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His Friend Judas: Why Didn't He Betray His Messiah?

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Chapter Six

His Friend Judas

Why Didn't He Betray His Messiah?

IN THE FIRST FIVE chapters we examined the many Jewish contexts of Jesus—childhood and family life, immersion ritual, prophets, miracle workers, and messiahs. We also attempted to situate Jesus within these contexts, at least according to how he was understood by the earliest Christians, especially the authors of the Gospels. The primary conclusion from this survey is that Jesus was Jewish. Many Christians pay lip service to the fact that Jesus was Jewish, which to them means that he was Jewish at a distance. Too often, Christians interpret Jesus as coming to make the Mosaic law obsolete, condemn Jewish leaders (as evidenced in his conspicuous display of righteous indignation toward them), and institute a system totally foreign to Jews. However, as we have seen, Jesus' relationship with Judaism is a bit more complex than the Christian world has understood it. It appears that, according to the authors of the Gospels, Jesus loved the Hebrew Scriptures. His life paralleled the many great Israelite prophets and leaders like Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Elisha. Many of Jesus' deeds and sayings were strikingly similar to the rabbis, both his contemporaries and those subsequent.

A question that Christians might ask is, if Jesus was so entrenched within and embrative of Judaism, then why did he condemn Jewish leaders and why was he ultimately rejected and killed by his fellow Jews? In this and the next four chapters (chapters 6–10) we will challenge the assumptions of that very question and illustrate that “the Jews” did not reject and kill Jesus, and that Jesus did not reject and condemn “the Jews.” We will explore the relationship between Jesus and his peers. We start in this chapter by looking at

Judas, whose story is perhaps Exhibit A that illustrates the Christian charge that “Jews killed Jesus.” Judas serves as a representation of Jews according to later Christians. However, before turning our attention to Judas, it behooves us to grasp the extent of the “Christ killer” accusation hurled at Jews by Christians from late antiquity to the present day. After reviewing this heart-wrenching material, we can then proceed by asking ourselves, “did Jews really kill Jesus?” and “was Christian persecution of Jews warranted?”

Christian Persecution of “Christ-Killing Jews”

The New Testament is one of the most—if not *the* most—foundational texts in the history of western civilization regarding religion and spirituality; however, it is also foundational in the most extensive and tragic bloodbath in recorded history. The very corpus that stresses love, forgiving enemies, and turning the other cheek (i.e., not retaliating) is the same corpus that led to the unjustified slaughter of millions of Jews, including women and children. Perhaps the most common accusation among Christians from late antiquity to the mid-twentieth century was that Jews were “Christ killers.” The writings of a few well-known early Christian personalities illustrate this theme. Melito (d. 180), bishop in western Anatolia (modern Turkey), labeled Jews as “Christ killers” and blamed all of Israel for the death of God, as he put it.¹ Prominent early Christian theologian Origen (d. 254) said of the Jews:

I challenge anyone to prove my statement untrue if I say that the entire Jewish nation was destroyed . . . on account of these sufferings which they inflicted on Jesus . . . For they committed the most impious crime of all, when they conspired against the Savior of mankind.²

Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) referred to Jews as “Christ-killers,”³ claiming that the synagogue “is not simply a gathering place for thieves and hucksters, but also of demons; indeed, not only the synagogues, but the souls of the Jews are also the dwelling places of demons.”⁴ Saint Augustine (d. 430), the well-known early Christian theologian, wrote that Jews not only killed Jesus, but they were happy to do it as they shouted “Crucify him!” To intensify the insult, Augustine used the

1. Melito, *On the Pascha*, see explanation and text in Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 56–70.
2. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 198–99.
3. See English translation in Chrysostom, “Patrologia Graeca 48.843–856” (852).
4. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 20.

Jews' own sacred texts purported to be written by David (Psalms 57 and 64) to describe the Jewish people!

[Jews are] lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords . . . [they are] scheming evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless; they shoot suddenly and without fear. They hold fast to their evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly, thinking, "Who can see us? Who can search out our crimes? We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot" . . . but God will shoot his arrow at them; they will be wounded suddenly . . . [and] all who see them will shake with horror (Psalms 57:4, 64:2–8).⁵

Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) believed Jews were "deviant souls" whose ways were equivalent to vomit. He instituted a Sunday commemoration in late summer, during the time when Jews mourn the loss of their temple (ninth of Av); Christians celebrated the destruction of the temple and defeat of the Jews, and they gleefully repeated legends that Jews became slaves to Rome as part of their divine punishment for killing Jesus.⁶

When the Fatimid Muslims under the leadership of Caliph Al-Hakim burned down Christianity's holiest site, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, in 1009, French Christians immediately blamed Jews for convincing Al-Hakim to destroy the church. Rodulfus Glaber, an eleventh-century writer, explained that Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem had increased significantly during this time, which caused the devil to worry. He, therefore, called on his demonic minions, the Jews, to dampen these activities by conspiring with Al-Hakim to destroy the premier pilgrimage site. Christian and Jewish sources confirm that as a result of these accusations, many French Jews were massacred. One year after Al-Hakim burned the church, King Robert of France commanded Jews to either convert to Christianity or die. These persecutions drove numerous Jews to commit suicide.⁷

The destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher led to other tragedies for Jews in Europe. Muslim-Christian relations worsened over the next several decades and animosity toward Muslims increased. By the 1090s, Christian armies were marching to Jerusalem to take back the Holy Land—what is now called the First Crusade. Despite calls by some Christian leaders throughout western Christendom to leave Jews alone while their "Soldiers of Christ" trekked across Europe, Jews were nevertheless targeted.

