

Our Patron Saint:

Judas Iscariot, Forgiveness, and Christian Imagination

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Judas is a character who has fascinated Christians for centuries; he has been the object of much hatred and disgust, as well as curiosity. In our limited human capacity, it may seem easy to damn him for his betrayal of Jesus, despite there being no final word in the New Testament regarding his fate. But is it our place to judge him, and if we do so, how should Judas be judged? While we cannot know the mind of God, we invariably use our human tendency to fill in the cracks of knowledge, to embellish upon what we do not know in order to make the story more satisfying in our own minds. Imagination is part of our desire to create, an attribute we inherit from our own Creator. For some, imagination damns Judas, and for others it redeems him. But as former Elmhurst College Professor Ronald Goetz writes, “Why should Judas be judged more harshly than we are?”¹ It is certainly understandable to want revenge or justice for the death of Christ, but there may be a perspective on Judas we miss as humans. This perspective is informed by Christian imagination, by applying our creative impulses to the fate of Judas. As we look at selected portrayals of Judas throughout the history of Christian artistry and imagination, we may be able to understand why we are able or unable to forgive Judas, to see what is important to us in the story of Christ’s betrayer. The admittedly limited set of examples that follows brings together arts, both the dramatic and the static, using visual, audible and written genres from various eras in Christian history. All of these works have a focused portrayal of Judas, concerning his life or his fate. By exploring Judas’s character and fate through the imagination, we may be able to see Judas as our “patron saint,” the “agent whose dark work was a necessary part of our salvation.”²

Starting from the Scriptures, we move into Christian imagination to make determinations about the fate of Judas. Extra-Scriptural references play a part in attempting to give a voice to Judas, but in order to start from a common source of imagination, the canonical Scriptures are

¹ Goetz, “Judas,” 263.

² Ibid.

probably the best place to begin. So, what do we know about Judas Iscariot³? According to the canonical Christian Scriptures he was one of the twelve disciples,⁴ he betrayed (or possibly simply handed over) Jesus to the authorities⁵ and died a violent death, although the Biblical accounts of his death do not match.⁶ But beyond the Biblical accounts, where do we go? The answer is Christian imagination.

Judas and his fate find a voice in popular culture via the music of the group U2. Led by singer/activist Bono, U2 has consistently used Christian imagery in their songs, some of it unconventional. “Until the End of the World,” a song from their 1991 album *Achtung Baby*, is a conversation between Judas and Jesus, taking place in the afterlife.⁷ Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the song is its treatment of Judas; he is neither explicitly condemned nor forgiven. Jesus only tells Judas that he will wait “until the end of the world”—the line repeated at the end of each verse.

Waves of regret, waves of joy
I reached out for the one I tried to destroy
You, you said you’d wait until the end of the world

The first two verses have Jesus talking about the end of the world and acting like it was the end of the world (after Judas’s kiss) respectively. This is not a sweet song of fond reminiscence, but one living out the drama of a confessional, as if Judas could only too quickly get the events out of his head as he is “drowning in sorrow.” Reaching out to Jesus, Judas attempts to embrace him. Christ rejects the embrace (so it seems), but we do not get a satisfying conclusion to the dialogue. Judas’s recollection is enhanced by the music. Guitarist The Edge uses heavy reverb and echo effects on his musical lines, creating an all-enveloping sound. The

³ There is even debate concerning what exactly “Iscariot” means; it is not essential to this study. The best in-depth look can be found in Fr. Roman Halas’s dissertation, *Judas Iscariot*.

⁴ Mark 3:13-19.

⁵ Mark 14:10. For an in-depth look at the use of the word “betrayal” and the theological implications of the Greek word *paradidomi*, please see *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* by William Klassen, p. 42-61.

⁶ Matthew 27:5, Acts 1:16-18.

