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Social Psychology, Alternative Scenario Theory, and the case of Judas Iscariot

Abstract

The Gospels' depiction of Judas Iscariot, as the evil betrayer of Jesus, was generalized over the centuries to Jews as a whole and became the foundation for antisemitism, eventually leading up to the Holocaust. The arguments and pleas to avoid blaming all the past and present Jews, as well as having some empathy for Judas' fate, are reviewed. These attempts are based on an uncritical acceptance of the Gospels' narrative, in which the power struggles between the disciples are ignored and Judas' presumed motivation to betray is not questioned. Notwithstanding the gospel of Judas, the article goes further and suggests an alternative scenario: Judas was Jesus' closest friend, a supporter of his social agenda and unlike Simon Peter, his rival, not a proponent of Jesus' exaltation as the Messiah. Judas Iscariot became the victim of false blaming and scapegoating.

Judas Iscariot – Jesus – Simon Peter – Gospels – betrayal – antisemitism – alternative scenario theory

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> History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books—books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. As Napoleon once said, "What is history, but a fable agreed upon?"
>
> — Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code

1. The Blame, its Aftermaths, and Extenuation

A direct line extends between the charges made in the Gospels against Judas Iscariot (*Yehuda Ish Kerayot*, in Hebrew) and the anti–Semitic animosity, discrimination, and assaults through the generations against the Jewish people, culminating in the holocaust. Judas is deemed a betrayer-traitor in Matt 10:4, 26:14-16, 25; Mark 3:19, 14:10-11; Luke 6:16, 22:4; John 6:71, 12:4, 18: 2,5. He is deemed a thief with greed for money in John 12: 1-8, Matt 26: 8; Mark 14: 4; John 12: 6, and as an agent of Satan in Luke 22:3, John 6:70-71, 17:12, 13:2, 22:3, 13:27. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus himself said that Judas, the son of perdition, was the only apostle lost (John 17: 2).

Judas, it was claimed, betrayed Jesus, his Lord, and Messiah, delivered him into the hands of the Jewish authorities, and set in motion events that led to the Crucifixion. Gradually his portrayal as treacherous, greedy, and driven by Satan, was generalized to

the Jews as a whole, helped by the semantic affinity of "Judas" and "Jew" (Yehuda and Yehudi, in Hebrew). In fact, Peter Stanford titled his book “Judas: The Most Hated Name in History” (2016). I will not quote the more extreme and incendiary statements made by the Fathers of the Church and later authorities, reviewed elsewhere (Cohn-Sherbok 1997; Gubar 2009; Nicholls 2004).

This accusation created a wedge between two sister religions — Judaism and Christianity, and tragically created mutual suspicion, fear, and hatred between Christians and Jews. Nothing can change what already happened, but would a reasonable doubt about Judas’ blame, and considering the possibility that he was a victim of vilification, diminish the hate now?

1.1 Extenuation and Empathy

While some Church authorities added fuel to the fire of blaming Judas and persecuting the Jews, others tried to reduce the flames. The toning down must have started firstly with the realization that “The grand irony, of course, is that without [Judas’s betrayal], Jesus doesn't get handed over to the Romans and crucified. Without Judas, you don't have the central component of Christianity—you don't have the Resurrection” (Cargill 2020). Secondly, the more the historical Jesus was studied, the more it was realized that he was a Jew (Vermes 1981; Levine 2007; Schafer 2014), which did not concur with hating the Jews. Thirdly, the blaming and hate, created a theological dilemma, how is it possible to blame a person for doing what God wanted him to do, “Judas should be understood as caught up in the suffering and cost of salvation, not as one to be vilified and scapegoated” (Cane 2005). Fourthly, the hate did not agree with the Christian values of non-violence and forgiveness. Lastly, realizing that the blaming and hate of Judas and the Jews

eventually led to the horrible holocaust (Cf. Moore 2004), the Church saw it as a duty to encourage empathy towards Judas, and avoid generalization to the Jewish people as a whole. This approach resulted in the *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times) declaration issued in 1965 by Pope Paul VI, and a statement made in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI, both exonerating the Jewish people. Pope Francis went further to declare Judas as a repented "lost soul" (Hovrat 2020).

