

Leviticus 16:5-10  
Matthew 26:20-25; 27:1-10  
Text: Matthew 26:

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## THE SCAPEGOAT DISCIPLE

At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. *Matthew 26:49-50*

With the announcement of the restoration of much of the manuscript of the ancient "Gospel of Judas," and its recent translation, the news of this important event seems to invite at least a reconsideration of the role of Judas in the events leading to Jesus arrest. So I thought to address this today, resurrecting notes and conclusions from some research on the role of Judas that I did in 1979.

His name was Judas—Judas called "Iscariot." It was once a proud name, an honored name, a name born of the people of God, and of a land. Judas—it was the name of a great hero of the past, Judas Maccabeus who drove the imperial soldiers from the land and restored the temple to the people. Judas was even the name of one of our Lord's own brothers. Judas! Yet how quickly all those proud associations changed. Who among us or our ancestors ever named a son by that once great name? Jude, perhaps, but Judas? The name has come to stand for treachery and deceit. They call the animal a Judas goat that leads unwitting sheep into the slaughterhouse. There is the Judas tree with its lush, appealing fruit that offers only a bitter and unpalatable taste. A Judas slit is a peephole in the door of a cell that the guard uncovers to spy upon a prisoner. To call someone by that name is a terrible reproach, a condemnation.

Judas is a name to make one squirm, synonymous with "betrayed." Yet when we speak honestly of betrayal the ranks of those who have called themselves Christ's followers, yet still betrayed him, are thick and deep indeed. And who among us can claim exemption.

We are not here today to deny Judas' complicity in betrayal, but to look for a less biased truth than has longed been claimed by a traditionally defensive orthodox church. There is much to read between the lines, much, even, to be spoken in Judas' defense, much that history hasn't been eager to hear, especially until now with a climate of suspicion about much institutional religion that opens the door to other opinions and sources. Who, after all, hasn't sought to gild their own character by diminishing another's? Scapegoats are convenient beasts of burden for sins we do not gladly bear ourselves. That, you may recall, was the function of the "scapegoat" in our Leviticus text, a record of the sins of the people being strapped to a goat that was then sent off into the wilderness to die, and thereby the sin and its punishment died vicariously with it.

He was born *Yudas ben Shimon*; in English, "Judah son of Simon." In all probability his parents raised him in a city in Judah, for which he was named, for *keriotha* often means "city," even "*the city*" of Jerusalem. There was also a town called Kerioth thirty-five miles south of Jerusalem in the southern territory of Judea.

These were bitter times under harsh Roman rule and, by extension, under different imperial powers for 600 years with hardly a break. Jews were weary and angry at being prisoners in their own land. A Jewish boy grew up with the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and Judas need be no exception. He would know all about Moses and his successor the war-like Joshua, and the almost mythical King David. In the popular imagination, *these* were

truly great leaders, but nobody of their stature had been around in Israel for 150 years, not since his glorious namesake, Judas Maccabeus. Now there was a leader! As a child Judas Iscariot would hear the rabbis and the elders talking in whispered tones with venerable longing for the coming Messiah, God's "anointed one." Sometimes it was all the elders seemed to talk about, when the Romans or their spies weren't listening. And when the boys played, shooting bow and arrow at benign targets, and scrambling up the limestone bluffs around the town, it was into the mind's image of Judas Maccabeus, the great one, that they materialized. Everyone wanted to see *meshiah*, "the Messiah" or, in the Greek which almost everyone spoke in Galilee, "the Christ." The two words mean the same thing. And because the greatest leaders of the past had been military heavyweights, people with power, canniness, and great personal magnetism, someone to give the Romans a taste of their own bitter medicine and drive them finally out of Israel—that's what most people looked for in the Messiah. Most of all they knew he would be someone, well—different! Some groups couldn't wait for the Messiah. There were the Sicari who would ambush Roman soldiers in dark alleys and leave them with their trademark as a gift—a curved and lethal knife in their backs. These were the "freedom fighters" of Israel. Then there were the Zealots, guerillas who'd stream down out of the hills without warning and catch a Roman garrison off guard, then disappear into the limestone caves that riddles the hills, just as quickly. Simon, not Simon Peter but another one of the twelve, was a Zealot from Galilee. In fact, Galilee seemed to be the ideal place for the Messiah to muster his troops when the time came. And the hour was certainly ripe.

