

THREE VERSIONS OF JUDAS FOUND IN BUENOS AIRES
DISCOVERY CHALLENGES BIBLICAL BETRAYAL

SPECIAL TO VARIACIONES BORGES

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In a stunning development that has shaken the erudite world of biblical scholarship, and that has wide implications for Christianity and interfaith relations, a text unearthed in Buenos Aires depicts Judas Iscariot not as the evil betrayer of Jesus but as his lucid collaborator.

The text, apparently of Gnostic provenance, first came to light in 1944, a year before the Nag Hammadi monastery collection of Gnostic writings discovered in the Egyptian desert, and three years before the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Qumran caves in Israel. Researchers are hailing the Buenos Aires manuscript as “spectacular” as these finds. Tentatively named Codex Sur after its site of discovery, the Argentine writing is composed in the *porteño* dialect of Spanish, although investigators, who initially believed it was translated either from Greek or Coptic, now consider it a copy of a lost original entitled, *Kristus och Judas*, redacted in Swedish by a theologian-scribe who went by the code name Nils Runeberg. Runes were ancient mystic letters, and

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"Nils" suggests null, or nothingness, as well as "Nil," the River Nile.

The name may be an encrypted allusion to the Cainites, a Near Eastern Gnostic group which held that the so-called biblical sinners, Cain, Esau, Korah, and particularly Judas, were rebels with a cause, who sought to free humanity, including the bodily Jesus, from the nothingness of corporeal life through mystical "gnosis," knowledge, in Greek. Ancient Gnostics generally believed in esoteric wisdom as a means of enlightenment, and tweaked biblical stories to describe a journey to the divine through the heavenly spheres led by a chosen redeemer.

Professor J. L. Borges of the University of Buenos Aires, editor of the *Codex Sur* which he has published under the title, "Three Versions of Judas," strengthened speculation about Nils Runeberg's Gnostic affiliations when he characterized the sage as the possible leader of "one of the Gnostic conventicles" in second-century Asia Minor or Alexandria, and compared the theologian to three renowned Gnostic teachers: Basilides, Carpocrates, and Saturnilus.

Gnostic teachings were condemned as blasphemous by the Fathers of the Church, foremost, Irenaeus of Lyon who in his tractate, *Against Heresies*, acerbically complained about the Cainites: They say that "Judas the betrayer...alone was acquainted with the truth as no others were, and so accomplished the mystery of betrayal... And they bring forth a fabricated work to this effect, which they entitle the Gospel of Judas."

The *Codex Sur*, or "Three Versions of Judas" could well be this "fabricated work," since Runeberg, Prof. Borges explained, says much the same thing in three slightly different ways. The first asserts that unique among the apostles, Judas sensed, and through his infamy acknowledged, Jesus' secret divinity and terrible purpose. The second, that Judas ascetically mortified himself in a renunciation meant to bring about the kingdom of heaven. And the third, most audacious version: that the Word had to become Flesh to the point of iniquity in order to free mortals from their sinful earthly coils. He could have become anyone; he became Judas.

After revealing the awesome name of the Divine, the sought for gnosis, Runeberg comes to share the inferno with his Redeemer, expiring of a ruptured aneurism. Now liberated from *his* bodily prison, the Codex Sur concludes, he added the complexities of misery and evil to the Jesus concept.

(See the related article, "Borges, Gnostic Precursor.")

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BORGES, GNOSTIC PRECURSOR

Professors and Bloggers

The previous paragraphs are my semi-serious spoof on the fabulous, media drenched announcement by the National Geographic Society in April, 2006, that an ancient Gnostic Coptic papyrus containing a Gospel of Judas had surfaced out of the sands of Egypt after 1700 years. Sensationally, in the gospel, Judas is the good guy, alone among the apostles entrusted by Jesus with special knowledge, and told: "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me" (*Gospel of Judas* 43). As sensationally, the gospel seems to be the very text (or a version of the text) vilified by Irenaeus, and possibly hidden to protect it by Coptic monks in caves near their monastery, not far from the Nile River. Almost two millennia after the "orthodox" Church sought to obliterate alternate scriptures by labeling them "heretical," the Gospel of Judas resurfaced, in a return of the repressed.