The Swiss theologian and priest Hans Urs von Balthasar, continued the trend, arguing that God chose Judas to represent him, making him his minister, who had to execute the sentence of the Father. In his, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved?"* he contended that there is no certainty that anyone is or will be in Hell, and that the Church never spoke about the damnation of individuals, not even that of Judas. Every Christian must hope that all human beings, including Judas will be saved (Balthasar 2014). It is not surprising that such views were opposed by conservative Catholics, who had a more favorable view about hell and damnation (Hovrat 2020; Pagès 2017).

1.2 Questioning the Written Record

Apart from the above theological and humanitarian reasons, Judas' blame was challenged by four lines of arguments, made together or separately. First, the report in the New Testament is fictitious and based on myth, either on Biblical earlier stories about Jacob's son Yehuda selling his brother Joseph into slavery told in Gen 37. 25 – 28 (Spong 2005) or Homer's *Odyssey* where Melanthius betrayed Odysseus (MacDonald 2015, 11–12). Other details are similarly taken from earlier Biblical incidents. The sum of "thirty pieces of silver" assumingly paid to Judas, appeared in both Jeremiah (19.11) and Zechariah

(11.12 – 13). Judas is said to hang himself like Ahitophel who conspired against King David (2 Sam 17.23). Jesus' announcement that he is going to be betrayed "What I am saying does not refer to all of you. I know the ones I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who eats my bread has turned against me'" (John 13.18, all the Gospels quotes are from the *New English Translation*), is modeled after King David's words "Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me" (Ps 41.9). In citing such parallels between Jesus and King David, and between Judas and other Biblical betrayers, some scholars concluded that "Judas' story is either wholly fabricated at worst or grossly embellished at best" (Hatch 2019, 151).

Second, William Klassen (2005:47–51) argued that the negatively loaded word "betrayed," is a tendentious mistranslation of the Greek *paradidomi*, better translated as "handed over," And that Judas contacted the authorities at the request of Jesus, who wanted a message delivered to them in person, making it an act of cooperation, and not betrayal. Judas was chosen for the task because he had some connections with the religious leadership "I know whom I have chosen ..." (John 13.18), and urged him to carry out this mission "Do quickly what you are going to do" (John 13.27).

Third, the Judas' hate expressions were motivated by the mainly Pauline interest to bring about the parting of the ways between early Christianity and Judaism. This motivation puts in doubt the objectivity of the accusations. One means of achieving this goal was describing Judas and his actions in horrendous terms, arousing feelings of hate and revenge. Another means was writing about "the Jews," in a generalized manner, not "us" anymore, but "they." Three examples will suffice: in the Gospel of Matthew, we find that "In reply all the people said, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!'"

(Matt 27.25). In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to the "Jews" as being "from your father, the devil" (John 8:44), and Paul mentions the "Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and persecuted us severely" (1Thess 2:14–16). The schism served the new religion's need to build a different identity and portray itself as better than the old one. Both Judaism and early Christianity fought over recruiting new believers, especially among the gentiles. Defaming the competition is a common practice in such situations. The shifting of the blame of killing Jesus from the Romans to the Jews, helped the new movement ingratiate itself in the eyes of the Roman authorities. Some anti–Jewish feelings were also a reaction to the refusal of the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah (Maccoby 1992).

Fourth, the blaming of Judas might have been a psychologically motivated measure to deal with a belief crisis. Influenced by Albert Schweitzer, one scholar asked: "Why the Church Invented Judas's 'Betrayal' of Jesus?" and then explained that a concrete person who delivered Jesus to the enemy had to be found, partially to draw attention away from the "embarrassing delay in Jesus' Second Coming" (Lüdemann 2020). One of the first studies in this vein suggested that there were two crises: the earlier one was the very Crucifixion, and the second later one was the disconfirmed expectations for the return. The type of resolutions and their order were predicted using Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, and Christology was conceived as the combined resolution attempts of a belief crisis, consisting of the mechanisms of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendental measures. In this view blaming, scapegoating, and foretelling, are all examples of solutions, inserted into the text in a later period (Wernik 1975).