⁷ Ochoa, “20th Annual.”

music is disorienting; it is like being awash in a rough sea, much as the final verse suggests. The sins of Judas wash over him, and the music gives the impression that his inner turmoil is devastating. The music is driven by a strong beat; it is not a song that meanders along, but pulses across the images of the Last Supper and the betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane. A question does arise—is Jesus waiting until the end of the world to embrace Judas, or is Jesus’s embrace lasting that long? Given that Judas reaches out for Jesus, it may be that Jesus is willing to let Judas wait. But if Judas’s time in hell is eternal punishment or temporary refinement, we are left uncertain. The repeated line does make the point that for true knowledge of Judas’s fate, we as humans will need to wait to discover the outcome. However, our lack of divine knowledge should in no way prevent our imaginations from continuing to study Judas. By looking at Judas in the hypothetical, we have the freedom to explore Judas’s fate, even if we cannot change its eternal outcome. Bono has shown that we can make pronouncements about Judas while at the same time remaining enigmatic; we can accept this because of the medium of song, which reinforces its message through repetition and music.

Through music we internalize messages; however, a visual medium or a descriptive telling of a story can allow us to linger on details, and the artists can use this to their advantage. Perhaps one of the most vivid and disturbing images of the fate of Judas is provided by the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri. In Canto XXXIV, Dante and Virgil come face to face with Satan; his three faces can be viewed as a mockery of the Trinity, his eternal devouring of the flesh of Judas, Brutus and Cassius an evil Eucharist, a communion of betrayal.⁸

For the one in front the gnawing was a trifle
to the clawing, for from time to time
his back was left with not a shred of skin

“That soul up there who bears the greatest pain,”
said the master, “is Judas Iscariot, who has

⁸ Paffenroth, *Judas*, 29.

his head within and outside flails his legs.”⁹

The circle of hell Satan is trapped in is the inner circle Judecca (the innermost part of the ninth circle of hell, Cocytus), named for Judas, and reserved for those who betrayed their masters.¹⁰ In Dante’s view, Judas’s betrayal is not just about the act of sending Jesus to the cross, it is about the betrayal of a friend. Judas’s damnation comes about because he has destroyed the pure love between Jesus and Judas. In this conscious moment of the ending of a friendship, it goes beyond the betrayal of “instinctive” love, but rather the ending of a “fully conscious relationship.”¹¹ And not only is there a betrayal of a friendship, but the betrayal of God’s rule. Brutus and Cassius attempted to overthrow the Roman Empire, the civic kingdom of God; Judas’s betrayal is also the attempted overthrow of God’s kingdom.¹² The traitors in this picture of their judgment are feeding evil—betrayal is kept alive by the betrayal of the love of the masters.

Dante’s treatment of Judas as the penultimate sinner in Hell is that of a detached observer; he does not attempt to analyze or personalize the actions of Judas. He is painting a picture with words, making a final pronouncement on the fate of Christ’s betrayer consistent with his beliefs about betrayal. Dante may have been influenced by a depiction of Satan in the cupola of the Baptistery of Saint John in Florence; Satan is similarly devouring three sinners, although there is no direct reference that any one of them is Judas.¹³ By placing Judas in this hellish punishment, Dante drives home his point about his belief that betrayal is the most heinous sin. Dante does not attempt to analyze what goes on behind Judas’s actions—for the poet they are consistent with the punishments in the rest of his *Inferno*, and Judas is not worthy of a reprieve.

⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, 631.

¹⁰ Reynolds, *Dante*, 229.

¹¹ Luke, *Dark Wood*, 42-3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ Reynolds, *Dante*, 228.

Equally damning images of Judas are seen in Giotto's 14th century frescos in the Scrovegni Chapel in Italy, albeit for a different sin. Built by the wealthy Enrico Scrovegni, the chapel is covered in frescos by the artist Giotto depicting events in the history of Christianity and the life of Jesus. Scrovegni built the chapel as penance for the sins of his father Reginaldo, specifically, usury.¹⁴ The *Pact of Judas* portrays Judas receiving the money for Christ's betrayal from the high priests, and there is a shadowy form grasping his shoulders—Satan.¹⁵ He is directing a youthful, almost handsome Judas to the priests; his hands grasping his shoulders can be interpreted as an ancient gesture of the presentation of a bride.¹⁶ Juxtaposed with this scene is the *Visitation*, the meeting of the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. Drawing off a lesson of Saint Bonaventure, "what you have conceived you will bear," Giotto places Judas's conception of the betrayal against the faithful bearing of Jesus and John.¹⁷

