

# JUDAS' MOTIVES AND ROLE

## Preliminary Questions

- Was Judas' betrayal of Jesus to the Sanhedrin an act of impulse or anger?
- What is meant by the verb "betray" (Gk. *paradidomi*)?
- Was Judas motivated by his need for thirty pieces of silver or by his agenda?
- Was Judas' cooperation with the Sanhedrin responsible for Jesus' death?
- If Judas intended to have Jesus killed, why did he approach the Sanhedrin knowing that they had already planned to kill Him?
- What did Judas expect to accomplish by his bargain with the Sanhedrin?
- Why did Judas not appear at Jesus' trials (before Caiaphas or Pilate)?
- Where was Judas' home? How did he become one of the twelve apostles?
- Were there preceding events and issues that contributed to Judas' action?
- What was Judas' role in the proceedings that brought Jesus to the cross?

## Preface

Is there a connection between Judas' selling Jesus to the Sanhedrin and Satan's temptation of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry? Satan had offered Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" if He would submit to his authority (Matt 4:8,9; Luke 4:5,6). Was Judas' action three years later another attempt by Satan to force Jesus to establish his kind of kingdom, a "kingdom of the world" rather than the kingdom of righteousness, the universal "shalom" promised by the prophets? To understand the meaning and significance of Judas' involvement requires an appreciation of the larger context of the event, including the motives and role of Satan himself.

Scriptural references to Judas suggest that he would have been content with Satan's kind of kingdom, one that required no birth from above (John 3:3). The purely political character of this kingdom would presumably have delivered the nation Israel from Roman authority and, more importantly for Judas, have given him the position and power he sought. If Judas had believed in Jesus as God's Son and Messiah, would he not have been content, as were Jesus' other followers, to trust Him to establish His kind of kingdom in His time? Jesus' parable of the minas (Luke 19:1-27), His Olivet Discourse (Matt 24, 25), and the several predictions of His death had made it clear that there would be no kingdom on earth in the immediate future.

Why would Judas have risked the potential benefits from his association with the popular Rabbi who had just entered Jerusalem in triumph? Was it because he had come to realize that, as one who had not come to Jesus for salvation, he would have no place in Jesus' kingdom? Did Judas understand what Jesus meant when, a year before, He had said, "Did I Myself not choose you, and one of you has a devil" (John 6:70)? As they gathered in the upper room for that last Passover, Jesus told them, "You are not all clean" (John 13:11). He warned them that "one of you will betray me" (John 13:21). Judas knew who Jesus meant, and he knew that Jesus knew where he was going when He dismissed him with the words, "What you do, do quickly" (John 13:27). Judas had always known that he was "not one of them." From the beginning, when, to his probable surprise, Jesus had chosen him to be one of the Twelve (Luke 6:13), Judas had known that he was not qualified to be in Jesus' kind of kingdom, (John 6:64, 70, 71).

## 1. Judas' Gamble

When Satan sought to enter Judas' heart to control him, Judas was ready. Judas was more than willing to bring Jesus to the Sanhedrin, knowing what they planned to do with Him. But apparently he expected that when they arrested Jesus, popular outrage would force Jesus to become the king of Judas' kind of kingdom. Would the Hosanna-shouting crowds, the people of Lazarus' Bethany, and Jesus' compatriots from Galilee not take this opportunity to defy the Romans and sweep Jesus onto a throne? Such a dream could explain why Judas would risk all to gain the position and power he craved, and which he knew would otherwise not be his. If his plan failed and the Sanhedrin succeeded in having Jesus crucified, Judas would lose his present privilege as treasurer of the group, a position that facilitated his embezzling activities (John 12:6). But his plan did fail; the Sanhedrin intimidated Pilate into crucifying Jesus. Bitterly disappointed, Judas crashed his coins onto the temple floor and rushed down to the Valley of Hinnom where he hanged himself (Matt 27:3-10).

## 2. Judas' Influences: Did he consider . . .

- The Zealots' attempt to make Jesus king at Bethsaida? (John 6:15)
- The parable of the minas at Jericho: no kingdom immediately? (Luke 19:11-27)
- The impact of Lazarus' return from the tomb? (John 12:9-11)
- The Sanhedrin's decision to execute Jesus? (John 11:45-53)
- Jesus "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem? (John 12:12-19)
- Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's destruction? (Matt 24:1-3)
- The disciples' expectation of a kingdom? (Matt 18:1; Luke 22:24-30)
- Jesus' previous easy escapes from the authorities? (John 7:30; 8:59; 10:39)
- His status if Jesus did not establish His kingdom then?