The adventures and misadventures of the Codex Tchacos, so named after the antiquities dealer who shepherded its purchase and publication, reads like a thriller worthy of a Dan Brown. (Brown's mega bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* itself reflects Gnostic documents found at Nag Hammadi which depict Mary Magdalene as Jesus' beloved companion, whom he was fond of kissing on the mouth.) National Geographic has rushed out two books on the Gospel of Judas, one on the heady quest for the lost

manuscript; the other an English translation accompanied by scholarly commentaries (see Krosney and Kasser).

Had Borges been alive he surely would have woven some theological fantasy out of these amazing facts—but, of course, he already had. Over sixty years *before* the National Geographic brouhaha he had penned “Three Versions of Judas,” in the process creating his own as yet unearthed precursors.

No wonder then that Internet blogs about the Gospel of Judas buzzed with Borges. “By an irony of literary history, we in the early 21st century have been well prepared for the discovery of this lost gospel,” wrote one excited blogger, “I was reminded of a short story..., ‘Three Versions of Judas’.” Another headlined: “Life Imitates Art: Borges on Judas.” A third message said: “El Evangelio según Borges: el escritor argentino se sumergió con 62 años de antelación en los secretos de Judas que hoy anuncia una sociedad científica. El Iscariote ya había sido vindicado en la obra del argentino” (Mader; Walnut; Lira).

Even no less an authority than Prof. Marvin Meyer, an eminent scholar of Gnosticism and one of the Gospel of Judas’s translators, cites Borges twice in his introduction to the text, first Borges’s story, then his comments in the essay, “A Vindication of Basilides the False”: “‘Had Alexandria triumphed and not Rome, the extravagant and muddled stories that I have summarized here would be coherent, majestic, and perfectly ordinary’” (GJ 8). Obviously, the good professor knows his (Gnostic) Borges and feels no compunction about quoting a fiction-maker in his preface. The professor and the bloggers attest to Borges’s place as a shaper of how we now read Gnosticism.

BORGES’S GNOSTICISM

When Harold Bloom talked about “the gnostic in Borges,” he wasn’t too far off the mark (*Jorge Luis Borges* 1).¹ Gnostic beliefs

¹ While my computer program likes “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” many people, scholarly and otherwise, prefer “gnostic” and “gnosticism” (I was just redlined and decided to follow my computer.) The discussion goes in part to the nature of the beast, some suggesting that there was in fact no such phenomenon

intrigued Borges long before “Tres versiones de Judas,” most visibly in “Una vindicación del falso Basíledes,” first published in *La Prensa* in January, 1932 with the broader title, “Una vindicación de los gnósticos.”² Like Cervantes before him, Borges describes his own (Gnostic) library: A Spanish-language encyclopedia, Quevedo’s “Sueño del infierno,” Irenaeus of Lyon, and above all, German-language tomes: a translation of the British theosophist G.P.S. Mead’s *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (*Fragmente eines verschollenen Glauben* [1902]), Wolfgang Schulz’s *Dokumente der Gnosis* (1910), and Wilhelm Bousset’s articles in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th edition, of course).

These Teutonic affiliations aren’t surprising, since it was early twentieth-century German Protestant theologians largely from the so-called “religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” or history of religions school, who first fostered the serious study of Gnosticism. Bousset was a leading light of this movement; Borges mentions another scholar, Adolf Hilgenfeld, in his vindication, and again refers to Bousset and his prominent adversary, the church historian Adolf von Harnack, in “Los teólogos.” (More on this rocky relationship later.)

By providing systematic information about a “faith forgotten” even in such popular venues as encyclopedias (one of Borges’s favorite sources) these divines gave the voracious reader and developing author raw materials with which to fashion his novel theological-artistic fantasies. His vision of Gnosticism reflects awareness of their studies—although he vindicated Gnosticism, and they didn’t.

Briefly put, from a Borgesian perspective Bousset et al. achieved three things: First, they made Gnosticism’s theology and cosmic tales respectable, worthy of investigation in their own right, available to meditate on in essays or to weave into innovative fictions. Normative Christianity, these researchers argued, wasn’t the only religious “version” in antiquity—a notion not exactly orthodox, and enormously attractive to Borges.

as “Gnosticism” per se (see the comments in Meyer and King). Borges believed that there was, so I will work on that assumption.

