

**ETYMOLOGY OF THE NICKNAME 'ISKARIŌT(H):**  
the “One Who Saw a Sign” [(‘i)sqar(i)ʾōt̄/yisqar(i)ʾōt̄] or the “One Who  
Slandered/Betrayed a Sign” [(‘i)šqar(i)ʾōt̄/yišqar(i)ʾōt̄]?

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ABSTRACT. The article derives Judas’s nickname *ʾIskariŏt(h)* from the Hebrew/Aramaic verb *sāqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar*, and the noun *ʾōt̄/ʾōt̄* (widely used in Biblical Hebrew and attested in the Talmud [=Aramaic *tʾtʾ*]), and interprets it as the “one who saw/gaze upon a sign” (cf., e.g., *John* 2:23, 4:48, 6:2,14,30 mentioning those who «saw signs» and came to be Jesus’s followers; the verbs *theōréō* and *ʾorāō* used in these passages correlate with the verb *sāqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar*, “to look (at), gaze, see”, and the noun *sēmeiōn* (pl. *sēmeia*) correlates with the term *ʾōt̄/ʾōt̄*, “sign”). The *ex hypothesi* “positive” character of Judas’s nickname possibly explains the evangelists’ renunciation of its interpretation. As an alternative etymology of Judas’s nickname *ʾIskariŏt(h)*, one can derive it from the Hebrew/Aramaic verb *šāqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar* (“to lie, deceive, slander”, *sc.* “to violate (a treaty, etc.)”, “to betray” [the latter meaning is attested in Samaritan Aramaic]) and the same noun *ʾōt̄/ʾōt̄*: the “one who slandered/*resp.* betrayed a sign”, *i.e.* the one who brought false evidence against Jesus (cf.: *Matt.* 26:59 ff.; *Mk.* 14:55 ff.). In *Jn.* 6:70, Jesus himself defines Judas with the term *diábolos*; this word can be interpreted as “slanderer”, “accuser”.

KEYWORDS: The Gospels; etymology of Judas’s nickname *Iskariot(h)*.

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Unlike some other Hebrew and Aramaic phrases and designations (including some of the apostles’ nicknames), rendered in Greek transliterations in the New Testament, the nickname of the betrayer Judas — *Iskariot(h)* — has been left without any interpretation in all four Gospels. Possibly it was done by the evangelists deliberately, for the nickname *Iskariot(h)* could arise before Judas’s betrayal — yet before “Satan entered into Judas” (*Lk.* 22:3; *Jn.* 13:2,26–27; cf.: *Matt.* 27:3–5) — and therefore not necessary bear negative character. On the other hand, the figure of Judas must evoke none other than negative associations from the very beginning. (Probably we meet with the same approach in the case of the high priest Joseph named *Caiaphas* in the Gospels without any further interpretation of this designation.<sup>1</sup>) Judging by *Jn.* 6:71, 13:2,26, Judas’s nickname was patrimonial: Ἰουδᾶς

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<sup>1</sup> In connection with this nickname see, e.g.: Cotton et al. 2010, 481–487; Zissu–Goren 2011, 74–95; Rollston 2012, 233–243.

Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου<sup>2</sup>, “Judas, (son) of Simon Iskariot”. In any case, in the Gospels this nickname was applied to Judas before his betrayal, and thus its content could be neutral or even positive. The designation *Iskariot(h)* is attested in two forms: Ἰσκαριώθ and (ὁ) Ἰσκαριώτης<sup>3</sup> (νν. *Il.*: Σκαριώθ, Σκαριώτης<sup>4</sup>, *resp.* Peshitta: s<sup>e</sup>kar-youta’). As was noted by J. E. Taylor, “Judas was designated by a Hebrew or Aramaic name transliterated as Ἰσκαριώθ and rendered in Greek form as Ἰσκαριώτης”, but “the manuscripts show more of a tendency to standardize the epithet in Greek form rather than to retrieve or preserve the Hebrew or Aramaic form”.<sup>5</sup> In the main manuscripts of the earliest Gospel — According to Mark — only the spelling Ἰσκαριώθ is attested (3:19, 14:10; also: *Lk.* 6:16).