## Perspectives

### 1. The Impact of Lazarus' Resurrection

A few weeks before Passover, a man dead four days had walked out of his tomb in a village less than two miles from the temple. The sect of the Sadducees, who controlled temple worship and the politics of the region, denied the possibility of physical resurrection. But this Rabbi from Galilee had just raised a man in full view of reliable witnesses. It was a phenomenon they could not ignore. At a hastily called conference, the High Priest Caiaphas defined their dilemma, "If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (John 11:48). They fully understood the gravity of the situation. They had only one option: "It is expedient that one man should die for the people . . ." (11:50). "So from that day on they planned together to kill Him" (11:53).

The Sanhedrin faced a problem, however, in executing their plan. When Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem, riding on a donkey colt like an ancient king of Israel, wildly cheering crowds had escorted Him down from the Mount of Olives into the city. His followers, many coming from Galilee for Passover, had chanted royal psalms. Even the children had joined the festivities, shouting their messianic hosannas.

That man Lazarus still haunted the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees especially! Many in that Passover crowd had witnessed Lazarus walking out of his tomb. This astounding event was still making a considerable impact on the people at the feast and on their leaders. It had drawn many to welcome Jesus into the city. "For this cause also the multitude went out and met Him, because He had performed this sign . . . The Pharisees therefore said one to another . . . look, the whole world has gone after Him" (John 12:17-19). In their panic, "the chief priests took counsel that they might put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away, and were believing in Jesus" (12:10-11). Apparently the Sanhedrin did not reckon on Jesus repeating this miracle! If they had killed Lazarus, undoubtedly thousands would have crowded around his tomb expecting to see him come out alive again!

How could even the powerful Sanhedrin arrest and execute this popular Rabbi, this raiser of the dead, under these circumstances? Surely they must delay their action until His supporters had returned to their homes after Passover and the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed it. Perhaps by then, their memory of the miracle would have faded. Despite their urgency to deal with Jesus, reason prevailed. In the court of the High Priest Caiaphas, "the chief priests and the elders . . . plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth, and kill him. But they were saying, 'Not during the festival, lest a riot occur among the people'" (Matt 26:3-5). This decision to delay would have postponed Jesus' crucifixion for at least ten days, contrary to the typology of His being crucified as the Passover Lamb of God. Further, Jesus had revealed to His disciples the specific day on which He would die. "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be delivered up for crucifixion" (Matt 26:2).

## **2. The Unique Contribution of Judas**

The Sanhedrin found the solution to its quandary in a most unexpected place, in one of Jesus' own disciples. During that Passover week the risk of riot was much too great for the Sanhedrin to take Jesus to Pilate to seek His crucifixion. But if someone of His own group, for instance, were to lay a charge . . .! And then Judas appeared at their door. Surprised, and not a little skeptical, they gave a wary welcome to the disciple from Idumea as he entered their sanctum. With the determination and concentration of a man possessed, he blurted out his grim proposal, "What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?" (Matt 26:15) Luke further noted that "Satan entered into Judas . . . And he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them" (22:3,4). Suddenly Judas had altered the equation, and unknown to all but Jesus, had maintained the God-ordained schedule for His crucifixion.

## **3. The Greed Factor**

Would Judas have entered into this risky collusion with the Sanhedrin to obtain money? Did he urgently need the slave price of thirty pieces of silver? Did he not control the disciples' treasury and, according to John, regularly embezzle from it? Further, Judas' mercenary instincts had been revealed a few days earlier in Bethany. When Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive nard, valued by Judas at three hundred denarii, he complained that this usage was a waste. As John notes, he would have preferred that this money be donated to the funds that he controlled (John 12:4,5).

It is possible that greed may have contributed to his decision. He did ask the amount of the reward for his involvement. Knowing, as he did, Jesus' power to feed thousands and

to provide many other benefits, would it not have been counterproductive for even a greedy disciple to arrange for His death? Whatever part greed may have played in his dealings, it was certainly not Judas' intention that Jesus would die as a result. Such an outcome, although much desired by the Sanhedrin, would not have been to Judas' advantage.

