot be saved until they have gone through all kinds of experience.” (Interestingly, the Carpocrations, according to the letter of Clement of Alexandria discovered by Morton Smith (see below), were the ones who obtained a copy of the Secret Gospel from Clement’s church and used it to justify libertine practices.

That there were Cainites, in the sense of individuals or a group who cited Cain as their forbearer, seems certain given later, independent references to them (Epiphanius and pseudo-Tertullian, although, the latter does not mention a Gospel of Judas). Perhaps this puzzle can be resolved if we take the part of Irenaeus’ account based on the writings he actually possessed – which portrays them as libertine Gnostics – as an accurate description of the Cainite sect, and conclude that although they cited the Gospel of Judas because of the iconoclastic role it gave Judas, the gospel was written by some other, more ascetical group of Gnostics, not the Cainites.

The worldview and theology of the Gospel of Judas are Christian—Jesus is its central spiritual authority—but thoroughly Gnostic, of a piece with the sort of texts found in 1945 at Nag Hamadi. All these documents appear to have been hidden away at a time when a newly ascendant orthodoxy in Christianity was actively suppressing writings with divergent beliefs, above all those of the Gnostics. Gnosticism—broad a term used by historians to describe a diverse body of beliefs, writings, and groups in the ancient world—emphasized the acquisition of esoteric or secret knowledge. In its view, the physical world in which we live is corrupt, and only through special knowledge could humans transcend it to apprehend, indeed *enter*, a greater spiritual reality. This knowledge, as the Gospel of Judas illustrates, took the form of elaborate mythologies describing the origins of the cosmos and the organization and occupants of its various realms.

Another characteristic feature of Gnosticism was its dualism. The evil and imperfections of the mortal world could not have been created by an all-powerful, beneficent god. Rather, Gnostic texts argue, the world was created by an inferior god—an accidental and malignant emanation of the true supreme deity, who remains utterly alien to any form of materiality. Gnostics, like the Cainites, identified this degenerate deity with the creator God of the Jewish bible; this was the basis of their hostility toward Judaism. Although the spread of Gnostic beliefs is not believed to have begun in earnest until the second century, certain themes typical of Gnosticism can be traced back much further. Eventually, Christian, Jewish, and pagan versions of Gnosticism flourished side-by-side.

Until recently, however, Gnostics were known largely through what their opponents, propagandists like Irenaeus, said about them. With the Gospel of Judas and the Nag Hamadi library before us, we encounter Gnostics in their own words, relating their theology in the form that many in the ancient world found persuasive.

The overblown fanfare surrounding the release of the Gospel of Judas, however, has done the text a disservice. While press releases implying that history would have to be rewritten riveted the attention of a large public, they also seem to have triggered powerful instincts of self-preservation within institutions committed to a story of the past that they are loath to change. Academics quickly pointed out that this text, written well over a

century after the death of Jesus, cannot be a reliable source of evidence concerning the either Jesus or Judas. "It is certainly an ancient text," as Simon Gathercole, a New Testament professor at Aberdeen University, remarks, "but not ancient enough to tell us anything new. It contains themes which are alien to the first-century world of Jesus and Judas, but which became popular later."

Churches, for their part, are even more constrained to adjust their stories of the past, since these are viewed as divinely given—and God does not leave rough drafts lying about or have need to issue revised editions. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Gospel of Judas has been declared irrelevant across the spectrum of institutional Christianity by spokesman ranging from the H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy, theological leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who has said, "These texts are neither reliable nor accurate Christian texts, as they are historically and logically alien to the main Christian thinking and philosophy of the early and present Christians," to the Baptist theologian, Rodney J. Decker, Th.D., whose on-line PowerPoint presentation on the subject concludes, "There is very little that is distinctively Christian here; most is stock Gnosticism."⁵

Now, queer historians, theologians, and Christians might be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief. Preoccupied with the status of the document in relation to institutional discourse, the debate so far has overlooked a prominent element of its contents: its unequivocal condemnation of same-sex relations. Indeed, the text refers to homosexuality twice; noteworthy since, after all, the New Testament speaks of it only three times and never more than once in a single book. (I count these as 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:26). It would seem that the Gospel of Judas is not so alien to mainstream Christianity after all.