The present paper derives Judas’s nickname *Iskarioth* (Ἰσκαριώθ) from the Hebrew/Aramaic verb סָקַר, s̄āqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar<sup>6</sup>, “to look (at)”, “to gaze”, “to see”,<sup>8</sup> and the noun סֵמֶן, s̄ēn/s<sup>e</sup>n, “sign”, widely used in Biblical Hebrew and attested in the Talmud<sup>9</sup> (=Aramaic סֵמָא, סֵמָא): סָקַר אֶרֶץ, s̄āqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar s̄ēn, *resp.* סֵמָא (י)סָקַר (א), (i)sqar(i)s̄ēn, *i.e.* the “one who saw/gaze upon a sign”<sup>10, 11</sup>. This could be one of those signs (σημεῖα<sup>12</sup>), about which it was written or “not written” (cf.: *Jn.* 20:30) in the Gospels. A sign (especially, in heaven) was one of the most important confirmations of a prophet or a soterological, Messianic figure mission verity for the Jews at that time (see, *e.g.*: *Matt.* 16:1, 24:24–26,30; *Mk.* 13:21–22; *Lk.* 11:16, 21:11,25; *Acts* 2:19; *Rev.* 12; cf., *e.g.*: *Josephus Flavius*, *Jewish Antiquities*, II, 259; *ibid.*, 261 ff. and *Acts* 21:38).

John (*e.g.*: 2:23, 4:48, 6:2,14,30; cf. also: 6:26)<sup>13</sup> mentions those who «saw signs» (ἐθεώρουν τὰ σημεῖα; 6:2) and came to be Jesus’s followers. The verbs θεωρέω and ὀράω used in these passages correlate with the verb סָקַר, s̄āqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar, “to look (at, on), gaze, see, watch”, and the noun σημεῖον (*pl.* σημεῖα) correlates with the word סֵמֶן, s̄ēn/s<sup>e</sup>n, “sign”. One can assume that Judas was possibly the one who “saw” a special “sign”, “believed” in Jesus as Christ, and hereupon came to be his disciple and got the nickname “Iskarioth”, *i.e.* the “one who (proclaimed that he) saw a sign”. The hypothetical usage of just the verb סָקַר, s̄āqar/s<sup>e</sup>qar in this designa-

<sup>2</sup> In some manuscripts (K, Δ, Π, f1, and others) *Jn.* 6:71 reads Ἰσκαριώτην instead of Ἰσκαριώτου.

<sup>3</sup> The spelling with definite article (ὁ Ἰσκαριώτης) is attested in *Matt.* 10:4; *Jn.* 12:4, 14:22. The spelling ὁ Ἰσκαριώθ in *Mk.* 14:10, attested in some manuscripts (κ<sup>c</sup>, L, Θ, Ψ, 565, 892), should probably be considered as a secondary one.

<sup>4</sup> The Bezae manuscript (D; V cent.).

<sup>5</sup> Taylor 2010, 368.

<sup>6</sup> *Bibl.*: סָקַר (attested in *pi’el*).

<sup>7</sup> Attested already in *Targ. Job* 20:9, 28:7.

<sup>8</sup> Yastrow 1926, 1021; Sokoloff 2002, 388.

<sup>9</sup> Yastrow 1926, 36.

<sup>10</sup> See also: Tantlevskij 2011, 163, n. 259.

<sup>11</sup> In connection with the spelling Ἰσκαριώτης let us note that “Greek could transliterate Hebrew and Aramaic (soft) *tau* with a *teth*. Gennesareth (cf. Hebrew כנרת) in the Gospels is rendered with a final Greek *tau* rather than a *theta* for Hebrew *taw*: Γεννησαρέτ (*Matt* 14:34; *Mark* 6:53; *Luke* 5:1), and by Eusebius in declinable form: πρὸς τὴν Γεννησαρίτιδι λίμνῃ (*Onom.* 58.11) and τὴν Γεννησαρίτην λίμνην (*Onom.* 120.28)”. (Taylor 2010, 381).

<sup>12</sup> This term is often used in the meaning “miracles” in the New Testament.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., *e.g.*: *Lk.* 19:37.

tion possibly implies the heavenly character of the sign; *NB*: the noun סָקוֹר, *sāqôr*, “astronomer”<sup>14</sup>, attested in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, is derived from this very verb. For instance, Judas’s vision of a sign could be like that described in the apocryphal Gospel of Judas<sup>15</sup> (Iskariot): “ ‘Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star.’ Judas lifted up his eyes and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. Those standing on the ground heard a voice coming from the cloud...”. As was noted above, the *ex hypothesi* “positive” character of Judas’s nickname could explain the evangelists’ renunciation of its interpretation (and possibly that is why John carries it over Judas’s farther, Simon).