#### 4. The Kingdom Factor

- **Zealots and the Feeding of the five thousand at Bethsaida (one year before).** When Jesus fed the five thousand at Bethsaida, the crowd tried to force Him to become their king (John 6:15). Probably some were revolutionaries from Gamala. This major zealot stronghold was located just nine miles up in the eastern hills from Bethsaida, easily visible across the Jordan Valley. The place was home to Judas of Galilee, whom the Romans had killed in a revolt less than three decades before (Acts 5:37). The fact that Jesus immediately forced His disciples to sail away from the place without Him (Mark 6:45) suggests that one or more of the disciples may have joined in this attempt. Further, the next day Jesus referred to His disciple Judas as "a devil" and noted that one of them was a traitor (John 6:70,71). This unusual comment in this context may indicate that Judas encouraged, or even initiated the attempt to make Him king. If so, Judas' action would have revealed his determination to force Jesus to establish a kingdom in which he would benefit.
- **The Parable of the Minas (the previous week).** Another event that occurred just a week before they arrived in Jerusalem for the last time may also have contributed to Judas' desperation. As they passed through Herodian Jericho on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus had stopped to communicate an urgent truth in terms of a parable of the minas. To Judas' consternation, Jesus made it clear there that He was not going to establish His kingdom at that time (Luke 19:11-28). Indeed, like the nobleman in the parable, Jesus would be rejected by His citizens and then return with a kingdom at a later time. But Judas could not wait for a kingdom that would be postponed into the indefinite future. He must have a kingdom now, with all that he would gain in it. He realized that unless he took drastic action, his dream of a coveted place in a kingdom would never become a reality. Mulling over his disappointment as they approached Jerusalem, Judas was seeking a way to force Jesus to establish the kingdom.
- **Jesus' "triumphal" entrance into Jerusalem (Sunday).** Judas, as well as the Sanhedrin, was fully aware of the strong support Jesus enjoyed in Jerusalem at that Passover. The palpable anticipation of the pilgrims from Galilee, whose lives had benefited from Jesus' extensive ministry there, together with the Judeans for whom the Lazarus incident had greatly increased Jesus' credibility, created what must have seemed to Judas an irresistible opportunity. Jesus had entered Jerusalem as king! If Jesus were reluctant now to establish His kingdom, and thus deprive him of a prestigious position, then Judas would have to force the issue. What better means of doing this than by bringing Jesus before the Sanhedrin to precipitate a popular uprising that would crown Jesus king? Would these cheering crowds not riot against Jesus' captors and hail Him as their king? Had not the Sanhedrin delayed dealing with Jesus for this very reason? And since this kingdom would be the kind of kingdom with which Satan had tempted Jesus three years before, may we not detect his hand guiding Judas in his doomed design?

- **Jesus' prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem (Tuesday).** Why did Judas initiate contact with the rulers the day after Jesus' last confrontation with them and His teaching on the Mount of Olives? A logical motive, following satanically twisted logic, would be for the traitor to believe that by precipitating a trial before the Sanhedrin while many of His were in Jerusalem, Jesus would be forced, and perhaps even encouraged, to announce the inauguration of the predicted kingdom. Could Jesus' Olivet Discourse in which He predicted great tribulation rather than an imminent kingdom have made such intervention even more urgent for Judas?

## 5. Judas' Roots

Why did Satan select Judas as his agent, his "mole" within the band of disciples? What would suggest to Satan that, rather than the four fishermen or naive Nathanael, this man could be tempted with position and power? One answer may lie in Judas' origin. His name, Judas Iscariot, (*Ish*, "man of" Kerioth) identifies him as a citizen of Kerioth, a small village about twenty miles south of Hebron. The region had been settled by Edomites, as reflected in its Latin name, Idumea. Idumeans were in the audience for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mark 3:7-8). The night before that event, He had selected the Twelve, including Judas (Luke 6:12-16). Jesus' other disciples were Galileans, but Judas was apparently an Idumean, a descendant of Esau. Jesus and His other disciples traced their ancestry back to Jacob, but if Judas were an Idumean, he would have been a descendant of Esau, Jacob's alienated brother. Judas' probable connection with "the other line" of Isaac's sons may not have been a factor in Satan's recruitment of this special agent . . . but, then, it would certainly have had historical precedent!

## 6. The Nature of the Betrayal

Judas' role was not to betray Jesus in the common usage of that word. He was not making secret information available to an enemy or exposing the identity of an undercover agent. It is true, of course, that Judas betrayed Jesus in the sense that he violated their trust relationship (John 13:18-20). What he contracted to do, however, was to "turn over" (*paradidomi*) Jesus to His enemies. This meant that he would be laying a charge against Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Since the initiative had come from one of Jesus' own followers, an important consideration given the current pro-Jesus mood in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin was willing to become involved.