Perhaps it is just as well that it be consigned to the purview of an antiquarian interest in obscure religious sects of the second century.

⁵Bishoy: http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2006-04-07; www.tertullian.org/rpease/manuscripts/gospel_of_Judas/); <http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/GJudasWeb.ppt>).

But this would be a loss for queer studies, for I believe a careful examination of the Gospel of Judas leads to a very different conclusion regarding its references to homosexuality. In fact, the picture of early Christianity that emerges from the Gospel of Judas is surprisingly consistent with the one I put forth in *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love*: hostility toward same-sex love does not come from within the original circles of the Jesus movement, but from without, as accusations against Jesus himself and his earliest followers, from its opponents and defectors. It was only when Christianity gained ascendancy as the official religion of Rome and had need of an institution's power to manipulate its members and outsiders that accusations of this kind migrated into the heart of its discourse. Before then, perhaps as late as the time that the Gospel of Judas was composed, a truly different reality prevailed.

This is the conclusion I will tease out of this remarkable document in the discussion that follows.

"You are those men"

The Gospel's references to homosexuality occur early in the text, which begins with a bold declaration of its contents, to wit: "The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot." It goes on to relate a series of short scenes in which Jesus and his disciples are depicted in a contentious relationship. The first describes the disciples observing a rite, apparently communion, when Jesus appears and castigates them for having failed to understand his teachings. They respond in an angry outburst. Jesus then takes Judas aside and expresses his intention to tell him the "mysteries of the kingdom."

In the next scene, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, what is the great generation that is superior to us and holier than us, that is not now in these realms?" Jesus replies cryptically, "...no one born of this aeon will see that [generation], and no host of angels of the stars will rule over that generation."

It is in the following scene that the subject of same-sex relations arises. The disciples come to Jesus and relate to him a collective vision, as follows (brackets indicate missing or illegible text and possible reconstructions; emphasis mine):

They [said, "We have seen] a great [house with a large] altar [in it, and] twelve men – they are the priests, we would say – and a name; and a crowd of people is waiting at that altar, [until] the priests [... and receive] the offerings. [But] we kept waiting."

[Jesus said], "What are [the priests] like?"

They [said, "Some ...] two weeks; [some] sacrifice their own children, others their wives, in praise [and] humility with each other; *some sleep with men*; some are involved in [slaughter]; some commit a multitude of sins and deeds of lawlessness. And the men who stand [before] the altar invoke your [name], and in all the deeds of their deficiency, the sacrifices are brought to completion [...]."

After they said this, they were quiet, for they were troubled.

Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled? Truly I say to you, all the priests who stand before that altar invoke my name. Again I say to you, my name has been written on this [...] of the generations of the stars through the human generations. [And they] have planted trees without fruit, in my name, in a shameful manner."

Jesus said to them, "Those you have seen receiving the offerings at the altar – that is who you are. That is the god you serve, and you are those twelve men you have seen. The cattle you have seen brought for sacrifice are the many people you lead astray before that altar. [...] will stand and make use of my name in this way, and generations of the pious will remain loyal to him. After him another man will stand there from [the fornicators], and another [will] stand there from the slayers of children, and another from those who *sleep with men*, and those who abstain, and the rest of the people of pollution and lawlessness and error, and those who say, 'We are like angels'; they are the stars that bring everything to its conclusion. For to the human generations it has been said, 'Look, God has received your sacrifice from the hands of a priest' – that is, a minister of error. But it is the Lord, the Lord of the universe, who commands, 'On the last day they will be put to shame.'"

Jesus said [to them], "Stop sac[rificing ...] which you have [...] over the altar, since they are over your stars and your angels and have already come to their conclusion there. So let them be [ensnared] before you, and let them go....