The addition of a prosthetic *aleph* (this phenomenon was not uncommon in Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew) to a stem can be explained by the inordinate length of the compound word; this gave rise to elision of the vowel farthest from the accent, thereby “creating a clash of syllables which necessitated its addition”.<sup>16</sup> Let us also point out that in the Hebrew and Aramaic names and designations, composed from two words, a paragogic *yod* could be used for their combination in the united term; in particular, this phenomenon took place in the names of some leaders of the fallen angels in the Qumran Aramaic fragments of the Book of Watchers (=1 Enoch 1–36), dated paleographically to the II–I centuries BCE (*4QEn<sup>a-c</sup> ar*), e.g.: שְׁהַרְיָאֵל, *Šaharî’el*, “Moon of God”; טוֹרְיָאֵל, *Tûrî’el*, “Mountain of God”; יוֹמִיָאֵל, *Yomî’el*, “Day of God” (var.: *Yammî’el*, “Sea of God”); שְׁמִיחָזָה, *Šemîḥazah*, “The Name saw” or the “One who saw The Name”; דְּנִיָאֵל, *Dani’el*, “God has judged” or “Judge (from) God” (in *Ezek.* 14:14,20, 28:3, the spelling without a *yod* is attested — דְּנָאֵל<sup>17</sup>; יְהִדִיָאֵל, *Y’hadî’el*, “God will guide”, and others. The spelling of one of the fallen angels name *Zêq(i)’el*, “Lightning flash of God” or “Shooting star (from) God”, is attested both with a conjunctive *yod* — זִיקִיָאֵל and without it — זִיקָאֵל. In Greek transliterations of the fallen angels names a conjunctive *yod* is rendered by a *yota* (e.g.: טוֹרְיָאֵל — Τυρτηήλ/Τουρτηήλ); in some cases a conjunctive *yod*, missing in Hebrew-Aramaic names, is reproduced in Greek and Ethiopic renderings of these designations (e.g.: רַעַמְאֵל — Ραμυήλ, *Râmi’el*, “Thunder of God”; and others).<sup>18</sup>

Let us also note that in the Washington Codex of the Four Gospels (V century), in *Mk.* 3:19, the spelling of Judas’s nickname without a *yota* is attested: Ἰσκαρώτης.

If the imperfect form of the verb<sup>19</sup> was used in Judas’s nickname — יִסְקַר, *yisqar* (cf., e.g., the Masoretic vocalizations of the Biblical Aramaic verbs in *pe’al*, imperfect 3 m. sg.: יִסְבֵּר (*Dan.* 7:25); יִשְׁלַט (*Dan.* 5:7); יִשְׁפֵּר (*Dan.* 4:24)), then the reconstruction of an initial prosthetic *aleph* is unnecessary at all, for the Hebrew/Aramaic -יס, *yis-* can be rendered in Greek as *ισ-* (cf., e.g.: יִשְׂרָאֵל, *yisrā’el* — Ἰσραήλ). Thus, the designation יִסְקַר(י)אֵוֹת can be precisely transliterated by the Greek letters as Ἰσκαρ(ι)ώθ, *i.e.* *Iskar(i)oth*.

<sup>14</sup> Sokoloff 2002, 387.

<sup>15</sup> On this composition see, e.g.: Kasser et al. 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Cf.: Taylor 2010, 377.

<sup>17</sup> According to *Jub.* 4:20, Enoch was married to Daniel’s daughter. The Ugaritic epos contains a cycle of legends about Daniel.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. a comparison table of the fallen angels names in the Book of Watchers in: Dacy 2011, 31–37.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., e.g.: *Jn.* 6:2.

Co-existence of Aramaic and the Hebrew vernacular in Judea at the beginning of the Christian era allows one to admit a “mixed” Aramean-Hebrew character of certain designations, phrases, passages, etc. (especially those of the religious content) at that period (cf., e.g.: *Ps.* 22:2 and *Mk.* 15:34, *Matt.* 27:46; a variation of *κουμ/κουμι* in different manuscripts in *Mk.* 5:41), including possibly the nickname “Iskariot(h)”.

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On the other hand, if the nickname *Iskarioth* bore a negative content, then it could be derived from the Hebrew/Aramaic verb *שָׁקַר*, *šāqar/š̄qar* (“to lie, deceive, slander”, sc. “to violate (a treaty, etc.)”, “to betray” [the latter meaning is attested in Samaritan Aramaic<sup>20</sup>]) and the same noun *נִקְרָא, ’ōṭ’ōt*: *Iskarioth* is the “one who slandered/resp. betrayed a sign”,<sup>21</sup> i.e. the one who could bring false evidence against Jesus (cf.: *Matt.* 26:59 ff.; *Mk.* 14:55 ff.). In *Jn.* 6:70, Jesus himself defines Judas with the term *διάβολος*; this word can be interpreted as “slanderer”, “accuser”.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tal 2000, 929.

<sup>21</sup> See also: Tantlevskij 2011, *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the figure of “the Man of Lies” (’iš ha-kkāzāb) who seems to have slandered and betrayed the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness. (Cf., e.g.: Tantlevskij 2011, 129–131.)