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THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS AS CONFICTIO
(IRENAEUS, ADV. HAER. I, 31, 1)

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The first testimony we have to the newly discovered Gospel of Judas is in Irenaeus, Adv. haer. I, 31, 1. Here it is said that certain Gnostics adduce a confictio which they call ‘the Gospel of Judas’. The question is: what does the noun confictio mean here?

Up to now the word has been translated into English as ‘a fictitious history’, ‘a fabrication’, ‘a fabricated work’, ‘a fabricated book’. The suggestion in all of these translations is that the Gospel of Judas is considered to be ‘a fiction’. One may dispute this opinion, however.

According to TLL,8 confictio has a negative meaning indeed: dolosa excogitatio. But apart of this first (mentioned) meaning it also denotes formatio. The positive meaning of this last word is illustrated by a quote from the Collectio Avellena: qui ... plasmatus est et confitionem (Gr. σύστασιν) in muli bribery acceptum ventre. Moreover, it is also indicated that the noun is derived from confingere and that its equivalent according to glossaria is σύνθεσις, σύμπλασις. For the correct understanding of confictio in the Latin Irenaeus we deem this information to be of vital importance.

As regards confingere, TLL10 starts by indicating that the verb is composed of con and fingere. Its first and, so it appears on the basis of its many testimonies, preponderant meaning is: fingendo efficere comminisci. Its second and, in view of the considerable number of testimonies, also well-attested meaning is componere, conficere. Among the testimonies of the second category one reads, for instance, one example from Varro belonging to the discipline of linguistics11 and some from Pliny ‘the Elder’ belonging to natural history.12 It is this second but at the same time most literal, elementary and hence basic meaning which, according to my opinion, the person who once13 translated Irenaeus original Greek into Latin had especially in view.

Evidence to support this claim is primarily found in Epiphanius. In his report on the Gospel of Judas and the Gnostics who adduce (φέρειν) it, he terms it a συνταγμάτων.14 This seems to indicate a (small) work that has been put together from several components. From the Latin translation of Irenaeus’ testimony, it is true, one cannot deduce that the writing we are dealing with was small; the suggestion brought about by the word confictio is supported by Epiphanius’ συν-ταγμάτων, however. It is fairly possible that
Irenaeus in his original Greek text used this word. It might also be possible that he termed the work a σύνταγμα or σύνθεσις. Be that as it may, one thing seems to be evident: both Irenaeus and, in his wake, Epiphanius hand down the information that the Gospel of Judas was a composition in the original sense of the word, i.e. a work put together from several (in all likelihood: Gnostic) traditions.

As a matter of fact the word confictio, like its suggested equivalent σύνταγμα, has the negative connotation of ‘feigned’ or ‘fabricated’. But this connotation is not inherent to the meaning of σύνταγμα/συνταγμάτιον (or σύνθεσις, for that matter). By opting for an ambiguous word such as confictio in order to indicate the peculiar work the Gospel of Judas according to Irenaeus’ description was, the Latin translator made an appropriate choice. His readers are endangered, however, to overlook the original meaning of the word and, in this way, to miss a cardinal characteristic Irenaeus intended to transmit. From the course of Irenaeus’ exposition in Adv. haer. it is clear that in I, 31 he is dealing with a group of Gnostics (later on, for instance by Epiphanius and Theodoretus, they are termed ‘Cainites’) whose teachings are based upon doctrines several of which we also find in other Gnostic groups.

A glance at the original meaning of confictio we finally get from Theodoretus of Cyrhrus. In his Haereticorum fabularum compendium I, 15 he hands down an abstract from Irenaeus’ original Greek passage on the Gospel of Judas and their Gnostics. As regards the Gospel, he emphatically communicates:

δέπορ ἐκεῖνοι συντεθέκασιν. The stress in this phrase, it should be observed, is on ἐκεῖνοι: Theodoretus is explaining to his readers that Judas did not write the Gospel named after him, but that it originated from others. In the choice of the verb συντέθηκα, however, we may hear an echo of Irenaeus’ original Greek noun which his Latin translator transmitted as confictio.

Our concluding remarks may be brief. Already from Irenaeus’ testimony it may be derived that the Gospel of Judas was a composite, the word confictio at the same time bearing the negative connotation of something put together. But Irenaeus (and the same goes, in his wake, for Epiphanius and Theodoretus) does not term it a mere fabrication or fiction. From the recently discovered Gospel of Judas we learn that the information provided by Irenaeus is correct. The Gospel of Judas is a work composed of several Gnostic (mainly ‘Sethian’) and also other traditions.

NOTES

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10 *TLL* IV (n. 8), 213–214.


13 There is some discussion in regard to the date of the (unknown) person(s): see Doutreleau’s remarks in the various volumes of the edition of Irenaeus’ *Adv. haer.* in the Sources chrétiennes and, in particular, Sven Lundström, *Studien zur lateinischen Irenäusübersetzung*, Lund: Gleerup 1943 and idem, *Neue Studien zur lateinischen Irenäusübersetzung*, Lund: Gleerup 1948.


17 For σύνταγμα, see for instance Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1724 (e.g. ‘that which is put together in order’ and ‘treatise, work, book’); for σύνταγμάτιον, see for instance G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961 (repr. 1972), 1338: ‘dimin. of σύνταγμα, little treatise, little work’ (in regard to σύνταγμα in patristic sources, Lampe can confine himself to the just quoted meanings as found in Liddell & Scott); for σύνθεσις, see Liddell & Scott, 1716 (e.g. ‘putting together, composition, combination’) or Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 1328-1329 (idem from a great variety of ‘patristic’ sources).


19 See e.g. Scopello (ed.), *Gospel of Judas in Context* (n. 1). The major part of the essays included in this volume refer to ‘Sethian’ elements, some (e.g. J.-D. Dubois, ‘L’ Évangile de Judas et la tradition basilidienne’, 145–154) to ‘Basilidean’ elements, others to the apparent ‘Biblical’ traditions. As it is generally assumed (and becomes evident at first reading), the main contents of the Gospel of Judas as we now have it in a Coptic version consists of ‘(pseudo-) historical’ information on the one hand and highly interesting Gnostic (mainly ‘mythical’) information on the other.