² The essay was collected in *Discusión* in the same year with the title change, later in OC 213-16.

Second, fascinated by the “extravagant and muddled stories” and “outré” religious practices (their attitude smacked of fin-de-siècle Orientalism), they carefully recounted Gnosticism’s “myths,” often following hoary polemicists, but also including newly available, especially Babylonian-Iranian materials. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* articles by Bousset that Borges talks about are chock full of Gnostic “lore,” a mother-lode of inspiration for *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, whose pages pullulate with Gnosticism.

Third, despite their apparently “radical assault” on time-honored definitions of Christianity, these savants continued to speak in a discourse of heresy and orthodoxy, of theological ins and outs. (Protestant) Christianity was ultimately superior in their view—they weren’t fond of Catholics and Jews--, and Gnosticism, “an unstable religious syncretism, a religion in which the determining forces were a fantastic oriental imagination and a sacramentalism which degenerated into the wildest superstitions, a weak dualism fluctuating unsteadily between asceticism and libertinism.” *Sic dixit Wilhelm Bousset* (King 107; Bousset *EB* 12:158; see also Filoramo 11).

Borges absorbed this orthodoxy / heresy-speak, the “heresiological matrix,” as Giovanni Filoramo eruditely puts it, but in an anticipation of more contemporary (postmodern?) perspectives on Gnosticism and Christianity he vehemently “deconstructed” the distinction—to use that overworked word--, coming much closer to current thinking (11). Here are the twenty-first century scholars of Gnosticism: “There seems not yet to be a central body of orthodox doctrine distinguished from heretical doctrine to the right and to the left, but rather a common body of beliefs variously understood and translated or transmitted...To this extent the terms *heresy* and *orthodoxy* are anachronistic” (Karen King quoting James Robinson after Walter Bauer [King 152]). And here is Borges at the close of “Los teólogos,” his dramatic recounting of a fight to the death between two ancient church fathers, set in the heart of the Christian-Gnostic polemic: “Más correcto es decir que en el paraíso, Aureliano supo que para la insondable divinidad, él y Juan de Panonia (el ortodoxo y el hereje, el aborrecedor y el aborrecido, el acusado y la víctima) formaban una sola persona” (*OC* 556).

Borges originally published the story in 1947, in the inter-space between old and new perspectives on Gnosticism.

BORGESIAN FRAGMENTS OF A FAITH FORGOTTEN

I'd like to pursue some Gnostic fragments in Borges a little further, focusing on my proof text, "Una vindicación del falso Basilides," where Borges sets us in the Basilidean world of the *pleroma*, the plenitude of the distant and unknowable Supreme God. From His abode above emanated 365 subordinate heavens, and a plethora of lesser divinities, or demiurges, seven per heaven, more inferior the closer they come to our own world; the Lord of the lowest heaven, who founded the earth and created all of us is the Hebrew God, or Abraxas, leader of the most debased class of angels. Darkness and light coexist in this cosmos: sparks of the ineffable God, darkness of the below. The making of humans was merely a result of darkness's reflection, a simulacrum of the light.

Cast down by Abraxas and his cohorts, humanity needs a redeemer; and so the Supreme God sent his Christ. But this is not the canonical Jesus rather, an illusory body whose phantasm hung on the cross, for the flesh, we must remember, degrades. (Think of the Gospel of Judas and Judas's liberating the bodily Jesus). The true Christ ascended to the Father from which he emanated, restored to the luminosity of the *pleroma*. Those who know the truth of this history and the secret names of the heavenly hosts—possessors of gnosis, in other words--will know themselves free of the lower princes, just like their redeemer (OC 213-14; Harris 143-45).