What did Judas actually agree to do for the Sanhedrin? Whatever the specifics, we know that it was sufficient to proceed with arresting Jesus and trying Him, without risking the popular uprising they feared. The reason we do not know the nature of Judas' commitment is that before he could appear to lay his charge or to testify against Jesus, he committed suicide (Matt 27:3-10). Apparently, the Sanhedrin concluded that because the initiative came from one of Jesus' disciples, the crowd would be too confused and divided to riot! None of the charges they brought to Pilate, however – forbidding to pay taxes, claiming to be king, or misleading the nation – were of any interest to Pilate.

## 7. The Reason for Judas' Remorse

Judas did not intend that his action would result in Jesus' death. The record makes this clear: "Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he

felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying 'I have betrayed innocent blood.' . . . and he threw the thirty pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself" (Matt 27:3-5). Suicide is not the reaction of a man who had achieved his purpose but of one who had realized that the Great Deceiver had manipulated him. Satan had tempted Judas as he had tempted Eve, with greed and desire for power. The result was the same: loss and death. Obeying Satan, Judas lost his pieces of silver and his life. As the Gadara pigs had charged down the hill to their destruction when Satan's demons controlled them, so Judas rushed down to the Valley of Hinnom to his destruction.

Judas, whatever his motives, did not intend for Jesus to be crucified. Indeed, such an outcome would have made impossible the establishment of the kingdom he so fervently coveted. If it was not Jesus' death he sought, his purpose then could only have been to force the establishment of a kingdom that would have satisfied his pride and greed. Since it would not have been a kingdom of righteousness, it would also have fulfilled the plan of his controller, Satan.

## **8. The Result of Judas' Withdrawal**

When Judas withdrew from the proceedings, throwing his silver coins down in the temple and rushing out to hang himself, the Sanhedrin was left without a case against Jesus or even a plaintiff. If they had anticipated the possibility of Judas' defection, they would not have embarked on such a precarious procedure during the feasts. Without a witness against Jesus, a disciple to lay a charge, they had suddenly become vulnerable. The Sanhedrin was exposed, just as they had feared, to the possibility that Jesus' supporters would turn against them, precipitating a revolution that would be climaxed by their acclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as "the king of the Jews."

The fear of this scenario precipitated their desperate search for witnesses in the early hours of that Friday morning. "Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put him to death; and they did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later, two came forward" (Matt 26:59-60). Apparently they were forced to dismiss most of the witnesses because they could not testify to anything that could be used effectively against Jesus. These last two men were the best the court could find. Their testimony, claiming that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple, was confused and contradictory (as well as absurd!).

## **Summary**

### **Judas' Reasoning**

Judas feared that the Sanhedrin would kill Jesus, which would deprive him (Judas) of his anticipated position in Jesus' kingdom. He had heard Jesus predict His crucifixion and he would have been well aware of the Sanhedrin's plan to kill Jesus after the feasts. He had to intervene, if even by a desperate action (his offer to turn Jesus over to the rulers) that would, he hoped, precipitate a popular uprising that would give Jesus His kingdom and Judas his coveted position. Satan had a plan for a kingdom, but God had a plan for a greater kingdom!

## **Judas' Role**

The breakdown in the Sanhedrin's attempt to establish a case against Jesus before the Sanhedrin reveals the kind of responsibility Judas had assumed. The confusion and desperation of the Sanhedrin during those early hours of Friday morning also confirmed the role they had intended for the defector. He was a "betrayal" in the sense that he defected from his relationship with Jesus and his peers, and that he manifestly served the purposes of "the enemy." The nature of his action, however, was unique, not conforming to our usual understanding of the term "betrayal." He had agreed to "turn over" Jesus to the Sanhedrin. After the initial phase of this procedure (his official identification of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane), he withdrew from the proceedings. He had come to realize that his actions were leading, not to a kingdom, but to Jesus' death and his dashed dreams.

## **Judas' Responsibility**

Was Judas responsible for Jesus' crucifixion? No. Not only was this God's eternal plan and Jesus' purpose, but if Jesus had never chosen Judas as one of the Twelve and if he had never offered his cooperation to the Sanhedrin, Jesus would have been crucified on that Passover. Judas's defection did not cause Jesus' death, as is often assumed. His action, rather, determined the time of the crucifixion. Until Judas entered their chambers, the Sanhedrin had decided to delay their move against Jesus for more than a week when the crowds would have returned to their homes after the feast of Unleavened Bread. (Matt 26:1-5, 14-16; Mark 14:1-2, 10-11; Luke 21:37-38; 22:1-6). The result of Judas' initiative, then, was that Jesus died at 3.00 p.m. on the day of Passover, as the Passover lamb s prefigured in the exodus (1 Cor 5:7).