1.3 Judas in the Arts and Gnosticism

A reconsideration and a more positive view of Judas' motivation and deeds can also be seen in the fine arts. Eminent writers, among them Kazantzakis, Jorge Luis Borges, and José Saramago, presented Judas as a resistance hero, or as a suffering witness. The same can be seen in films (Hebron 2019). The discovery and publication of the Gospel of Judas, created a fury of publications, first claiming that this gospel proves that Judas was Jesus' best friend and truest disciple, that in his actions he only obeyed Jesus' wishes and that he was eventually murdered. Among those who treated this gospel as reliable evidence were Bart Ehrman, Craig Evans, Karen King, and Elaine Pagels, who concluded that Jesus and Judas acted in collaboration. Later, the enthusiasm waned (Kim 2013), and it was finally accepted that this gospel is not a historical document, but rather a parody in the "upside-down" world of gnostic sects (DeConick 2016: 7-35). Coincidentally or surprisingly, this article will also suggest that indeed Judas was Jesus' best and most loyal friend and that he was murdered.

In the following sections, construct an alternative scenario will be constructed and the shortcomings of the standard narrative will be pointed out. The Scenario approach theory is used in fields that aim to prepare for future eventualities (investments, defense, and safety control). It is also applied in criminal law to consider and evaluate evidence in terms of causal explanations. The theory is built on insights from the fields of psychology, epistemology, and philosophy of science. People usually use reasoning called "inference to the best explanation" (van Koppen and Mackor 2019). This approach emphasizes that the scenario of the prosecution (in our case the written record in the

Gospels) should be compared to at least one alternative scenario, and suggests that fact-finders assess and compare the two scenarios. Inference to the best explanation (IBE) consists of accepting a scenario when it provides a better explanation of the evidence than any alternative scenario that has been proposed "The central question in the scenario approach is as follows: Why should we believe (beyond reasonable doubt) that the indictment is (probably) true?" The indictment is that Judas betrayed Jesus and committed suicide (which is also considered a crime, one of self–murder).

2. The Nature of the Written Evidence

In his Presidential Address given before the Society of Biblical Literature

and Exegesis, December 28, 1926. Shirley Jackson Case reminded his listeners that "Historical Christianity embraces both the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus, both the Jesus of history and the Christ of dogma." These words hold for the Gospels, which contain evidence of this transformation:

> The Jesus of history became the Christ of faith so soon after his death, if indeed the process of elevation had not set in before the crucifixion, that one finds it a hazardous undertaking to discriminate accurately between the mind of the Master and the mind of his admiring disciples in the gospel–making age (Case 1927).

He suggested that it is impossible to know whether Jesus saw himself as the Messiah or not, but it is much clearer that he believed the day of Yahweh was at hand and saw himself as a prophet in the tradition of the Biblical prophets. Thus, in the Gospels, we can

expect to find statements that pertain to Jesus' thoughts and actions alongside those attributed to him or made by his followers, which reflect their beliefs, psychological needs, and interests. Putting aside the belief in textual inerrancy and literalism, it is possible to say that the Gospels consists of a few layers, as in an archeological site: some historical remains of Jesus' legacy, evidence of a belief crisis, attempts at resolution, evidence of a later crisis and its resolution attempts, and on top of it all, editorial revisions by different interests, such as separating from Judaism, or gaining positions of power in the emerging Church.

A positivistic approach sees events described in the Gospels in the same way it would see non–religious historical–political events. Thus, the possibilities of power struggles and intrigues can be considered and it becomes legitimate to ask in whose interest it was to describe things in a given way. After Jesus' shocking death, the writers, editors, and redactors of the Gospels faced a situation in need of explanation and justification, a situation in which Judas was unfortunately entangled:

> The kingdom did not, of course, arrive shortly after Jesus's death, as the first Christians (and certainly St. Paul) seem to have believed it would. The Christian movement begins in bathos. Its origins lie in a hideously embarrassing anti-climax, one which follows hard on the heels of the shameful scandal that the Son of God has actually been butchered (Eagleton 2008).

Two cognitive means of coping with this crisis of unfulfilled expectations stand out in the Gospels' portrayal of Judas: the idea of predestination, and blaming. From the first perspective, God wished for the Crucifixion, Jesus agreed and knew in advance when it

will happen and who will set the wheels in motion. From the second perspective, Judas and the Jews are responsible for it, and the Jews refused to prevent it. Hence, the gap between expectations and reality is narrowed, by acceptance of the inevitable, alongside the transformation of doubt and shock into hate (Wernik 1975).

In addition to the vertical examination of the Gospels — examining the belief dilemmas they confronted, a horizontal examination is needed —studying the unique characteristics of the different Gospels, the place, time and circles of their writings (See the chapter "The Gospels: fact fiction or speculation." In Greenberg 2007). It seems that the Evangelists had their favored heroes, "If Mark might have been the first to cast a stone at Peter; Matthew would have been the first to lay a cornerstone at the cathedral of St. Peter in Rome" (Robinson 2009). For this article, the Gospel of John is most significant: more than half the occurrences of the names Judas Iscariot and Simon Peter are found there, and it supplies information not found in the others (https://biblescan.com).