Borges fills out this account of Basilides's cosmogony with details culled from analogous Gnostic systems, Saturnilus's, Valentinus's, Simon Magus's, most impressed by the tale of a fallen goddess, Achamoth, or Sophia-Wisdom, the female dimension of the divinity, also His virginal Daughter. She is thrown into the evil world of matter and forced to prostitute herself before being redeemed. In the Simonian version, her hapless spirit has transmigrated into Helen of Troy, reduced to servicing sailors in a

brothel in Tyre. A captive soul searching for liberation and return to the Father Helen-Achamoth finds salvation through Simon (a stand-in for Christ).

To scoff at or condemn this "vast mythology," or "melodrama or popular serial-story (*folletín*)" would be easy, Borges wryly comments, but anachronistic or useless; more productive and contemporary would be to try to understand its intentions. One is to resolve the *problem of evil* through the hypothetical insertion of subordinate deities between the hypothetical and inscrutable Most High and the abominable powers that roughly formed us. (Borges beloved and closely related kabbalistic "golem" comes to mind here). The other, less noticed intention is to explain "our central insignificance." "Admirable idea: the world imagined as a process essentially futile, like a sideways, lost glance of old celestial episodes. Creation as a chance act" (OC 215; BR 27).

That insight—our contingency—has tremendous consequences. Had the Gnostics been victors in the heresy / orthodoxy struggle not only would their stories be considered coherent, majestic, and perfectly ordinary (the words that Prof. Meyer quoted), they would underlie our (let us call it Western) world view, molding philosophy, science and the arts. Pronouncements such as Novalis's "life is a sickness of the spirit" or Rimbaud's, "True life is absent; we are not of this world" would be normative. And speculations such as Richter's "discarded one, about the stellar origin of life and its chance dissemination on this planet" would be seriously weighed in the "pious laboratories" (OC 215; BR 27).³

To couch Borges's perception in a twenty-first century vein, had Gnosticism won, there might have been a sea change in the (let us say Christological) *weltanschauung* that still girds many present day debates, for example, on evolution (why argue if

³ Borges is referring to the German physician Hermann E. Richter, who in the late nineteenth century scientifically advocated the theory of panspermia, that life was seeded from outside the earth, specifically from meteorites that had picked up living cells. Richter's ideas—or more contemporary versions of them—have recently been seriously weighed in the "pious laboratories" (see Wickramasinghe and Hoyle).

there is no Intelligence behind the design?) or on anti-Semitism (if Judas the Jew wasn't the bad guy, why persecute his descendants?)

Borges's writing imagines this alternate, Gnostic-driven world, frequently revolving around the sideways fabrication of an ersatz cosmos by decrepit demiurges that misshape the human, and precipitate a fall into malevolent matter. Borges then embeds multiple hints to the Gnostics in the fabulations, the heresiarchs from Iraq and Asia Minor for whom the visible world is an illusion in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the gospel of Basilides in "The Library of Babel," and "Three Versions of Judas," the cosmogonies that tell of the sub-deities that mold an imperfect Adam in "The Circular Ruins." The story's magician comes from the Zend-speaking villages of Iran, home of Gnostics influenced by Zoroastrianism, whose sacred text is the Zend-Avesta (oc 432; 468; 453, 451). In "Emma Zunz," name clues (Emma / Emanuel=The Lord is with us) suggest the fall into evil of Helen-Achamoth, as Emma the daughter plays prostitute in a whore house by the Buenos Aires port to attain justice over the armies of the dark (oc 565-66).⁴

To contain these suppressed stories, Borges considers the possibility of variant or "heretical" gospels, "Three Versions of Judas" and its later retelling, "The Sect of the Thirty," supposedly a Latin translation of a Greek manuscript studied by Hans Leisegang, another (real) German investigator of Gnosticism, as well as "Fragments of an Apocryphal Gospel" and its own retelling, "Another Apocryphal Fragment" (oc 514-18; oc 3: 38-40; oc 1011-12; oc 3: 489).