The next several lines are missing. When the account resumes, the disciples have dropped

out of the picture. The remainder of the text deals with the mysteries that Jesus relates to Judas—the origins of the cosmos, the hierarchy of spirit beings who occupy the heavens, Judas' destiny, and the fate of humanity. Then, abruptly, the tone shifts from the mystical to the journalistic, relating the betrayal of Jesus in a few terse lines, then ending abruptly with the verse, "And he [Judas] received some money and handed him over."

I have quoted the passage above at length so that the context of its references to same-sex relations is evident. They are part of a blistering polemic against the disciple *cum* priests, charging them with violating fundamental moral precepts concerning sexuality and the respect of human life. Their portrayal as an undifferentiated collective signals that they are rhetorical figures, to be understood as representing some larger group, namely those who do not acknowledge Judas as a discipline—which would have meant, then and now, nearly all other practicing Christians. The impression one gets is of an embattled minority defiantly opposing a majority it considers corrupt, an impression reinforced by the attribution of the gospel to Judas, a figure otherwise reviled in the Christian tradition.

By unpacking this polemic, however, we catch a rare glimpse of how early Christianity appeared from the outside looking in. It is a view of the past other than the one told by history's winners. Certainly, it is a partial viewpoint, as all others are, and allowance must be made for its bias. But the same is no less true when we read Ireneaus, the inveterate heresy-hunter, presuming to describe "others" who follow Cain and Judas.

With this in mind, then, let us ask: what are the salient features of the nascent Christian orthodoxy in the eyes of the religious militants who produced the Gospel of Judas?

First, it remains a form of Jewish Christianity. Christianity began, of course, as a sect within Judaism and remained so under the leadership of Jesus' brother, James and others, until the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E.⁶ Up until that cataclysm, through Paul's time, one of the central debates within the church centered on whether to be a Christian one had to be a practicing Jew as well.

⁶ According to Eusebius, the first fifteen bishops of Jerusalem were "of the circumcision" (*History of the Church* 4.5.3-4).

Second, It entails mystical practices directed at angels and supernatural powers. This is suggested by the claim, which the Gospel of Judas attributes to its opponents, “We are like angels.” In making such a boast, they were not alone. As I relate in *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love*, belief in spirit beings was nearly universal in the ancient world, among Christians, Jews, and pagans alike. Closely related to this was the belief that a series of heavenly domains encircled the earth, culminating in a supreme heaven—the kingdom of the heavens—in which a supreme god or gods ruled. The intermediate realms between the highest heaven and earth were the domain of the lesser gods or spirits.

As monotheism spread in the ancient world the role of spirits actually increased. For they had the capability of traversing the realms between humans and the supreme god. In the ancient world, Jews, Christians, and pagans alike all sought ways of influencing spirits, from prayers to angels to the use of simple protective charms to magical rituals that served to produce visionary encounters with these supernatural beings. An interest in stars and astrology, which the Gospel of Judas also attributes to its opponents, is a natural extension of these ideas, since the stars and planets also occupied the heavens and held sway over human affairs. In fact, in addressing its opponents, the gospel refers to “your stars and your angels” as if they were interchangeable. Their claim, “We are like angels,” therefore, implies that they had encountered such beings directly and obtained their powers.

Third, it promotes social and sexual freedom. The litany of transgressions laid against the disciple-priests amounts to a general indictment of libertinism. Of course, charging one's opponents with immorality, especially sexual and gender nonconformity, is symptomatic of Western discourse going back to the classical Greeks. By the time of Epiphanius, the fourth-century Christian heresy hunter, it was part of the stock polemics deployed by orthodox Christians against heretics and heathens alike. These charges are so often overstated (as in the Gospel of Judas: fornication *and* homosexuality *and* child sacrifice) that one is tempted to always ignore them.

But the theological basis for libertinism lay within Christianity's foundational texts—in Jesus' pronouncements in Matthew and Luke that “the Law and the prophets were until

John, from then on the kingdom of God is proclaimed" and in his willingness to fraternize with sinners, including "common" women, adulterers, eunuchs, men who did women's work, and those suffering from mental and physical ailments that made them, in the view of Jewish religious law, unclean. Jesus himself was accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" – that is, a libertine who indulged his appetites.