5. See Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 75.

6. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 22–25.

7. Jestic, "Great Jewish Conspiracy?," 25–42.

These Christ killers would have to pay a price. Many Jews were murdered, forced to convert, or driven to commit suicide. During the Second Crusade (1145–1149), knights harassed and physically assaulted a revered rabbi in Ramerupt, France. They ripped up the community's Torah scroll and then preceded to inflict five wounds to the head of Rabbi Jacob ben Meir, the grandson of Rashi, perhaps one of the top three most recognized rabbis of all time. The five wounds were revenge for the crucifixion where Jesus was wounded five times: nails to two feet, nails to two hands, and a wound in the side (Catholics called these five wounds the "Stigmata of Christ"). Rabbi Meir called out to a passerby to save him. A Christian man intervened and stopped the beating; but he then warned Rabbi Meir that if he did not convert to Christianity, the attackers would be allowed to return. Such incidents were not isolated; many Jews throughout Europe experienced similar treatment.⁸

Pope Innocent III (d. 1216) stated that Jews deserved to be in perpetual servitude to Christians due to their role in Christ's suffering. He also reinstated old practices of forcing Jews to wear a certain style of clothing to be identified easily by the Christian population.⁹ In the twelfth century, some Christian theologians heightened their criticisms of Jews by claiming that Jews were not only inherently evil, they were less than human. Their evidence? Jews must not be fully human because of how dumb they are; they do not seem to understand the obvious proof of Christianity and the error of Judaism. For example, Peter the Venerable, a Benedictine monk, wrote in 1147:

I know not whether a Jew is a man because he does not cede to human reason, nor does he acquiesce to the divine authorities which are his own . . . Why are you not called a brute animal, why not a beast, why not a beast of burden? Consider the cow or, if you prefer, the ass—no beast is more stupid. . . . The ass hears but does not understand; the Jew hears but does not understand.¹⁰

Thirteenth-century friar Raymond Martin, in his work *The Muzzle of the Jews*, demonized Jews and their covenant of circumcision when he wrote:

But do not the Jews, who take the sexual organ of everyone who is circumcised, adult or child, into their most defiled of mouths, mouths with which they blaspheme Christ, and then suck for as long as the blood flows—do they not eat just like the pig who

8. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 135–66.

9. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 50–51.

10. See context and translation in Novikoff, "Middle Ages," 72.

soils his snout with abundant filth? Abraham did not do this.
Moses did not order it. God did not command it.¹¹

The notions of Jews being children of the devil and inherently evil became so commonplace that accusing Jews of atrocious, sickening behavior became easy. Throughout medieval Christian Europe Jews were accused of poisoning Christians. For example, in 1161 in Bohemia (in modern-day Czech Republic), eighty-six Jews were burned to death based on accusations that they had conspired with Jewish physicians to poison the Christian populace.¹² Such accusations were so common that Martin Luther, the most famous of the Reformers who is also known for his intense hatred of Jews,¹³ said in a sermon shortly before his death, “[Jews] are our public enemies . . . If they could kill us all, they would gladly do so, aye, and they often do it, especially those who profess to be physicians. They can give poison to a man of which he will die in an hour, or in ten or twenty years.”¹⁴ Queen Elizabeth I of England was compelled to execute her Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, in 1594 after he was found guilty of plotting to poison her, even though she did not believe the accusation.¹⁵

As Christ killers, Jews were also accused of murdering Christian boys during Easter season as an attempt to reenact Jesus’ crucifixion. Perhaps the most well-known case is William of Norwich, England. After young William’s dead body was found in March 1144, Jews were blamed. Three years later, several Jews of Würzburg, Germany, were murdered after being accused of killing a Christian.¹⁶ In 1235, Christians in Germany murdered thirty Jews, mostly women and children, in a violent protest after Jews were accused of killing two boys. Rumors circulated that they used the boys’ blood for their Passover rituals.¹⁷ In 1255, King Henry III in England imprisoned ninety Jews after hearing rumors that they killed a young Christian boy. He eventually executed eighteen of these Jews when they refused to be tried in an all-Christian court.¹⁸ Accusations of ritual murder spread not only from

11. Martin, *Capistrum Iudaeorum*, 2:286–88, see the translation in Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 91–92.

12. Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 97.

13. Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews*.

14. Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 99.

15. For these and numerous other examples of Jews being accused of attempting to poison Christians, see Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 97–108.

16. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 169–70.

17. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 170, 184–85.

18. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 186–87.

England to Germany, but also to France and Spain.¹⁹ It has been argued that “nearly all the accusations [of ritual murder] arose from the clergy, who profited directly from them; the martyred ‘saint’ and his shrine brought pilgrims and offerings.” In the William of Norwich case, for example, one cleric scrambled to obtain the body in order to profit off the incident.²⁰ As an outgrowth of these rumors, legends developed in various parts of Europe, even until the nineteenth century, that a Jewish bogymen (“*Jüdel*” in Germany, for instance, is a folk representation of the wicked demon Jew), will come snatch kids away if they misbehave.²¹ Given these legends, it would not be surprising if the German-born fairy tale of the nineteenth century, *Rumpelstiltskin*, was meant to represent Jews (i.e., evil extortionists who make immoral bargains that only benefit themselves), especially considering the alleged anti-Semitism of the Grimm brothers.²²