And then there is the discourse on the discourse, the orthodoxy / heresy battles that damned the Gnostics to the shadows and to monks burrowing away the Gospel of Judas in the desert sands. Borges bounces the past, present and future against each other on the pages of "Los teólogos," when he has the two giant

⁴ I have written on Emma Zunz as a kabbalistic figure in *Books and Bombs*, keeping in mind the close connection between many aspects of the Kabbalah and Gnosticism, in this case the feminine hypostasis of God, or Shekhinah (79-86). See also on the links between the two forms of spirituality, *Borges, el tejedor del Aleph y otros ensayos*, 106-07.

twentieth century scholars of Gnosticism repeat the hostile gestures of their ancient antecedents: "...Aureliano y Juan prosiguieron su batalla secreta (...) Desgraciadamente por los cuatro ángulos de la tierra cundió otra tempestuosa herejía. Oriunda del Egipto o del Asia (porque los testimonios difieren y Bousset no quiere admitir las razones de Harnack) infestó las provincias orientales y erigió santuarios en Macedonia, en Cartago y en Tréveris" (oc 552).

Bousset and Harnack, as Borges notes with a wink, went head to head on the matter of Gnostic origins, Harnack, famously diagnosing Gnosticism as an "acute Hellenization of Christianity," Bousset, sarcastically mimicking his opponent's formula: "If we wish to choose our *termini* following a famous example," Gnosticism is not the acute Hellenization but the "acute Orientalizing" of Christianity (King 54, 95; Jonas xvi). Harnack, in turn, vehemently contested Bousset's approach: the Asiatic was esoteric and mythic, how could Christianity come from such a thing? To Bousset, no less a European supremacist, that was exactly what was fascinating, even if Gnosticism ultimately failed.

Borges, obviously aware of these debates, recognized that "Gnosticism" was the sum of its receptions, its commentators. Harnack and Bousset were supplanted by the also great mid-twentieth century scholar Hans Jonas (whose works, Borges told me in a conversation, he didn't know), and in the twenty-first century by new "slayers" of their predecessors. Karen King's history of the science of Gnosticism narrates the ups and downs of Gnosticism's construction as an object of study, one mode, including her own anti-essentialist, anti-purity, anti-heresy-orthodoxy stance, supplanting, perhaps more accurately, palimpsest-like overwriting another. Latter-day approaches will come as time passes, and to the unfathomable divinity, as Borges concluded in "The Theologians," it won't matter. It will matter and say volumes about us.

BORGES, A MISSING LINK?

To sum up: Basing himself on previous polemicists and investigators, yet unbound by their orthodoxies and sectarian feuds, Borges could imaginatively project a picture of a possible Gnostic cosmos; a picture that appealed to him with its emphasis on contingency, the dilemmas of good and evil, and knowledge as a potential road out.

His ability to fictitiously create this world and to resuscitate even its undiscovered texts, fueled by the fame he garnered—precisely because he could conceive such universes—made him a part of the contemporary discourse on Gnosticism. Eggheads and web-maniacs can now comfortably reference Borges; that Borges hovers on the edge of erudition and imagination, laughingly manipulating both, adds to his respectability. He can be an antecedent to the Gospel of Judas and to the commentary on that gospel; checkmate to professors and fable makers alike.

But that isn't all. I'd like to end with the half-jovial, half poker-faced tone with which I began, and to propose Borges as the missing link between the old and new approaches to Gnosticism, an idea I've already floated throughout. A mid-twentieth century writer on the edge of kaleidoscopic geographies, empires, cultures, traditions, religions, languages, literatures, genres, world-historical events—he was an Argentine through and through—Borges could take what his German informants gave him and reproduce it; but at the same time, with the irreverent chutzpah of the periphery, he could poke holes in their legacy, looking ahead to our days. In the 1930s and 40s when Borges wrote "Three Versions of Judas" and most of the other Gnostic-tinged tales, when worlds were dying and fragmentarily coming into being, with evil stalking about, Borges lifted the shards of one discourse, sometimes with its problems --Orientalism comes to mind--to insinuate another.

The discourse (and world) he insinuated looks much like what we read about Gnosticism (and our world) today: orthodoxy, purity, anteriority, uniformity, othering, Euro-centrism no longer work; plurality, multiplicity, many forking paths in time and space hopefully do (see King 186, 24-241, for example).

I like the way another blog puts it in a nutshell: "The extent to which Borges deals with Gnostic themes is impressive... It's all here: demiurges, wisdom, divine sparks, myth and archetypes, creation dreams. Jorge Luis Borges is the man" ("The Gnostic Borges").

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