Nonetheless, when Jesus says, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32) it is liberation from Jewish law, the Torah, that he has in mind. Only later, as Christianity spread beyond the Jewish community, did passages like this come to be understood as implying liberation from *all* law and authority.

Yet another, more theologically sophisticated, rationale for libertinism can be found in Paul's writings. Jesus' death, Paul claimed, fulfilled the demands of the law; it had no further claim on him as a Jew. And gentiles who underwent baptism and had been "united" with the spirit of Jesus, experiencing his death and resurrection, were also freed from any obligation to Jewish law.

But Paul's language seems to have invited broader application than he intended. Statements like "all things are lawful for me" were taken literally by some of his followers at Corinth (1 Cor. 6:12, 10:23). In Romans, he complains that his words have been twisted to mean, "Let us do evil so that good may come." (Rom. 3:8). Logically, however, such a proposition is not such a large step from Paul's declaration of freedom from the law. Those who have been cleansed by baptism and united with Christ are holy, and those who are holy cannot commit unholy acts. This line of thought eventually gave rise to an even more radical formulation: to transcend desire, which kept one entangled with the world of material forms, one must fulfill it, experiencing every dimension of this world, escaping desire by exhausting it. This is the view Irenaeus attributed to the Cainites, quoting their writings: "They also hold, like Carpocrates, that men cannot be saved until they have gone through all kinds of experience" (31:2).⁷

Libertinism, in short, was often as not a fire in Christianity's own backyard.

⁷On the Carpocratians, see above.

Given the fairly certain dating of the Gospel of Judas to the mid-second century, the assumption that most scholars have made—that whatever evidence it contains pertains foremost to that time—is certainly reasonable. On this basis, however, scholars and religious authorities alike have declared that the gospel offers nothing for our understanding Christianity's first-century origins. The problem with this, however, is that the Gospel of Judas' portrayal of its opponents does not match what we know about the mainstream of Christianity in the second century. It portrays the "disciples" as if they were priests performing rituals in a setting that could only be the temple at Jerusalem. This is certainly a dramatic way to charge them with Judaizing (as Paul charges Peter in Gal 2:14), but these rites had not been performed since the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. This event dispersed both Jewish and Christian religious communities and consummated the schism between Judaism and the followers of Jesus. In the second century, Christians still considered the God they worshipped to be the same as the God of the Jews and the Old Testament, and Jesus as the messiah of Jewish scripture. But to charge anyone with performing Jewish temple rituals that had not been witnessed in nearly a century would have had little currency.

It would have been current, however, a century earlier. Indeed, the very passage in the Gospel of Judas that addresses same-sex relations turns out to have a direct link to the earliest surviving writings of Christianity—the letters of Paul.

"Those-who-sleep-with-men"

When I first read the English translation of the Gospel of Judas available on the National Geographic website, I was struck by the wording of its references to homosexuality: the first, "some sleep with men," describes behavior (38:20-21); the second, however, "those who sleep with men, (40:11-12), suggests a social category, potentially an identity. But both phrases sound oddly euphemistic given the way biblical references to homosexuality are usually translated—with words such as "sodomite," "homosexual," "unnatural intercourse," "male prostitute," "pederast," or, in the inimitable style of the King James version, "abusers of themselves with mankind." Were

National Geographic's translators being reticent – wary of controversy, perhaps – or even prudish?

Lacking any facility with Coptic, my curiosity may have remained unfulfilled were it not for a footnote (always the queer scholar's last resort) by the translators attached to phrase "those who sleep with men." In a rather apologetic tone, they note that accusations of "sexual impropriety" were commonplace in polemical writing of the time (the implication being, I suppose, that one need not heed them). Preceding this, however, they offer a technical comment, and this is the key to understanding the passage cited earlier. The Coptic term translated as "those who sleep with men," they note, is misspelled in the papyrus manuscript. The correct spelling (using the Roman alphabet) is *nrefnkotk*. The complete phrase, "those who sleep with men," is *nrefnkokte mn zoout*.