Rumors of ritual murder were coupled with other accusations that Jews engaged in cannibalism—eating the corpses or hearts of their “little Jesuses.”²³ Still other rumors flooded the literature that Jews would steal the communion wafer and desecrate it, recreating the crucifixion of Jesus. Transubstantiation, the idea that the communion wafer and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ, was formally established at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In subsequent years, rumors abounded throughout Western Europe that Jews conspired to obtain the wafer so that they could murder Christ again and again. Jews supposedly would stomp, stab, and burn the wafer. These tales in medieval literature often contained miracles of blood flowing from the wafer and Jews being struck dumb or paralyzed. The first recorded accusation of this host desecration occurred in 1243 in Beelitz, Germany. Christians retaliated based on these rumors and all Jews of the city were burned to death. Many more thousands were killed following similar accusations in, among other places, Germany in 1298, France in the 1330s, and Prague in 1389.²⁴

Libels against Jews not only flooded medieval Christian literature but also art. Christian iconography portrayed Jews both suckling from pigs and eating their excrement with Satan standing by. Jews were depicted as horrific goats standing on their hind legs, and they were given horns and a tail

19. Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 94–102.

20. Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 124–25.

21. Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 125, 243 n. 5.

22. Martin, “Jew in the Thorn Bush,” 123–39.

23. Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations*, 188; see discussions about cannibalism as an outgrowth of ritual murder rumors in Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 109–17.

24. For the context and many more examples see Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 103–9; Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 109–23, 140–55.

as a representation of demons. They were also shown attending Satan while wearing the “Jew badge.”²⁵ Michelangelo’s famous statue of the horned Moses—displayed in the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome—has been attributed to the perpetuation of Saint Jerome’s mistranslation of Exodus 34, where he inadvertently changed Moses’ “shining skin of his face” when he descended Mount Sinai (Exod 34:35) to the “horns of his face.” The more likely interpretation, however, is that Michelangelo’s statue was meant to perpetuate the notion of Jewish evil that was common in medieval and early modern Europe.²⁶

Centuries of Jewish persecution culminated in the atrocities of the Holocaust. Perhaps when many of us think of Nazi Germany, we tend to associate their hatred for Jews due to race, views that they were deceitful money-grubbers, or perceptions of them as minorities unwilling to fully embrace the local customs. Alongside these attacks in Nazi propaganda were accusations that Jews were Christ killers. Susannah Heschel, prominent Jewish Studies scholar at Dartmouth, has shown that the popular Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life attempted to purify Christianity of Judaism—to eradicate all Jewish elements from the German Church and to transform Jesus from a Jew into an Aryan, a white European:

In the six years of its existence, as the Nazi regime carried out its genocide of the Jews, the Institute redefined Christianity as a Germanic religion whose founder, Jesus, was no Jew but rather had fought valiantly to destroy Judaism, falling as victim to that struggle. Germans were now called upon to be the victors in Jesus’ own struggle against the Jews who were said to be seeking Germany’s destruction.²⁷

This well-funded and pro-Nazi institute composed of Protestant theologians argued that any opposition to National Socialism from within Christian organizations in Germany must necessarily have arisen from Jewish influences, “such as the arguments of Jewish scholars that Jesus was a Jew.”²⁸ They attempted to establish a national German church. They mimicked the structure and culture of the Nazi government, placing swastikas on church altars next to the cross. They argued that when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE, they expatriated the

25. See Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, 95–155; Cohen, *Christ Killers*, 204–9; Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 27–30, 45, 53.

26. Bertman, “Antisemitic Origin of Michelangelo’s Horned Moses,” 95–106.

27. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 1.

28. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 2.

Israelites in the region and replaced them with Aryans. Thus, Jesus' ancestors were Aryans, not Jews. They also attempted to eliminate any suggestion that Jesus was the messiah, which is a Jewish notion; instead, Jesus was God, the Son of Man.²⁹ The Institute attempted to restore the New Testament and Christianity back to its original pristine form by, for instance, eliminating the Old Testament from the Christian Bible and eradicating all Hebrew words (like *Hallelujah* and even *Moses*) from Scripture and the hymnal.³⁰

Some theologians, along with Hitler himself, argued that Paul was responsible for Judaizing the teachings of the Aryan Jesus.³¹ One Institute theologian, Hugo Pich, suggested that they should eliminate Paul from the German church canon—because if they kept Paul, they would be perpetuating “Jewish Christianity.” Another theologian, the bishop of Mecklenburg, argued that such a proposition is unacceptable because by eliminating Paul, a hero of Martin Luther and the German Lutherans, the superior German nation would be conceding that they “had been duped . . . by some stinking Jew for 1,500 years.”³² Some in the Institute argued that the effeminate, gentle Jesus common in late medieval art was really a corruption from Judaism. Consequently, Jesus was changed to a masculine, tough, heroic fighter.³³ The purification of Christianity from Judaism not only included the altering of texts and ideas, but also the purging of Jews who had converted to Christianity. Complaints from pastors and laity grew louder in the 1930s about the practices of missionizing and baptizing Jews. For example, a propaganda piece published in 1933 stated, “Just as a pig remains a pig, even if you put it in a horse’s stall, so a Jew still remains a Jew, even if he is baptized.”³⁴ One of the most striking statements to come out of the Institute was from a theologian, Siegfried Leffler, who said:

As a Christian, I have to follow the laws of my nation, which are often presented in a very cruel way, so that again I am brought into the harshest of conflicts with the Jew. Even if I know “thou shalt not kill” is a commandment of God or “thou shalt love the Jew” because he too is a child of the eternal Father, I am able to know as well that I have to kill him, I have to shoot him, and I can only do that if I am permitted to say: Christ.³⁵

29. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 55–63.

30. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 106–65.

31. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 42, 50, 140.

32. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 146.

33. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 52–53.

34. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 54–55.

35. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 10.

Arguments have been posited that the German masses, especially the good Christians, were unaware that Hitler was murdering Jews, and that the churches opposed the Nazi program. This myth started to be exposed in the 1980s. It is now clear that the German churches (and universities) were complicit in the Holocaust.³⁶ The Institute was filled with pastors, bishops, theologians, and laity who knew what the Nazi government was doing. Those German citizens whom previous generations of scholars thought were the “good Germans” heard gushing praise of Hitler over the pulpit. Christian sermons did not exclusively deal with social problems regarding Jews but theological problems. Jews, as the claim went for centuries, were inherently evil Christ killers. The people who heard these sermons supported a regime that was open about their intentions toward Jews.

The United States was not without anti-Semitism. *The International Jew*, the anti-Semitic booklet of Henry Ford, the great American icon, got him an award from Hitler, and he was praised in *Mein Kampf*.³⁷ In the late 1930s, public polling revealed that anti-Semitism was at its highest point in American history. A 1938 survey revealed that 77 percent of respondents answered “No” when asked, “Should we allow a larger number of Jewish exiles to come to the United States to live?”³⁸ These details of American anti-Semitism do not explicitly claim that Jews were hated because they killed Jesus, but it is implied. America is a predominantly Christian country. In a 2002 national survey, nearly 40 percent of Americans agreed that Jews were responsible for killing Jesus. It is likely that this question in the 1930s would have revealed a much higher percentage.³⁹ Many people will recall that a Christian man shot and killed eleven Jews at a Pittsburgh synagogue on October 27, 2018. His justification? “Jews are the children of Satan,” taken from John 8:44.⁴⁰

This section has served as a reminder of the atrocities against Jews from late antiquity to the twentieth century. After encountering this deplorable display of humanity on the part of Christians toward Jews, we are left with a disturbing conclusion. Such behavior would be bad enough even if it were true that “Jews killed Jesus,” especially given Jesus’ admonition to forgive enemies and turn the other cheek. However, unimaginable Jewish suffering for a crime their ancestors did not commit is unfathomable. In short, the demonization and murder of millions of Jews because “they killed

36. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*.

37. Rubinstein, “Anti-Semitism in the English-speaking World,” 160.

38. Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 127.

39. Tobin and Groeneman, *Anti-Semitic Beliefs*, 19–20.

40. Turkewitz and Roose, “Who Is Robert Bowers?”

Jesus” was unwarranted—it was based on horribly flawed interpretations of the New Testament and on poor logic. The remainder of this book seeks to demonstrate this, as well as to contextualize the many New Testament passages that demonize Jews. We also seek to understand Jesus’ relationship with his Jewish peers and to answer the question, “why didn’t the Jews kill Jesus?” when the New Testament seems to claim otherwise? First, we deal with the Judas story.

Judas the Betrayer?

Because Jesus was humiliated and killed by his enemies, many Jews who thought he might be the messiah abandoned such hope after the crucifixion, including some of Jesus’ close followers. For example, the Gospel of Luke describes two “saddened” non-apostle followers who, not knowing they are speaking with the disguised Jesus, reflect that he had been a great “prophet,” but they “*had hoped* that he was the one *to redeem Israel*” (Luke 24:13–21; emphasis added). Some of Jesus’ apostles even “doubted” after they met the resurrected Jesus in Galilee (Matt 28:16–20). The text is unclear on the nature of their doubt, but it may have concerned Jesus’ role as the messiah in relation to their previous messianic expectations. According to Acts, when the resurrected Jesus gathered the apostles together, their first question was, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Their entire worldview was centered on when the messiah would come and defeat Israel’s enemies and subsequently reign as king. Consequently, Jesus’ death scandalized many Jews who thought he was the messiah. Paul identified the crucifixion of Jesus as “a stumbling-block to Jews” (1 Cor 1:23). In fact the Greek word for “stumbling-block” here is *skandalon* (where we get “scandal”). Most Jews simply did not expect the messiah to be killed.

The case of Judas may also illustrate that some (or all?) of Jesus’ closest disciples believed him to be the messiah but did not expect him to die, at least not before fulfilling the messianic expectations of achieving freedom from Rome. Judas is most infamous for handing Jesus over to the authorities, but the accounts conflict as to why he did so. According to the author of Matthew, greed compelled Judas to betray Jesus (26:14–16). The Gospels of Luke and John conclude that Judas was possessed by satanic influence (Luke 22:3; John 6:70–71, 13:2, 27). Note that greed and evil influence are standard explanations as to why people commit horrendous acts that are difficult to explain—the perpetrators are either “bought and paid for” (i.e., morally compromised because of greed) or they are possessed by evil spirits or crazy (i.e., a lunatic).

There is, however, another option for interpretation, especially considering Jewish messianic expectations. If Judas believed, like most other Jews, in a conquering messiah, then he would have anticipated Jesus subduing Israel's enemies. He would not have expected Jesus to die. The earliest Gospel, Mark, provides no motivation for why Judas handed Jesus over to the authorities. Mark makes no mention of greed or evil forces on the part of Judas. In fact, in Mark, it was not Judas who asked for money in return for handing over Jesus (as in Matthew) but the chief priests who offered the money to Judas (Mark 14:10–11). Further, Mark does not refer to Judas as a betrayer. Many English translations of the Bible use the word “betray” in reference to Judas, but the Greek *pareden* in its various forms means “to hand over” or “deliver,” not “to betray.”⁴¹ William Klaussen (scholar at numerous universities—most recently at Cambridge) explained:

Not one ancient classical Greek text has surfaced in which [this verb] means “betray” or has a connotation of treachery . . . Josephus, the most prolific historian of the first century, uses [this word] 293 times, but not once can one legitimately translate it employing the word “betray.” . . . There is no linguistic basis—in classical Greek, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, in Josephus or patristic sources—for a translation of “betray” to describe what Judas did.⁴²

Clearly the author of Luke was not referring to betrayal. During the Last Supper, Jesus mentions that one person in the room would hand him over to the authorities (Mark 14:18), which scandalizes the apostles. According to the author of Matthew, Judas himself wonders whether he would be the one to deliver Jesus (Matt 26:25). The Gospel of John adds that Jesus encourages Judas to “do quickly what you are going to do” (John 13:27). Given Jesus' increased discussion near the end of his ministry about an imminent realization of his divine mission, coupled with the pervasive expectations of a conquering messiah, Judas likely thought that the time had come for the great messianic battle to be waged.⁴³ Thus, when Jesus tells Judas during the Last Supper to deliver him, Judas is glad to do it. His rationale may have been, “I’ll be happy to arrange this meeting between the messiah and our enemies; he’ll light them up! It’s about time the messiah fulfills his mission and deals with Rome and our corrupt temple bureaucrats.”

41. See most English translations of Mark 3:19 and 14:10–11.

42. Klassen, *Judas*, 48–49, 57.

43. Other scholars and authors have made similar arguments about Judas. See Paffenroth, *Judas*, 86–92.

The portrait of Judas in Mark, supplemented by a few bits of information in the other Gospels, shows a disciple firmly entrenched within the brotherhood of Jesus' close circle. He is not demonized in this earliest Gospel as he is in later Gospels. When Judas exits the upper room during the Last Supper after being told to deliver Jesus, the other disciples assume he is leaving to buy food for the feast or to give to the poor (John 13:29–30). There is no hint of tension between Jesus and Judas, nor between Judas and the other apostles. On the contrary, based on Greco-Roman mealtime customs,⁴⁴ the act of Jesus offering food to Judas during the meal suggests a deep friendship, not a ruptured relationship. This interpretation of Judas makes the most sense in both Mark's portrayal of Judas and of first-century messianic expectations. As mentioned, Jesus' role as messiah was unclear to his disciples. The fact that Jesus asks his closest disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you think I am?" illustrates this lack of clarity (Luke 9:19–21; Mark 8:28–30; Matt 16:13–20). When Jesus claims at Caesarea Philippi that authorities in Jerusalem would kill him, Peter takes him aside and says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" (Matt 16:22). If Judas had a similar expectation of the messiah, he would have been willing to help Jesus overthrow Israel's enemies by arranging their meeting.

The Gospels themselves are conflicted and unclear on Judas's motives. This ambiguity has led many interpreters to conclude that either Jesus commanded Judas to hand him over as part of a divinely-ordained plan, or Judas was greedy and evil and, therefore, betrayed Jesus. Both interpretations, however, seem problematic given the subsequent events. If Judas was demonic, evil, greedy, and easily compromised by money—as the author of Matthew claimed—then why would he so quickly slip into a depressed and repentant state, return the money, and kill himself after Jesus' conviction? Why the immediate remorse? Similarly, why would Jesus command Judas to hand him over in order to accomplish a divinely ordained mission if he knew that such a commandment would not exalt Judas—as Abraham was exalted after following the commandment to sacrifice his son—but rather lead to Judas's disgraced death? Many conservative theologians have argued that Jesus, being all-knowing, called Judas to "the twelve" precisely *because* he was a devil and would "betray" him. According to the author of John, Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas would hand him over to the authorities, yet he chose him anyway: "Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.' He was speaking of Judas son of

44. See Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke–Acts," 361–87; Smith "Greco-Roman Meal Customs," 4:651–53.

Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him” (John 6:70–71).

A more realistic explanation is that Judas expected Jesus to fulfill the prevailing messianic expectations. When Jesus was convicted and killed, Judas realized he had made a mistake (albeit an honest mistake) and had misunderstood what Jesus as the messiah was supposed to have accomplished. Note that once Jewish authorities handed Jesus over to Pilate, Judas immediately returned the money to the chief priests and proclaimed, “I have sinned by handing over innocent blood” (Matt 27:4). The word “sinned” here may not be an admission of “sin” against God by Judas but may have been placed on Judas’s lips by the author of Matthew; however, even if the author of Matthew correctly preserved Judas’s exact words, the Greek word *hamartanó* can also mean “to miss the mark” or “to be mistaken.” It seems that Judas did not anticipate this outcome of his messiah’s defeat. For the author of Mark, Judas simply was the means by which Jesus accomplished his goal, a goal that Judas may have misinterpreted. Jesus knew he would be killed, while Judas expected him to be the victor.

We do not know what ultimately happened to Judas. It may be that he did not even commit suicide, as the author of Matthew claimed. The ancient sources disagree on his fate, and we are left to fill in the gaps through scholarship. The earliest Christian writings, for example, do not even mention Judas’s death. In 1 Corinthians, which predates all four Gospels, Paul refers to the night Jesus was “handed over” (*paredoken*), but he does not mention Judas (11:23). A few chapters later, Paul explains that the resurrected Jesus met with “the twelve” (1 Cor 15:5), which includes Judas. Had Judas really betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, Paul should have stated that Jesus appeared to the *eleven* apostles. Further, the earliest Gospel, Mark, does not mention Judas again after Jesus’ arrest. Similarly, the authors of Luke and John say nothing of what happened to Judas after Jesus’ crucifixion. Only in the “M” tradition (i.e., material exclusively contained in Matthew) does Judas commit suicide (Matt 27:3–10). According to the book of Acts, Judas died after taking a fall (1:18–19). An early Christian leader, Papias, wrote a few decades after the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written that a chariot hit and killed Judas.⁴⁵ The Gospel of Judas, a second – or third-century text, claims that the apostles persecuted and stoned Judas.⁴⁶ That Jesus’ followers within two hundred years of his death were unclear, and in fact contradicted each other, regarding Judas’s fate is apparent.