Money in hand, the next scene involving Judas is the *Betrayal of Christ*. In the midst of a storm of torches, soldiers and men, Judas embraces Jesus, his yellow robe engulfing Christ. The youthful face of the *Pact* transforms into the face of a "primate, with short brow, ... dishonest eyes ... [h]is lips pursed in a mixture of brazen insolence and cowardice."¹⁸ Giotto gives Christ an "Olympian" face, further distancing the two men. Judas and Jesus are not actually kissing in this fresco, allowing us to see Judas's lips "pursed in an unseemly eroticism" opposite of the calm face of Jesus, implying that the kiss is forced and not willingly returned.¹⁹ Again, Giotto places in juxtaposition a scene that may not seem explicitly in opposition, but provides valuable insight. The *Meeting at the Golden Gate*, a scene of the embrace of the parents of the Virgin

¹⁴ Stubblebine, *Giotto*, 72. Dante places Reginaldo Scrovegni in the seventh circle of the *Inferno*.

¹⁵ Luke 22:3, John 13:26.

¹⁶ Derbes and Sandona, "Barren Metal," 280.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 279-80.

¹⁸ Stubblebine, *Giotto*, 86.

¹⁹ Derbes and Sandona, "Barren Metal," 282.

Mary, shows two people in a loving embrace, lips together, a mutual loving union.²⁰ Judas's embrace is not equivalent; Miroslav Volf writes in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, "If embrace takes place, it will always be because the other has desired the self just as the self has desired the other."²¹ Judas is holding Jesus in "his own power," as Jesus does not reciprocate the embrace. Instead of an embrace leading towards reconciliation, as Volf believes it should, it only serves to differentiate between the men. In this understanding, Jesus's non-embrace of Judas could be viewed as the exclusion of the betrayer, especially considering Giotto's *Last Judgment*.

We do not see Judas in the Passion timeline again until the *Last Judgment*, which takes place on the Western wall. Judas's presence in the *Last Judgment* is minimal, but his fate is clear. At the base of the cross, on the left side of Christ, those damned with the sin of usury are hanging by their moneybags.²² Judas is among them, his intestines burst and hanging out of his body. The continuity of Giotto's symbolism draws us back to the *Pact of Judas*; the conception of evil has been brought forth. Judas, pregnant with sin, gives birth to his own demise, his soul exiting his body through his bowels.²³ By placing Judas with the usurers, we can see that his demise may not necessarily be attributed to his suicide, but rather to his greed. In his homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Saint John Chrysostom notes that the decline of Judas began with theft, and sin only brings about more despair, in this case, onto death by suicide.²⁴ Opposite of Judas's grisly depiction we see Enrico Scrovegni presenting a model of the chapel to the Virgin Mary.²⁵ For the Scrovegni family, greed is overcome by giving back to God; the sin of Judas can be rectified by the giving of oneself to the Lord willingly, which in Judas's suicide, he failed to do.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Volf, *Exclusion*, 143.

²² Derbes and Sandona, "Barren Metal," 275.

²³ Ibid., 280. It is thought that Judas's soul could not exit through his mouth because it was made holy by the kiss.

²⁴ Chrysostom, *Homilies*, LXXXVI, 514.

²⁵ Stubblebine, *Giotto*, 173.

By stepping back and depicting Judas from afar, there is a final judgment pronounced on Judas without getting his side of the story; it becomes a matter of dogma rather than artistic expression. It should certainly be understood that Giotto was likely working within his commission as an artist under the direction of the Scrovegni family. However, it is certainly just as easy for an artist or commissioner to imagine a Judas stuck in the trappings of hell as it is to pronounce him redeemed. Perhaps their judgment of Judas is simply their own, despite the more dogmatic undercurrents involved in their work. Giotto places Judas's hanging on the left side of Christ's cross, opposite of Scrovegni's presentation of the chapel on the right. Dante, by placing Judas next to Brutus and Cassius, shows a warning against the betrayal of friends, as well as against world order, Judas becomes a cautionary tale against sin. But not even artists can agree on why he is in hell. For that matter, they cannot agree if he even is in hell.