This was what I needed to be able to consult Coptic dictionaries and unpack the full meaning of this phrase.

From W. E. Crum's *A Coptic Dictionary*⁸, we learn that the initial *n-* indicates the object of the verb, and that the prefix *ref-* adds the sense "one who" to the word *nkotk*, which broadly means "a sleep" or "to sleep" (or "lie down"), and in the form *nnkotk*, "place of lying" or "couch," which includes the sense of "sexual cohabitation." Finally, *mn* is the preposition "with" and *zoout* is "men." "One who sleeps with men," in sum, is a perfectly adequate and literal translation.

Crum's entry goes on to provide a critical piece of information. The equivalent for *nrefnkotk* in New Testament Greek is *arsenokoitēs*, a word that conjoins *arsen*, "male" or "the male," with *koitē*, "marriage-bed," "the act of going to bed." This is undoubtedly the term used in the original Greek version of the Gospel of Judas – which contains numerous Greek loanwords – that the Coptic *nrefnkokte* translates. Indeed, *arsenokoitēs* translates "those who sleep with men" into Greek just as literally as the Coptic.

The significance of the term *arsenokoitēs* becomes apparent when we turn to the New Testament. It is used in two of its three references to homosexuality, . . . It occurs in First Letter to the Corinthians (6.9) and in a parallel passage in the First Letter to Timothy (1),

⁸See also the "Coptic/English Lexicon" at www.geocities.com/remenkimi/CopticEnglish.html.

which is believed to have been written by a follower of Paul.⁹ These are its earliest written uses that we know of, nearly all subsequent uses occurring in paraphrases of Paul.¹⁰ It is fairly certain, therefore, that the composers of the Gospel of Judas were familiar with the writings of Paul.

If we look at the context in which Paul uses *arsenokoitēs*—as part of a litany of transgressions he levies against his opponents—the parallels with the Gospel of Judas appear even greater:

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites (arsenokoitēs), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

It should be noted, however, that here Paul is not addressing outsiders but his own recent converts at Corinth, for in the next line he adds, “*And this is what some of you used to be.*” It would seem that Paul’s converts included more than a few social outcasts, who, in his absence, were relapsing into old patterns.

The Pauline corpus is peppered with these litanies, sometimes directed at Paul’s own followers, sometimes at outsiders. One finds them in Romans (chapter 1), Galatians 5:19-20, 2 Corinthians 12:20-21, Ephesians 5:3-5, and Colossians 3:5-9. Structurally, the Gospel

⁹The Pauline corpus includes seven letters generally agreed to have been written by him and six whose authorship is debated.

¹⁰For example, Polycarp to the Philippians [5:3], “Neither fornicators (*pornoi*) nor the effeminate (*malakoi*) nor homosexuals (*arsenokoitoi*) will inherit the kingdom of God.” It appears in the Sibylline Oracles, a non-Christian work, revised by both Christian and Jewish editors and dated anywhere from 200 B.C.E. to as late as the fifth century C.E., as part of a set of admonitions that sounds suspiciously like Paul’s in First Corinthians: “Be not an *arsenokoitein* or a slanderer or a murderer” [2.73]. Two other occurrences are in astrological contexts—interesting considering that Pauline texts referring to *arsenokoitēs* also contain astrological references (see the discussion of “stars” that follows). These are the *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* Iff, 1898ff, 8.4, p. 196.6 and 8, and Eusebius, *Pr. Ev.*, 6.10.25, which quotes Bardesanes, a semi-Christian Syrian who lived between 154-222 C.E.

of Judas passage most closely parallels that in First Timothy, which also uses the term *arsenokoitēs*:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites [arsenokoitēs], slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.” (1 Timothy 1:10-11)

Aside from this passage and the one in First Corinthians the only other of these listings to mention same-sex relations is in Romans. Here an even more exhaustive inventory of transgressions is made against Jews and pagans alike, which is linked to fundamental religious errors on their part—the worship “images” in the case of pagans and adherence to traditional religious laws in the case of Jews. Romans, however, does not use the term *arsenokoitēs*; rather the more sweeping and dramatic formulation “natural intercourse being exchanged for the unnatural.” This phrasing clearly encompasses a category of behavior, whereas, in contrast, *arsenokoitēs* appears to refer to a social type, a kind of person.