Then the word started to get out of an extraordinary new prophet in Galilee, about three day's walk from Judea. It would not be hard to find him in a land no bigger than New Jersey. The first time people saw Jesus it was different than most had imagined. He was not a militant figure but clearly one who waged a doctrine of peace. There was a presence about him that was intensely human, as though completing everything that was missing in ourselves. Jesus would look at a potential disciple, and in a flash he or she felt completely known. There were a lot of followers. It wasn't until some time into his ministry that he chose twelve as his inner circle of the most trusted, after the number of tribes in ancient Israel. Judas was chosen as one of the twelve.

There are indications that Judas may have felt on the fringe of things. As a Judean from the deep south, Judas was almost certainly an outsider. All the other eleven apostles appear to be from Galilee in the north. Judas isn't mentioned in the gospels as one of the select group of three or four intimates, but then the gospels were written 40-60 years after Jesus, and they are much colored by the traditions of two to three generations of the church. Intriguingly, of the 27 New Testament books, 22 never even mention Judas or link him to Jesus as a specific betrayer from the twelve. Most noticeably, there is no reference whatsoever to Judas even by name among the ten letters of Paul, written nearest to the events and long before the earliest gospel. Paul's letters are the earliest extant Christian writings of any sort (A.D. 45 – 65).

John, who may have been especially hard to get close to, has the most condemning things to say about Judas in his Gospel, easily the last one to be written (about A.D. 95). Like his brother James, John had the reputation of a real temper, "sons of thunder" Jesus called them. John was also the most different gospel, the most mystical and metaphysical. John came to hate Judas with a passion, but how early and why we cannot tell. He accuses him of stealing from the disciples purse that he kept as treasurer of the group of apostles, not that they likely ever had that much.

It was intensely difficult to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Disciples had to leave family, friends, and hometowns. They faced poverty, rejection, and hostile authorities. Also, Jesus

teachings were radically different and hard, often in parables, deeply paradoxical, sometimes impossible to grasp. Many disciples simply left when Jesus talked about how they would eat his body and drink his blood (John 6:66). The people wanted a king, but Jesus rejected kingship. He insisted time and again, after performing a miracle, that onlookers were not to tell anyone what they had seen. How could he be the Messiah and yet be so reluctant to let the people honor him or spread the word about him. No one is likely to have stayed with Jesus for three years, as all twelve apostles did, given the conditions that were demanded of them, unless they were incredibly committed to him: living from hand to mouth; sleeping in the open; in fear of the gathering hatred and plots of the authorities, not to mention the Romans. Time and again the Gospels reflect the struggle that all the apostles had with Jesus' teachings and methods. Almost everyone misunderstood the way he chose to be "Messiah." James and John almost came to blows, and Peter threatened to kill anyone who laid a hand on Jesus. All deserted him at the crucifixion. Even John, when he tells of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, tells it hand in glove with Peter's betrayal, as though they are equally culpable.

In fairness to them all, they were in a strange and alien territory with Jesus, struggling to understand the fullness of who he was, at least before the resurrection. In those early days there was no church; there were no gospels. Is it any wonder that, like Peter, some reacted violently when Jesus told them that he would surrender himself to the authorities and be killed? Some swore they would die with him at the end. None did. Well, one did—Judas, I suspect from a broken heart.