There is something to be said about the powerful words of Dante, or the vivid images of Giotto, but as with any form or art, it is limited by the medium. In the realm of dramatic interpretation, characters come alive as human actors portray them. One of the most active and powerful interpretations comes from Martin Scorsese's 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the book by Nikos Kazantzakis. Scorsese's Jesus is timid, unsure of himself and very human. Judas comes across as the dominant character in the film. He is the most outspoken, often rebuking Jesus when their opinions differ on the direction of Jesus's ministry. Judas is a natural leader for the band of disciples, although he is jealous of the relationships Jesus has with others. Despite Judas's almost overbearing personality, the two share a deep friendship. Because of his strength, Judas is the disciple that Jesus picks to betray him to the Romans. Despite Judas's protests to "get someone stronger," Jesus has faith in Judas to be the only one who could possibly start Jesus on the path to the cross. In the powerful betrayal scene, Judas approaches Jesus, walking with purpose but with tears in his eyes. A mutual embrace follows their full-

mouth kiss, both men seemingly realizing they will never see each other again. Unlike Giotto's *Betrayal of Christ*, we see the inclusion and love between the two men, the embrace being more in line with Volf's understanding. Volf admits that any embrace comes with a risk, and "each has the right to refuse the embrace."²⁶ The Jesus and Judas of *The Last Temptation* return each other's embrace, each bringing their self into the other.

Scorsese's vision, however, has Judas and Jesus meeting again, not in the afterlife, but in the last temptation. Satan visits Jesus on the cross and shows him a vision of a normal life, telling Jesus that he is not the Messiah and does not need to die. In the vision, at the end of a long life, the disciples come to visit Jesus during the burning of Jerusalem. Judas's primary role in this scene is to turn Jesus away from the last temptation of the devil.²⁷ Judas screams at Jesus, calling him a "traitor," telling him his "place was on the cross." Instead of tears of the betrayer, Judas cries with the tears of the betrayed. Despite Judas doing what Jesus told him to do, Jesus is the one who falls short of his expectations as the Messiah. Judas's impassioned cry, "I loved you so much I went and betrayed you," reflects his broken heart. In a radical twist of traditional views of Judas, Judas is the one who cannot forgive; all the works of Jesus and the disciples are in vain because Jesus accepts the temptation and denies his fate on the cross. It is telling that there is no corresponding temptation of Judas with money from the high priests, giving further moral weight to the words of Judas. It may have not been intended by Scorsese, but there is also the idea that Judas cannot forgive because he was not transformed by the new covenant of the Christ. Judas emerges into Jesus's room with blood running down his hands and wrists—he has returned to his violent past. Judas understands the violence of the cross is better than the violence of revolution; Jesus "broke the vicious cycle of violence by absorbing it," as Volf writes.²⁸ Instead of

²⁶ Volf, *Exclusion*, 147.

²⁷ Paffenroth, *Judas*, 139.

²⁸ Volf, *Exclusion*, 291.

transformation through the cross, Judas has regressed to his former self, the one that desired to kill Jesus at the beginning of the film.

A similarly powerful and sympathetic view of Judas can be found in the play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* by Stephen Adly Guirgis. Guirgis's quirky and colorful²⁹ play takes place in the realm of Hope (which in its current incarnation is a courtroom) and under the premise of an appeal of Judas's fate.³⁰ Judas is absent from his own appeal; we only see him in flashbacks and in his catatonic condition in hell. In his stead, we have several witnesses examined on the stand, such as Mother Theresa, Simon the Zealot, Sigmund Freud and Satan; some knew Judas, others did not. Freud's testimony provides one of the more sympathetic understandings of Judas. In Freud's view, Jesus is responsible for the suicide of Judas, as Jesus did not take into account the mental illness of Judas.³¹ Since Judas's mental condition was pre-existing, Jesus had the weight on his shoulders to prevent Judas from killing himself, because "Normal people do not kill themselves—even under extreme duress."³² Freud speaks of a patient of his who committed suicide by throwing herself from his fourth-story office. Freud says, "Did I bill her for the broken plate glass window she leapt through? Of course not! ... I exercised responsibility for my greatness—by moving my offices to the ground floor. I should think God would have done the same."³³ When God did not meet Judas in a place that reduced his vulnerability, the responsibility for the death of Judas falls on God—and Judas should not be punished for what God failed to do.³⁴

²⁹ In characterization, as well as language.