An important qualification needs to be noted, however.. The behavior Paul denounces in Romans is not attributed to an intrinsic inclination or a moral lapse on the part of individuals; it is a punishment that God has imposed because of their religious errors—in Paul’s words, “God gave them up to degrading passions” (Rom. 1:26, 28). Thus we find homosexuality portrayed in two distinct ways in Paul—in Romans it is a behavior that God forces individuals to engage in *against their will*, while in First Corinthians it is a failure on the part of individuals to contain a desire intrinsic to them.

Paul and the Gospel of Judas: A Common Enemy?

Scholars believe that the First and Second Letters to the Corinthians were cut-and-pasted from various writings by Paul, and that their division into separate texts is arbitrary. If we read them together, it becomes evident that the lapses Paul is concerned

with in First Corinthians 6:9-11 are connected to a larger problem, which is the main subject of Second Corinthians. Paul's converts seem to have come into in contact with other Christian missionaries, and these "other teachers," as Paul calls them, were at least partly to blame for instigating their libertine experiments.

Who were these "other teachers" whose Christianity was at odds with Paul's? If they were an offshoot of the Christian movement, heretics or schismatics, we might expect Paul to refer to them by a distinct name. He gives them no name, but his comments throughout Second Corinthians provide us with a good idea of who they were, what they were teaching, and the strength and source of their influence. There is no doubt, as we will see, that if Paul had not taken them seriously and strenuously countered their influence, we might be reading their letters today and not his.

As we learn from chapters 10 to 12 of Second Corinthians, they come from outside Corinth, which means that, like Paul, they are missionaries, representatives of an organized body seeking to expand. Paul calls them "ministers of Christ" and refers to them sarcastically as "super-apostles." Terminology that in his time implied a direct commission from Jesus; Paul does not challenge this. He cannot because, it would seem, they have "letters of recommendation" to back up their claims. Nonetheless, they proclaim "another Jesus" and have "another gospel" than Paul's, and they boast of their visions and revelations. They also boast of being "descendants of Abraham," that is, Jewish, as Paul was, and *Hebroi*, a term used in the New Testament to refer to observant Jews in distinction to *Hellenoi*, or Jews who did not observe traditional law and adopted a Greek lifestyle (and language). All this indicates that they were Jewish Christians from Palestine with a commission from the Jerusalem church itself.

How does Paul counter them? He does not challenge their claim to authority – a direct connection to Jesus himself, which Paul lacked. Nor does he question the Gnostic and mystical tendencies evident in their emphasis on visions. But he says that they disguise themselves as "servants of righteousness" even though, he implies, that were libertines, while he himself has "renounced the shameful things that one hides." Above all, he faults them for their arrogance and the fact that they challenge his authority. As for their demonstrations of spiritual power, Paul's responds that he, too, has had visions and

revelations, and he relates his experience of being caught up into the third heaven where he “heard things that are not to be told, and no mortal is permitted to repeat” (1 Cor. 12:4). Indeed, Paul boasts to his followers, “I speak in tongues more than all of you” (1 Corinthians 14:18).

Paul’s characterization of his opponents is polemical, but it has to have been fairly accurate, since the Corinthians knew them first hand. He could only exaggerate so far. Nor was the situation at Corinth unique. Competing Christian missionaries were a persistent problem for Paul. In Letter to the Galatians, written about the same time as First Corinthians, he complains of outsiders who have brought “another gospel,” which they say an angel proclaimed to them. They, too, are Jewish and, under their influence, the Galatians were observing Jewish laws and religious festivals. They also engaged in mystical practices involving interaction with “beings that by nature are not gods” and “elemental spirits,” and they boasted of their spiritual influence. They seem to have had a libertine influence as well, for Paul goes on to admonish the Galatians not to commit various sins (5: 19-21) in a litany that echoes his admonishments in First Corinthians.