Because of its unique transcendent–theological themes, the Gospel of John was considered an unreliable historical source, a view that was rejected in more recent studies. It seems that this Gospel consists indeed of a theological essay, alongside a list of Jesus' miracles and sayings, together with an earlier (70–80 CE) report of events, based on different sources, not found in the synoptic Gospels. Thus, compared with Mark who described a ministry of one year and one trip to Jerusalem, John is probably more realistic in detailing a few travels to and from Jerusalem, as would be expected from Jews of those times, and reporting three years long ministry (Anderson 2007). This might as well be the case with information about Judas, and the involvement of Annas, the high priest Caiaphas' father–in–law, in the proceedings against Jesus (John 18.13), which are not

found in the other Gospels. John differs also in the treatment of Judas Iscariot: rather than erasing information or changing details as the other Gospels do, John leaves the reports in place, adding to them ominous motivations, as if he could read what were Judas' inner thoughts. We will also see that rather than calling him by name, John uses codenames such as "the other disciple," or the "disciple Jesus loved."

3. The Group of Followers

Using rhetorical means (MacDonald 2013) the Gospels present a black and white picture of Jesus Christ, a symbol of truth and holiness, as opposed to Judas Iscariot, the personification of evil. The larger picture of relations between followers and leaders and those within the group of followers is relevant to the understanding of the historical Judas. Two points should be emphasized: first, the influence between leader and followers is bidirectional, and both want to change the other side (Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich 1985). Second, groups, inherently give birth to power struggles between the members, resulting in subgroups, coalitions, in-group members, and out-group ones. On occasion, one member, somewhat different from the others is given the role of "a black sheep," one who is not liked, trusted, and in being harassed or rejected, helps the rest feel closer, united, and on alert against dissent (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens 1988).

Jesus' followers behaved as can be expected from any group. Luke described two situations of arguments–disputes among the disciples as to who is greatest among them (Luke 9.46; 22.24), Mark described such a dispute as well (9.34), and according to Mathew, they also debated who will be higher ranked in the Kingdom of God (Matt 18.1). The identity of the contestants is not given, nor is it known in what way is someone

considered greater. This article suggests that greatness in their disputes was measured by the degree of closeness to Jesus their leader, in other words, the power to influence his decisions and policies, described as “power roles“ (Fiscella 2007, 95-113).

3.1 Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot

An important dividing line between scholars of the "historical Jesus" is the question as to whether he was a social revolutionary or an apocalyptic prophet, heralding the Messiah, or one who fulfilled the role himself. In more prosaic terms, whether he was present or future-oriented. A few contemporary representatives on the social agenda side of the divide will be Terry Eagleton, Shirley Jackson Case, Hyam Maccoby, Geza Vermes, and Gred Thiessen, who were mentioned before. On the apocalyptic-Messianic side, we can find others (Ehrman 1999; Fredriksen 2000; Luderman 2001, and Meir 1994). Arguably, this is exactly the issue that divided the disciples 2,000 years earlier. Simon Peter was the champion of the exaltation of Jesus and promoting him as the Messiah, while Judas was the supporter of Jesus’ social agenda, of actions and behaviors to actualize the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

The first scholar to raise the issue of the struggle between these two, said it forcefully: “There is no doubt that after the Crucifixion, when Judas disappeared from the number of the Twelve, Peter became leader. There is reason to think that before the Crucifixion, Judas had been the leader, for he held the bag, the symbol of authority.” Referring to Mark 14.10, usually translated as “Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus into their hands,” this author commented that the Greek

original “ὁ εἷς τῶν δώδεκα” usually translated as “the one of the twelve” seems evidently to mean “'the first' or 'the chief'’ of the Twelve” (Wright 1916).

Interestingly, in the lists of the apostles, Judas Iscariot's name is always placed last and Simon Peter’s first, while the other disciples’ placement is not fixed (Matt 10.1–4, Mark 3.13–19, and Luke 6.12–16). This placing is not by chance and must reflect some power struggle and interest. In these Gospels, Judas Iscariot’s name always appears with the epithet “who betrayed Jesus” or “became a traitor.” It seems that this jump to the future was added after the nomination of the apostles, which raises the possibility that different lists were in existence and someone made certain that only the first and last names would be identical to clarify who is the most important and who is the traitor. Similarly, in John, whenever Judas appears in the narrative, he is tagged with the label “traitor” (John 12.4; 13.2; 18.2).