45. Papias, “Frag. 3,” trans. Roberts and Donaldson.

46. Kasser et al., *Gospel of Judas*, 31.

Some scholars have posited that the demonization of Judas in the Gospels was an unfair portrayal, developed decades later by late first-century followers of Jesus.⁴⁷ The authors of Matthew, Luke, and John seem to go out of their way to use Judas as a symbol and microcosm for “Jews,” or at least for a certain influential segment of the Jewish population. The convenient and anti-Jewish portrayal of Judas in the Gospels seems suspicious, indeed. Here, we discuss four examples.

First, Judas’s name means “Jew”; it is the Greek version of “Judah,” the progenitor of the southern kingdom of Judah, the later inhabitants of which were called “Jews.” Further, Judas Iscariot may have been the only apostle not from Galilee (perhaps from Kerieth in Judea).⁴⁸ It seems a bit suspicious that the only apostle capable of “betraying” Jesus is the one named “Jew” from Judea, the home of the corrupt aristocracy.

Second, the Gospels portray Judas as having been influenced by Satan and his demons (Luke 22:3; John 6:70–71, 13:2, 27). Judas was evil to the core, according to the authors of Matthew, Luke, and John. Similarly, these Gospels portray some Jews as being demonic. For example, in John, Jesus supposedly tells “the Jews” (8:31):

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (8:44)

The Gospel of Matthew strangely describes Jesus in a few places as a non-Jew, an outsider who enters “their” synagogues (12:9), and describes the Pharisees, the popular leaders of Israel, as “evil” (12:34, 39), “children of hell” (23:15), “dead” inside and full of “filth” (23:27), “descendants of those who murdered the prophets” and destined for hell (23:31, 33). In both the Last Supper and Gethsemane episodes, Matthew paints Judas as the worst kind of betrayer, someone who must be wholly in league with Satan. For instance, Judas calls Jesus “Rabbi” during the Last Supper and again in Gethsemane (Matt 26:25, 49). Such a term is anathema in the Gospel of Matthew. It is in this story that Jesus excoriates Jewish leaders for desiring “to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students” (Matt 23:7–8). The author of Matthew is deliberate in his use of titles. Only in two places in this Gospel is Jesus addressed by the negative term (in Matthew’s view) of “rabbi”; on

47. Maccoby, *Judas Iscariot*; Klassen, *Judas*, 1–204.

48. Zwiep et al., “Judas Iscariot,” 14:938.

both occasions, his own disciple, Judas, uses the term!⁴⁹ Here, the author of Matthew provides evidence for Judas's hostility toward Jesus—Judas calls him the very title that Jesus rejects. In addition, Judas “betrays” Jesus with a kiss of intimate friendship. Again, the author of Matthew was trying to portray Judas as the most evil kind of person, one who displays overt hostility toward a dear friend in order to make a measly profit. Here, Judas dishonors his mentor in the most nefarious way possible, outside of killing him himself. This portrayal of Judas mirrors that of “Jews”; the demonic Judas was a representation of the demonic Jews.

Third, the Gospel of Matthew attributes Judas's “betrayal” to greed (Matt 26:14–16). Only in Matthew does Judas approach the chief priests and ask for payment to hand over Jesus. The Gospel of John also accuses Judas of greed: “[Judas] said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it” (John 12:6). The other Gospels likewise accuse Jews of being greedy. In Luke, Israel's leaders are charged with being “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). In Matthew, they are “full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matt 23:25). Jesus criticizes the temple establishment for being extortionists and thieves, making the temple complex a “den of robbers” (Matt 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). Again, the greedy Judas serves as a symbol for “Jews” in general. As we will see in the next chapter on Pharisees, the phenomenon of accusing one's opponents of being motivated by money was common, especially among the competing philosophical schools.

Fourth, the Gospels link Judas with the corrupt temple priests. Whereas Jesus hardly speaks to them during his trial, Judas deals directly with them (Luke 22:3–6; Matt 26:15, 27:3). The Jewish populace despised the corrupt chief priests and may have even cheered on Jesus as he cleansed the temple. Josephus stated, “No one need wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, for all the Jews throughout the habitable world, and those who worshiped God, even those from Asia and Europe, had been contributing to it for a very long time.”⁵⁰ Second Maccabees, a Jewish second century BCE text, agrees: “The Treasury in Jerusalem was full of untold sums of money, so that the amount of funds could not be reckoned” (3:6). Rome charged the priests to implement taxation. Josephus reported that Ananias, the high priest, sent servants to confiscate by violence the “tithes that were due to the priests.”⁵¹ Qumran texts refer to Jerusalem priests as wicked, robbing the

49. Luz et al., *Matthew 21–28*, 360.

50. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.7.110.

51. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.8.181.

poor, acquiring massive wealth, and defiling the temple.⁵² Thus, tying Judas to the chief priests by association was a way of illustrating that he was not just a Jew, but a Jew entrenched within the corrupt bureaucracy responsible for Jesus' arrest and death.