In Ephesians, believed to have been written by a follower of Paul, the listing of sexual and moral infractions is immediately followed by a command not to associate with those who “deceive with empty words” and engage in “unfruitful works of darkness” – “for it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly” (Eph. 5:6-12). Colossians, as well, speaks of opponents who deceive with plausible arguments and captivate through philosophy. They, too, promote observance of the law and the “worship of angels,” boasting of their visions. While they encourage ascetic practices of “piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body,” they are libertine, for Paul repeats again the reprimands of First Corinthians: “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry),” to which he adds “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language,” ending with the same qualification: “These are the ways you also once followed” (Col. 2-3). (Interestingly, however, reference to same-sex relations is missing here.)

In Letter to the Philippians, Paul warns of “dogs” and “evil workers” (3:2), who practice circumcision and “boast” in Jesus Christ, whom they proclaim “from envy and rivalry” (1:15-17). First Timothy refers to “people...desiring to be teachers of the law,

without understanding," who use Jewish Scripture to support their views (1:6-7), forbid marriage and demand abstinence (4:3), and offer special "knowledge" (*gnōsis*) (6:20). Given the space First Timothy devotes to commanding women's silence, it may be that these "false teachers" were also appealing to women and inspiring them to assume leadership roles.

First Timothy and the Gospel of Judas both refer to "those who abstain" in the same context as "those who sleep with men." The common denominator would seem to be a rejection of marriage and procreation. This required heterosexual but not necessarily homosexual abstinence or, indeed, abstinence from other forms of nonprocreative sexuality.

All these references to competing missionaries scattered throughout the Pauline corpus add up to a remarkably consistent picture. Whether they all had the same origins, as emissaries of the founding church in Jerusalem, their version of Christianity was similar. They were Jewish Christians seeking gentile converts, offering a different gospel than Paul's and boasting of their spiritual powers. Unlike Paul, they still observed Jewish religious customs including circumcision, and they worshipped angels. They were also ascetics, which apparently entailed fasting and other regimens, including abstinence from procreative sexuality, but not necessarily other forms, hence Paul's charges of libertinism. In all these respects they are identical to the proto-orthodox Christians denounced in the Gospel of Judas.

Paul's opponents were ubiquitous. They dogged his movements throughout the Near East. Clearly, they had resources equal to or greater than Paul's. They could not have been representatives of a dissenting minority or latecomers to Christianity. If they came from Jerusalem with the blessings of the original church, if some of them had known Jesus personally, then what they represent is Christianity's earliest form and, in Paul's time, its mainstream. It is Paul who is the dissenter, whose views are in the minority. In his letters, we see him mount a prodigious effort to promote these views and, ultimately, win over the heart and soul of the Christian movement from those who would preserve its original character: Jewish, mystical, homophilic (i.e., "libertine"). Paul's viewpoint eventually won

out, then proceeded to erase its tracks, to marginalizing its opponents in the historical record and presenting itself Christianity's original version.

Paul's understanding of angels and spirits is worth exploring in more detail. Throughout his writings, he consistently denigrates these supernatural beings, whom he refers to variously as "angels" (*aggelos*) "rulers" and "powers" (*archons*), "authorities" (*ezousia*), "demons" (*daimōnes*), "spirits" (*pneuma*), elements or principles (*stoikheion*, translated as "elemental spirits of the universe"), the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," and the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:21; 3:10). His more elliptic references to "heavenly bodies" and the "glory" of the sun, moon, and stars in First Corinthians should be included here as well—for the planets and stars were the other occupants of the heavens; they too "ruled" and had "authority" over human affairs. In the Gospel of Judas the connection between angels and stars is explicit in the phrase referring to the "host of angels of the stars."