An examination of two affairs highlights the respective causes and activities of Simon Peter and Judas. The first, involves the anointment of Jesus’ feet (or head) with expensive nard, by an adoring sinful woman. The second episode describes Jesus’ conversation with the followers in the area of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked them “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” What could be seen as slanted additions of laudatory or disparaging evaluations, will be disregarded to stay close to the dry facts.

The social agenda: in the Gospel of John, the event took place six days before Passover, during Jesus' visit to Lazarus' house. Martha, his sister served dinner, and Mary, the second sister, is the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. In this recounting, Judas "the one who was going to betray him," confronted Jesus saying, "Why wasn't this oil sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor." The Evangelist or a

later editor annotated that Judas did not care about the poor, but rather being a thief wanted to steal more money from the common coffer (John 12.1–8). Luke had the event take place during dinner in the house of Simon, a Pharisee in Galilee. Rather than a close acquaintance, the one who anointed Jesus' feet was an anonymous sinner woman. The significance of the story changed, making it an opportunity to contrast how Jesus and the Pharisees approached the issues of treating sinners, atonement, and forgiveness. Besides the host, Jesus, and the woman, the disciples were not present (Luke 7.36–46).

In the accounts of Mark and Matthew, the event took place in Bethany in Judea, and the sinning woman anointed Jesus' head (an allusion to him being the Messiah), but they differ on other details. According to Matthew, it was in the house of Simon the leper, and the disciples, who witnessed the expensive gesture became indignant and said, "Why this waste? It could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor!" Judas was not mentioned here by name (Matt 26.6–13). In Mark's version, only some of the disciples were angry with the woman for the waste, calculating how much money could have been given to the poor (Mark 14.3–9).

From this gradual modification of the story, one can learn that firstly, Judas spoke up as friends do, not in a timid revering manner, and not behind Jesus' back. Secondly, some other disciples thought like him, and thirdly, that the social agenda of helping the poor, was in his eyes the main cause. Not only that but there is also no evidence that Judas believed Jesus to be God or the Messiah. Unlike Simon Peter, he never called him Lord, but rather used the title Rabbi, that is "teacher" (Matt 26.25, 49).

The Messianic agenda:

> When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16. 13–16).

A parallel report can be found in the other two synoptic Gospels (Mark 8.28; Luke 9.18), and in the three of them, Simon Peter gave the consistent answer that he is the Messiah, or "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16.14; Mark 8.28; Luke 9.18). The other disciples answered that Jesus is a prophet. Their names are not given, and it is not known how many they were. Why did Jesus ask at all what the people thought about him? One possibility is that he was aware of the rising beliefs that he was the Messiah, was conflicted about it, and needed to decide on the future course of action to take (Wernik 2020, 98–9).

Jesus saw himself as a prophet, one who continued the tradition of the Biblical prophets who warned about the approaching "day of Yahweh," and called for social righteousness. Simon Peter headed in a different direction, one of exaltation or even deification. Simon Peter, John, and James went up the mountain with Jesus and saw how "the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became very bright, a brilliant white" and how he continued to speak with Moses and Elijah. Simon Peter then offered to build tents for the three of them (Matt 17.1–4; Mark 9.2–5; Luke 9.28–33). Again, it is not mentioned where the other nine disciples (including Judas) were. Later, it was Simon Peter who said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life. We have come

to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6.67–69). Nathaniel can also be added to this subgroup, for declaring "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel" (John 1.49).