Other details contribute to suspicions about Judas's portrayal in the Gospels being historically reliable. For example, the author of Matthew claims that Judas delivered Jesus for a measly thirty pieces of silver (Matt 26:15, 27:3, 9)—worth about 120 days' wages. Today the equivalent of this act would be a lower middle-class laborer who makes \$40,000 annually betraying and conspiring against his mentor, teacher, friend, and religious leader for a mere \$13,000. Judas sells his messiah for the low price of a slave (Exod 21:32); even the bottle of ointment used to anoint Jesus was worth more than double that of Judas's betrayal price (Mark 14:5; John 12:3).⁵³ Further, the author of Matthew uses Jeremiah's condemnation of Israel, or "the Jews," as a parallel to Judas's condemnation. The "thirty pieces of silver" is an allusion to both Jeremiah (19:11) and Zechariah (11:12–13). The author of Matthew references "Jeremiah" in this fulfillment of prophecy (Matt 27:9); however, the parallel in this verse is closer to Zechariah, and indeed some ancient manuscripts of Matthew 27 contain the name "Zechariah" instead of "Jeremiah."⁵⁴ After Judas delivers Jesus, he returns the money to the temple treasury, but the chief priests reject it (Matt 27:3–10). The word *treasury* in Zechariah 11:13 is translated in other ancient manuscripts as "potter."⁵⁵ When the priests reject Judas's silver for the temple treasury, they use the money to buy the *potter's* field for burying foreigners (Matt 27:7–10), also an allusion to Jeremiah (19:1–13, 32:1–15). The author of Matthew refers to this field as "the Field of Blood" (27:8). Based on Jeremiah 19, the traditional site for the potter's field is in the Hinnom Valley; the priests smashed the potter's jug in the Hinnom Valley as a symbol of Israel's destruction. In short, the author of Matthew is using the condemnatory material of Israel in Jeremiah and Zechariah in relation to Judas.

Matthew also links Judas with Judah in the Joseph of Egypt story. All of Joseph's brothers reject him, but *Judah* suggests selling him for twenty pieces of silver in order to make a "profit" (Gen 37:26–27). Similarly, in

52. 1QpHab. For a detailed discussion on temple corruption in the age of Jesus, see Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, 319–66.

53. Thirty pieces of silver was approximately the same as 120 Roman denarii. The women who anointed Jesus used a bottle of ointment worth about 300 denarii. See Betlyon, "Coinage," 1:1076–89, esp. 1086.

54. Omanson, *Textual Guide*, 49.

55. For more detailed treatments of the arrest narratives and their connections to Hebrew Bible prophets, see Luz et al., *Matthew 21–28*, 466–77.

Matthew, Jesus' disciples "deserted him" (26:56), but only *Judas* is willing to sell him for profit. Suspicion of how the Judas story unfolds in Matthew is warranted because the only two people in all of Jewish and Christian Scripture willing to sell their own brother or beloved teacher into slavery or death for a measly profit are both named "Judah." The goal here was not only to tie Jesus to Joseph but to tie the betraying apostle *Judas* to *Judah* in order to blame "Jews" for the death of Jesus.

We have already encountered several David-Jesus typologies. Not mentioned, however, is that the author of Matthew also infuses elements from the King David narrative into the Judas story. Specifically, Judas's actions mirror those of David's counselor, Ahithophel. When David's son Absalom attempts to steal the throne, Ahithophel joins the "conspiracy" against David (2 Sam 15:12, 31). When the conspiracy fails, Ahithophel "hangs himself" and dies (2 Sam 17:23), just like Judas (Matt 27:5). In fact, these are the only two suicide hangings in all of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Further, Judas's suicide seems to be directly related to Ahithophel's suicide because these two literary units are the only ones in the Bible and Greek texts to include both the words *aperchomai* ("went away") and *apagcho* ("hang oneself"). The authors of the Gospels apparently had Psalm 41 in mind when presenting the Judas episode. The author of John quotes Psalm 41 (see John 13:18), putting words into David's mouth regarding Ahithophel: "Even my *bosom friend* in whom I trusted, *who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me*" (Ps 41:9). Likewise, Jesus says, according to John, "The one who ate my bread has *lifted his heel against me*" (John 13:18).⁵⁶ These details present a strong case that the Gospels, particularly Matthew, wrote the Judas portion of the story with the Hebrew Bible open so that Jesus and Judas would mirror King David and Ahithophel.

The only other book in the New Testament that mentions Judas's death is Acts. This passage, however, says nothing about suicide but rather mentions Judas's fall that results in his bowels gushing out (Acts 1:18). Like the author of Matthew, the author of Acts connects Judas's story with King David, through David's nephew Amasa, who also participated in Absalom's conspiracy against David. After Absalom fails in his attempt to obtain the throne, David welcomes Amasa back into his circle, appointing him as a general. Amasa's rival, Joab, another of David's generals, becomes jealous. He approaches Amasa wearing a "soldier's garment," and while greeting him with the words "my brother," betrays him with a kiss on his cheek as he stabs him with a sword, making his bowels "pour out on the ground" (2 Sam

56. For more on the connection between the Judas story and Davidic elements in the Hebrew Bible, see Zacharias, *Matthew's Presentation*, 152–70.

20:4–10). The Amasa-Joab episode and the Judas material in the Gospels and Acts contain the same elements: the conspiracy, the betrayal, “soldiers,” the friendly verbal greeting, the kiss, the sword, and death as bowels gushed out on the ground.