Paul's attitude toward spirits is complicated. He does not deny their of spirits or their efficacy. In First Corinthians, he credits prophesizing and speaking in tongues—two of the "spiritual gifts" the Corinthians have received through his ministry—to angelic spirits. And in Second Corinthians he responds to his competitors' boasting of their spiritual prowess, by boasting of his own supernatural feats—a trip to heaven and back. Similarly, Paul's references to the rite of baptism characterize it as an experience of spiritual possession—by the spirit Paul calls the "Christ"—and ascent to heaven.

Paul's complaint is that his opponents (and his followers at Corinth who have become overly enthusiastic in their pursuit of "spiritual gifts") are worshipping angels as an end in themselves, to the neglect of the ethical and eschatological dimension of Jesus' mission. For Paul, the immanent return of Jesus, the arrival of the kingdom of heaven on earth, means that all subordinate spiritual beings will be swept away, their powers nullified. In the words of Colossians, God will have "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them." The Gospel of Judas echoes this belief when it refers to the "error of the stars." In the coming apocalypse, it asserts, these heavenly "rulers" will be destroyed along with the earthly domains they govern. As Jesus tells Judas, "No host of angels of the stars will rule over that generation"

Colossians concludes in a passage that again characterizes Paul's competitors as mystical Jewish Christians:

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking. (Col. 2.13-18)

Conclusion: Revisiting The Mystery of the Betrayal

To what extent are Paul's descriptions of his opponents relevant to Christians of the mid-second century – the disciple-priests condemned in the Gospel of Judas? The church by then was predominantly gentile. Why would the Gospel of Judas text borrow the polemics of a previous century?

In fact, Paul is an invisible presence in the Gospel of Judas. Its composers not only borrowed his term *arsenokoitēs* and his denunciation of same-sex relations, they found other aspects of his writings compatible with their outlook: his antipathy to Jewish law, his opposition to the worship of angels and stars, and his middle-of-the-road morality, which rejected both sexual freedom and asceticism. And they shared his self-image as an outsider in opposition to more dominant branch of Christianity.

If these observations are correct, then scholars will need to be more alert to the possibility that second-century Christianity retained more of the pre-Pauline, Jewish, mystical, and libertine characteristics of its earliest years than has been previously allowed.

In *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love* I attempted to reconstruct early Christianity, taking advantage of the discovery of a text no less "astonishing" than the Gospel of Judas – a passage from a hitherto unknown "Secret Gospel of Mark" quoted in a long-lost letter by Clement of Alexandria, who wrote in the same period as Irenaeus. In my book, I relate the story of this discovery by Morton Smith and its reception by modern scholars and historians.

The so-called Secret Gospel of Mark, if genuine (and a growing number of scholars believe it is¹¹), offers a view of Christianity consistent with that in Paul and in the Gospel of Judas, but a view from *inside* that movement rather than outside. It describes a mystical rite of baptism, in which Jesus, or a spirit he commands, possesses the initiate and imparts an experience of ascending to heaven. The culminating gesture of this rite was a naked embrace between the initiate and the initiator. This is precisely the kind of practice condemned in the Gospel of Judas, and seemingly that countenanced by Paul when he derides the worship of angels—although it would appear that Paul himself received some form of this mystical rite of passage at the time of his conversion. The homoerotic intimations of the baptism described in the Secret Gospel lends credence to the accusation of homosexuality against the earliest Christians that we find in both Paul and the Gospel of Judas, and the hostility toward baptism expressed in the latter (56).

Here is the real mystery of betrayal in the history of Christianity—how a homophilic movement, in which the love of sames and equals was once affirmed by a naked embrace between men, arrived at such a categorical rejection of same-sex love. It is a betrayal no less epic than Judas's betrayal of Jesus, who, after all, as the Gospel of Judas informs us, was only fulfilling God's will.

Our fundamentalist and conservative interlocutors want to claim that the rejection of homosexuality is God's will, too. Then we must ask them: why do we find this rejection only in Paul—and in such a marginal text as the Gospel of Judas—but not in the gospels that represent the teachings of Jesus himself?

— October 16, 2008

¹¹See, for example, Scott G. Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery*, Studies in Christianity and Judaism 15 (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), issued the same year as *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love*.