3.2 Jesus, Judas, and the other Disciples

Most of the disciples were Galileans, who lived close to the Sea of Galilee, some of them were family-related and in the same profession (one was a tax collector and another a former zealot). They were probably considered and treated by the Pharisees as *Am ha'aretz* (The Hebrew name for simple country folks, literally "people of the earth") (Kohler 1906). It is recounted how and by whom they were recruited. Judas Iscariot was an exception: nowhere is it mentioned when and how he was recruited, and it is quite possible that he and Jesus met and became friends in Judea, before returning to Galilee and the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Wernik 2020). If so, Judas was a city man (one possible meaning of the name Iscariot, which might have been a nickname given to him by the other disciples who were villagers), more sophisticated than his peers, who knew people of authority in Jerusalem, and it is not surprising that he was given the role of the group's treasurer by Jesus. The others had a complementary relationship of disciples–Rabbi, with signs of respect and adoration. Jesus and Judas had a close relationship of equals, Jesus calling him and no one else "friend" (Matt 26.50), in the Greek original *hetairos*, better translated as a companion. Judas, and none of the other disciples, greeted Jesus with a kiss (Matt 26.47–50; Mark 14.43–45), a sign of closeness and caring (Ellington 1990), and it is reasonable to assume that this was their habitual way of greeting each other, as a person with ill intentions might avoid close physical contact with the victim, and try not to draw attention to himself with a display of unusual

behaviors. At the Last Supper, the two sat next to each other and dipped their bread in the same dish (Matt 26.23), and Jesus gave Judas a piece of bread he dipped in the dish to eat, another token of affection (John 13.26). The astute reader will discover immediately that Jesus' presumed comment "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22.48) is disregarded here. However, it will be discussed later.

3.3 Jesus and Simon Peter

Peter, we saw, is considered in the Gospels as the first among the disciples: the first to follow him (Luke 5.4–11; John 1.35–42) the first to call him Lord, "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5.8). Like Jesus, he could even walk on water for a while (Matt 14.28). He was the spokesman of the other disciples (Matt 15.15; 19.27; Luke 12.41; John 6.67–68). He was among the three disciples who were present at the transfiguration (Matt 17.1; Mark 9.2; Luke 9.28), the raising of Jarius' daughter (Mark 5.37; Luke 8.51), and at the agony at Gethsemane (Matt 26.37; Mark 14.33). Jesus blessed him and promised "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven" (Matt 14.28–31), a promise which does not appear in the other Gospels.

According to John, Jesus said without mentioning any name, that one of the twelve is the Satan (*diabolos*), and the editor of the Gospel commented that he was referring to Judas son of Simon Iscariot (John 6.70–71). However, earlier, Jesus called Simon Peter a Satan (Matt 16.23; Mark 8.33) adding that Satan wished to "sift him like wheat," and that he prayed that his belief will not weaken, predicting that "Peter, the rooster will not crow

today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (Matt 26.34; Mark 14.30; Luke 22.31–34; John 13.36–38). The same messages were repeated a second time (Matt 26.31–36; Mark 14.32–42; Luke 22.40–46). The disparity between the praiseful descriptions mentioned above, and these unflattering passages is surprising and begs for an explanation.

Traditionally, these expressions are understood as a demonstration of the importance of repentance and forgiveness (granted to Simon Peter, but not to Judas Iscariot), and a lesson about human frailty. However, an alternative reading will see the biased aggrandizement of Simon Peter above as the counterbalance to the biased denigration of Justas Iscariot, both being editorial modifications. Moreover, the blame of being a satanic betrayer can be conceived as a projection onto Judas of what was said about Simon Peter. Finally, Jesus or an editor close to Judas could have realized that the successful promotion of him as the Messiah by Simon Peter and the curtailment of his social agenda might have brought him to the grievous situation in which he found himself. It is reasonable to assume that Jesus' grand entrance to Jerusalem riding an ass, as the Messiah was expected to do, with cheering crowds (Matt 21.1–11; Mark 11.1–11; Luke 19.28–38; John 12.12–19), hastened the authorities' decision to consider him a threat.

4. Some Commonsense Questions

Naturally, for lack of contradictory evidence, it is impossible to prove that the accusations made against Judas Iscariot are not true. Still, it is possible to raise questions and to use common–sense arguments to show that they are flawed:

4.1 Motivations for Betrayal

Judas is blamed for committing treason, betraying his Lord and master. When do people commit treason? It can happen in one or more of the following: firstly, extortion - when refusing to cooperate can bring severe loss or harm including death to the person or his or her family. Secondly, greed - when a person is tempted with a large sum of money and given assurances that the treason will remain hidden. Thirdly, ideological motivation, as was the case with members of the communist party who lived in western countries. In all these situations, the betrayer, for fear of being found out and to avoid reprisal, tries to keep the treason hidden.