It all came to a head in Jerusalem. Something terrible was bound to happen in the Holy City seething with humanity at Passover. The day he came into the city the people went wild with excitement, you'd think King David had returned from the dead. The Romans were as nervous and suspicious as cats on a porch full of rocking chairs. The religious authorities lurked like jackals, trying to trick Jesus, sending one posse after another into the temple, where he preached, to bring him down. Then Jesus started telling the apostles that these were his final hours before he was to be glorified. Some disciples must have seen this moment as the threshold of the kingdom, a perfect moment for the final confrontation and demonstration of Jesus in the full power of God, a power they had witnessed first hand repeatedly, but which, they must have thought, he never used to assert his rightful place.

In the upper room Judas was close enough to Jesus to hear him say, almost in an aside, that his betrayer was the one who dipped their bread in the cup with him—which of course they all did. It was a position of honor to be so close. In an instant the statement was passed through the gathering and one by one they protested, "Surely not I, Lord?" Matthew says that when Judas asked, Jesus said, "You have said so." John then records that Jesus said to Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Did this harbor a sense of something understood privately between them? The rest of the disciples were clearly confused by it, but knowing that Judas had the purse they may have assumed that Jesus was sending him off on some errand, as if specially credentialed.

Did Judas see this as an opportunity to force the situation to a climax, a situation Jesus wanted—as the Gospel of Judas suggests? Was Judas the pawn to bring Jesus and the authorities to a confrontation that Jesus knew must, of necessity, come? Every prior confrontation had left the religious leaders retreating with their tails between their legs. So off Judas went to the High Priest, with whom he had spoken earlier. Had they contacted him? Had they singled him out, anticipating that a Judean would be more receptive (Jerusalem is in Judea, in southern Israel)? But Judas did not ask them for money; Luke recalls that was their idea. It could be an enticing

appeal to the keeper of the disciples' purse to ease their financial burden. Then, when Judas led the priests and temple soldiers to the fateful garden, it seems as if Jesus had planned it this way; he was just standing there, as if waiting for them. And Judas did not give what we think of as a traitor's *kiss*, an awkward, embarrassed furtive embrace. The English does not carry the force of the Greek: it was vigorous, passionate embrace, as though Judas' heart was about to explode with volcanic emotion. This was *still* his Lord! Jesus even says to him as Judas approaches in the garden, "Friend, do what you are about to do." Mark, the earliest gospel, remembers that Judas begged the soldiers to take him gently.

What makes so much of the evidentiary material so ambiguous is that, in John's Gospel, for instance, hardly a phrase goes by that is not laced with verbal or dramatic irony. A good example is the High Priest Caiaphas speaking to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish parliament on the eve of Jesus' arrest, saying, "Do you not understand that it is better that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should perish."

Next, everything goes wrong. The authorities close in to assert their power base. The disciples scatter like leaves in a storm. The High Priest rams Jesus through a mockery of a trial and passes him off to Pilate. It is obvious that Jesus is going to die and, according to the gospel accounts, Judas has created the moment. So he takes the thirty pieces of silver that he'd been given, and hurls the blood money back in their faces, shouting, "I have sinned! I have betrayed innocent blood!" Does this sound like the action of a malicious betrayer, or a man beside himself with grief and guilt and despair—a man remorseful enough to take the ultimate punishment upon himself. Judas goes out and kills himself.

The rest is history. He would never see and be redeemed by the fruits of the resurrection, the forgiveness of Christ that Peter and the others came to know first hand from the risen Lord; Peter who cursed and swore in Jesus' moment of deepest need, while on trial, that he did not know our Lord.

These, I suggest, were not the actions of a calculating traitor. Nor, I suspect, would the evidence as we have it convict him of single-minded betrayal today by a jury of his peers? If we would find the lesson in this tragedy of Judas' story, let it be our learning that Judas was not *the* traitor but a representative of all of us. His story is our story. Who knows what reception God gave to the deeply contrite and repentant Judas, a name that rings with the history of a fallen people whom God continually raises up.

Amen