
**Discussion Questions for
*Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple***

**(Adapted from the discussion on Presbynet,
March 2002, conducted by Timothy M. Renick)**

1

Judas the Obscure: Object of Curiosity

Before reading: What is your most vivid image of Judas? When you think of him, what is the image that first comes to mind?

Consider the absence of Judas in Paul and the author's contrasting good theology with good storytelling. As we retell and experience the Easter story, what part can Judas play in our reflections on our own sinfulness? What would the story mean without him?

Why do you think the Son of Man *must* be betrayed (or handed over)? Is the story about Judas's (humanity's?) sinfulness, or Jesus' obedience, or the further agony (passion) that betrayal would cause Jesus?

The "Field of Blood" discussion raises questions about prophecy or Providence. How do you see prophecy working? Is it mostly forward looking, in the sense of foretelling or predicting, or is it mostly retrospective, looking back on an event and later seeing how it fits into God's plan?

Judas the Arch-Sinner: Object of Horror

This chapter contends that Judas is a lesson against (being) evil? But what is Judas supposed to teach us: not to betray? not to despair? not to commit suicide?

The stories analyzed in this chapter seem rather overly fascinated with grotesque punishment. Is their “primitive” point of view incompatible with a kind, loving, forgiving God? Or is it a “primitive” point of view that is salutary to our modern moral ambiguity?

What difference does it make to the story if Judas dies immediately after the betrayal or lives longer?

To what extent do we need scapegoats? Is it just a necessary part of religious or social life, or is it a perversion that needs to be eradicated?

3

Judas the Villain: Object of Hatred and Derision

To follow up on the previous question: is there a difference between scapegoat as an abstraction (like Judas, a character in a story) and real, live scapegoats whom we can hate and abuse in reality?

What is your understanding of Christian anti-Semitism? Is it something that only some Christians have engaged in, or is it more endemic? Can it ever be said that a piece of Scripture (in this case, the Gospel of John) is anti-Semitic (or racist, or sexist)? Consider the following statements, to decide whether and to what extent you would call them anti-Semitic: Jesus is the Messiah, a claim Jews deny and might find offensive; the church replaces Israel as God's chosen people; the Jews killed Christ and are the sons of the devil; most Jews are liars, traitors, and thieves (like Judas).

Is it possible to separate the story of Judas as a useful lesson against avarice from its association with Christian anti-Semitism?

Judas the Tragic Hero: Object of Admiration and Sympathy

Many of the traditions analyzed in this chapter choose to use Judas's (and Oedipus's) story as a vehicle to ruminate on the mysterious connection (or incompatibility?) of divine Providence and human free will? Did these literary and folkloristic attempts help you to understand the relation at all?

Why were the Medieval legends so fascinated with incest? Is there something in this sin/crime/disorder that makes it especially meaningful (cf. Freud)?

Why do the later traditions try to rationalize Judas's actions? Is this a good thing?

If Judas's act was just a mistake (misjudging Jesus' intentions and purpose) can it be considered evil? Or a sin? Or just bad? Or not even that?

According to some traditions, Judas let his relationships with women get in the way of his relationship with Jesus. Beyond an archaic tendency to blame as much as possible on women, is there something to be learned from this? In other words, when does our love for others enhance our love of Jesus and God, and when does it detract from it?

5

Judas the Penitent: Object of Hope and Emulation

It has sometimes been asserted that modern depictions of Judas that seek to exonerate him are just our excuse to exonerate ourselves, but this chapter shows how attempts to blame Judas also tend to exonerate us. Are both true? What is the best way to look at and learn from the sins of another?

Did Judas repent, or just regret what he did? What difference would this make to the story?

If Jesus died for my sins, and for all sins, did he die for Judas's sin? If he did, is it possible that Judas was saved?

After seeing all these depictions of Judas, write your own.

Suggested further reading and viewing:

Judas: Traitor or Friend? Paulist Productions, 2002. Rebroadcast at Christmas and Easter on the History Channel.

Klassen, W. *Judas. Betrayer or Friend of Judas?* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Lake, K. "The Death of Judas." In *The Beginnings of Christianity*. Edited by F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake. 6 vols. London: Macmillan, 1933. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979. 5: 22-30.

Maccoby, H. *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*. New York: Free Press, 1992.