None of these reasons apply here. Judas left his home and followed Jesus under harsh conditions for close to three years. John's explanation that he was a thief (John 12.6) is not satisfactory. The thirty pieces of silver supposedly paid to Judas was mentioned only in Matthew (27.9–10), to fulfill a prophecy in Zechariah (11.13). It was not mentioned in Mark and Luke, and the sum mentioned was very modest, only a tenth of what the sinful woman paid for the ointment used to anoint Jesus' feet (or head). If Judas loved money so much, shouldn't he have stayed at home? How come no one complained before about his stealing from the common coffer? The reason given by Luke that Satan entered Judas (22.3) is circular, begging the question: why did Satan do it? Is it possible that Judas discovered only then, and not when he decided to join him, that Jesus was righteous (Matt 27.3–5)? Furthermore, had Judas been an immoral sociopath, guilt feelings would not be expected, certainly not suicide, which was reported by only Matthew and not by the other Evangelists.

4.2 The Identification of Jesus

Why did the priests pay someone to point out Jesus to them? When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with his many followers and was welcomed by an enthusiastic crowd, he was already a well–known person. In the past, and on different occasions, he had disputed with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. When Jesus saw the number of soldiers and officers sent to arrest him, he said "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me like you would an outlaw? Day after day I sat teaching in the temple courts, yet you did not arrest me" (Matt 26.55; Mark 14.49; Luke 22.53). Not only that, no one had to identify him as he readily admitted "I am he" (John 18.4–9). Besides, if Judas indeed betrayed Jesus, wouldn't it be more reasonable for him to point Jesus out from afar and undercover, rather than get closer and kiss him?

4.3 The Evangelists' Reliability

The second issue is the reliability of the accusation against Judas. When different witnesses tell a different version of an event, we cannot be sure what happened. We already saw that Matthew was the only Gospel to declare Peter the rock, the holder of the keys (Matt 16.17–19). He was the only one who claimed that Judas told the soldiers and the servants of the priests in advance, that the one he will kiss is Jesus (Matt 26.47–50). Matthew is the only one to mention the sum of money Judas received (Matt 26:14–16), his guilt feelings, and suicide (Matt 27.3–5). Only in Matthew's version did Jesus say explicitly that Judas is the traitor (Matt 26.25). All these make him (or some editor of the Gospel) a mouthpiece of Simon Peter, working to serve his interests.

It was mentioned before that the Gospel of John is an amalgamation of a few texts, one of them reports events in support of Simon Peter, occasionally blaming Judas and

praising Simon Peter in the same sentence: Judas betrayed Jesus and Simon Peter believed in him (John 6.68–70); Judas was the betrayer, and Simon Peter drew his sword to defend him (John 18.2). Jesus told Simon Peter that he will deny him three times, as indeed happened, but only in John is Peter restored in Jesus' third appearance after his death. He asked Simon Peter if he loved him, and the latter answered each time that he did, leading to Jesus telling him "Shepherd my sheep" (John 21.15–19).

4.4 Editorial Interventions

The universal pasting of the epithet "who betrayed Jesus" to Judas Iscariot's name in all the Gospels suggests a late modification by one authority, as the different Gospels were almost ready in their final form. This is also true for all formulations that appear in the four Gospels, such as Jesus knowing in advance that he will be betrayed and killed. Another editorial addition has to do with mind-reading statements which describe what only the very person could know. This is the case in each of the following: the discussion between Judas and the High Priests when only they were present at a meeting; the explanation of Judas' opposition to the waste of money in Mary's expensive adoring gesture, in terms of avarice (John 12.1–8); the claim that when Jesus said that one of the disciples is a Satan, he meant Judas (John 6.70–71). How could anyone know what they thought?

The only Gospel, where Judas Iscariot has any significant presence is John, in which some factual information is supplied, albeit together with either forbidding interpretations, or without using his name, and substituting it with codenames. In the other Gospels, aside from the betrayal and lists of disciples, the person whom Jesus nominated to be the treasurer of the group, who was probably his closest friend,

apparently had nothing to say. This is remindful of the Roman *Damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory). After their death, some emperors were deified, but some others were officially erased from memory, usually in cases where they were considered tyrants, traitors, or enemies of the state. Their names were erased from inscriptions and their images were destroyed. Such a move needed the approval of the Senate (Flower 2006).