All of these parallels between Judas and “Jews” and between Judas and David’s conspiratorial counselors have caused some scholars to conclude that the Judas story is either wholly fabricated at worst or grossly embellished at best.⁵⁷ The rhetoric and details of the Judas material do seem hyperbolic. As we saw previously, Christians accused Jews of the very sins Judas was accused of in the Gospels and Acts—greed, satanic influence, conspiracy, and the murder of Jesus.⁵⁸ The Judas case was Exhibit A for the nature of Jews, as Kim Paffenroth has explained:

The simplest anti-Semitic use that Judas’s story could serve is one of simple equation: Judas was bad; all Jews are bad. The equation can run both ways: Judas was evil because he was a Jew; Jews are evil, demonstrated by their similarity to Judas. This has certainly been the most frequent anti-Semitic use of Judas’s story through Christian history.⁵⁹

Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), who referred to Jews as “Christ-killers,”⁶⁰ equated Jews with Judas when he wrote:

When God forsakes a place, that place becomes the dwelling of demons. But at any rate the Jews say that they, too, adore God. God forbid that I say that. No Jew adores God! . . . Shall I tell you of their plundering, their covetousness, their abandonment of the poor, their thefts, their cheating in trade? The whole day long will not be enough to give you an account of these things.⁶¹

The portrayal of Judas’s development from the earliest Gospel (Mark) to the later Gospels is clear. In Mark, the picture of Judas is somewhat neutral. William Klassen observed, “Compared with Peter . . . Judas comes out relatively well.”⁶² By the end of the first century, however, Judas had become a symbol of evil, greedy, conspiratorial Jews. Getting at the historical Judas is

57. Maccoby, *Judas Iscariot*, 22–168; Klassen, *Judas*, 1–204.

58. See Cohen, *Christ Killers*; Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*; Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*.

59. Paffenroth, *Judas*, 37–38.

60. See English translation in Chrysostom, “Patrologia Graeca 48.843–856” (852).

61. Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, 11, 25–26.

62. Klassen, *Judas*, 91.

difficult because the sources leave us with uncertainty regarding Judas's role in Jesus' arrest, his motivation for his actions, and his ultimate fate.

Ambiguity in the sources has led to numerous interpretations by later exegetes.⁶³ This perhaps alerts us to be cautious with this data. Some of the aforementioned points regarding Judas are stronger evidence than other points. Some points are also more speculative. However, when all points are viewed together, it is difficult to take the story at face value. It is difficult to conclude that Judas was the villainous traitor that some of the Gospels portray him to be. It is also difficult, however, to conclude that the Judas story was fabricated entirely. Perhaps the authors of the Gospels embellished the story for political and theological reasons, though several historical kernels seem to be embedded in their texts. Most likely, one of Jesus' apostles did deliver him to the chief priests. This apostle, named "Jew" (i.e., "Judas") in the story, believed that Jesus was the messiah and, therefore, was willing to arrange the meeting between the messiah and his foes. He did not expect Jesus to die. Later authors struggled to make sense of Judas's actions and attributed to him the worst motives. The revision of Judas's character by the authors of the Gospels may have been an attempt to deflect their embarrassment that one of Jesus' own followers had handed him over to the authorities. This act could have provoked some Jews to proclaim throughout the Roman Empire that the Jesus movement was illegitimate: How great can the Jesus movement be when one of Jesus' own students delivered him to the authorities for the price of a slave? The authors of the Gospels in their various contexts, therefore, may have revised the story to allow the response, "No, Judas was not one of us. Judas, a 'typical' Jew, was the only non-Galilean apostle; he was evil and greedy to the core and had connections to the Jerusalem establishment. He was not really one of us. He was one of you, a quintessential Jew." We will discuss more on the issue of rhetoric and embellishments in the Gospels, particularly in relation to Jews, in later chapters.

Takeaways

What did we learn here and why does it matter? First, Christians have blamed Jews for two millennia for Jesus' death. They called Jews "Christ killers," they accused Jews of murdering Christian kids and youths, and they claimed that Jews were inherently evil children of Satan. This accusation has led to the deaths of millions of Jews. Were these accusations, persecutions,

63. Paffenroth, *Judas*, 1–142; Cane, *Place of Judas Iscariot*; Zwiep et al., "Judas Iscariot," 14:938–58.

and murders warranted? Well, according to Christian ethics based on the teachings of Jesus, the answer is, no!

Second, we learned that, regarding the Gospels, things are not so simple—there is usually more to the story. A careful examination of the Judas episodes reveal that the Gospels' conclusion that he was an evil betrayer is fraught with ambiguity and contradiction. Our soft conclusion here is that Judas thought Jesus was the messiah, as did the other apostles. Thus, he did not expect Jesus to die. I call this a "soft conclusion" because we cannot enter the mind of Judas and prove what he did or did not think. We can only go by what the authors of the Gospels related to us. However, if we line up all the data from the four Gospels, and we examine that data critically, we find it extremely difficult to understand what Judas actually did, what his motives were, and what happened to him after Jesus' death. Since the Gospels lack uniformity on these three main issues, we are left to put the puzzle pieces together. It seems that the only sure detail is that Judas handed Jesus over to the authorities, and that is it. All other details are ambiguous. In my assessment, only one conclusion makes sense based on the prevalent messianic expectations among many first-century Jews: Jesus' friend Judas handed him over to the authorities—for reasons we do not fully know—but Judas did not expect Jesus to be killed. After Jesus died, something unfortunate happened to Judas, which, again, is unclear. Was he killed? Did he kill himself? Was he banned and "excommunicated" by the other eleven apostles? We simply do not know. All we have now are several accounts dating to the late first century and the second century wherein early Christians present their understanding of the tragic case of Judas.