The identity of the anonymous disciple "whom Jesus loved," who is mentioned six times in the Gospel of John, and not in the synoptic Gospels, remains a puzzle. Different scholars mentioned different candidates, among them John the son of Zebedee, the assumed author of the Gospel (Unger 1988), Lazarus, the friend loved by Jesus (Baltz 2011), Mary Magdalene, who according to the Gospel of Mary was especially loved (King 2003), and James, the brother of Jesus (Tabor 2007). The different scholars found reasons to support their claim, and also tried to explain why the name of this disciple had to remain unmentioned. As Jesus told his disciples “I give you a new commandment – to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples – if you have love for one another” (John 13.34–5). The epithet may relate to more than one disciple. The writer chose to report about Judas in this way, because of the "*Damnatio memoriae”* policy, *mentioned before.* If Judas was “the one who betrayed Jesus,” it was impossible to say that Jesus loved him, thus portraying Jesus as a poor judge of persons. He also used the code name “other” (John 20.2), a Talmudic practice of not mentioning by name the apostate Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah (Ginzberg 2017). Incidentally, even today, some religious Jews avoid mentioning Jesus’ name, and substitute it with “that man.” Hence, “the disciple whom

Jesus loved leaned back against Jesus' chest" (John 13.25), was Judas, who in the next verse, mentioned by name, was the disciple to whom Jesus gave a dipped piece of bread to eat (John 13:26). It is only reasonable that Jesus gave the dipped piece of bread to someone who sat next to him. It was also to Judas, that Jesus gave the responsibility to take care of his mother (John 19.26). The hypothesis that the disciple that Jesus love, is none other than Judas Iscariot, was suggested also by others, who accepted the charge of betrayal (Lee 2020; Pangan 2020).

5. An Alternative Scenario

One of the solutions to the belief crisis which erupted with the Crucifixion of the disciples' and followers' beloved and admired teacher, was finding someone to blame. Scapegoating takes place after an initial denial of the facts, and while still in a state of crisis and shock. Zeroing in on one specific target as responsible for their problems, enables the in-group members to change perplexity into hate, and confusion into certainty, leaving them guilt-free and maintaining their cohesion (Glick 2005). Scapegoating leads to tragic results: thus, in medieval Europe, during the Black Death pandemic, from 1348 to 1351, Jews were accused of spreading contagion and poisoning wells, and more than two hundred Jewish communities were wiped out (McNeil 2009).

Judas who was already a "black sheep," was made a scapegoat. There were three setting issues. Firstly, the followers were uneducated Galilean villagers, who knew each other, and talked in the same northern dialect; he was a more sophisticated city man, who came from Judea and had connections with the authorities. Secondly, Judas was Jesus' close friend, whom he probably met before the beginning of his ministry. They kissed

and called each other "friend," at dinners they sat close together dipping their bread in the same dish. The others did not have such an intimate relationship with Jesus and acted towards him in a formal revering manner. Thirdly, some of the disciples following Simon Peter began to see and publicize Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah, for whom everyone was waiting. Judas saw him as a human being, a teacher, and a prophet who demanded that people repent, love, and help others. Tensions came into existence as Judas Iscariot and Simon Peter pulled in different directions. The feelings of envy, resentment, distrust, and hate had been brewing and suppressed for almost three years. Simon Peter had more political clout among the disciples, Judas was in the minority.

We have two conflicting reports of Judas' death: While in Mark and Luke nothing is mentioned about it, in Mathew, whom we saw as Simon Peter's mouthpiece, we find "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood," he said. "What is that to us?" they replied. "You bear the responsibility… Judas threw the silver into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself" (Matt 27.4–5). The other report was "Now this man Judas acquired a field with the reward of his unjust deed, and falling headfirst he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out" (Acts 1.18). The first report looks like a cover-up, including a confession of guilt and wrongdoing. The details in the second report do not point to a suicide or an accidental fall. They suggest that the scapegoating here was not symbolic, but an act of murder closer to the original meaning of the term (Leviticus 16:1–34).

The only thing left to do was to erase all positive references to Judas and reinterpret or rewrite events. Jesus asked Judas to meet with the authorities either to reach a truce or deliver a message about repentance and the coming day of Yahweh. The mission was

unsuccessful, as the Priests were not interested in a peaceful solution. The events were then reconstrued into a story about the money-hungry Judas, who plotted and found reasons to deliver Jesus. Everything, from kissing Jesus or eating together was then reinterpreted accordingly. Again, what was presented here is only an alternative scenario. The reader will have to decide whether or not it is convincing. In court, a reasonable doubt would suffice.

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