³⁰ Guirgis, *Last Days*, 8-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴ Saint Augustine writes in *The City of God* that the suicide of Judas was what sealed his fate, resulting in a damning understanding of the act of suicide throughout much of Christian history (1.17). A reformed understanding of suicide (and Judas) can be found in Smith's *A Long-Standing Grief*.

As the play draws to a close, we finally find Judas and Jesus, together in what seems to be Judas's hell. Judas wants nothing to do with Jesus, repeatedly screaming to leave him alone. He believes that Jesus left him in his hour of need, saying, "I made a mistake! And if that was wrong, then you should have told me! And if a broken heart wasn't sufficient reason to hang, THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME THAT TOO!"³⁵ At the end, Judas can no longer even see Jesus, although he is standing right next to him; he cannot say he loves Jesus, although Jesus says, "If you don't love me, then why are you here?"³⁶ As Mother Theresa, a witness for the prosecution says earlier in the play, "The music of God's love and grace kept playing, but he, he made himself hard of hearing."³⁷ Judas cannot accept God's love; he cannot see past his despair.

Ultimately, the jury finds Judas guilty; the foreman, Butch Honeywell, delivers the verdict to Judas in person, along with a case of beer. Instead of leaving, though, Butch sits next to Judas and tells him about a time in his life when he cheated on his wife, and after the fact he could never look at her the same way again. "... [E]verything was exactly the same as if the night before had never happened, except, it wasn't the same, and I knew it. I had no idea why I had done what I done. But I had done it. And it couldn't be changed."³⁸ Butch goes on to say that the only way he could make it better was to keep using alcohol and women, echoing Judas's deepening despair and his inability to escape it. Butch ends the play with the line, "You cashed in on silver, Mr. Iscariot, but me? Me, I threw away gold."³⁹ Judas is stuck in his own cycle of despair; by accepting the silver, he throws away the gold of the resurrection, of the forgiveness of the risen Christ, his friend and master. However, Jesus does not leave Judas, washing Judas's feet as the final curtain falls. The love and patience of God will not leave Judas alone. Judas may not be willing to escape his hell, but Jesus is not willing to abandon him there.

³⁵ Guirgis, *Last Days*, 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

If we as imperfect humans cannot make a clear judgment on the fate of Judas, should we even consider it our place to judge Judas? Again, Volf writes, “We must therefore distinguish between our idea of God’s justice and God’s justice itself.”⁴⁰ We can make assumptions about the fate of Judas, but our knowledge of Judas’s fate cannot compare to the knowledge and justice of God. Judas’s tale can show us the consequences of sin, our being cut off from God and his love, our separation from his presence. However, at the same time, is it possible that the story of Judas can show us the ultimate and undeniable love of God? If we, as humans, can imagine a forgiven and redeemed Judas, then it is certainly within the character of God to embrace Judas as well. Even many Church Fathers such as Saint Ambrose felt that Judas could have been redeemed, but his suicide ended his possibility of repenting for his sin.⁴¹ By re-imagining an ancient Christian story, we can see how God could welcome Judas into his kingdom, despite his violent end.

The Christian idea of the Harrowing of Hell may allow Judas to come face to face with Jesus. The icon used in the Eastern Orthodox tradition shows Christ, clad in white and shining with glory, pulling Adam and Eve out of coffins, their death defeated by Jesus. Roman Catholic theologian and writer Gary Wills’s imagination has Jesus taking a slightly different route; he feels “the Shepherd was first seeking out his special lost one, Judas.”⁴² This is an idea also reflected in D. Ruth Etchells’s poem, “The Ballad of the Judas Tree.” Her Jesus claims, “But first I had to come to Hell / To share the death you had,” and that “[t]here is no final victory / Without this soul from Hell.”⁴³ After the betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane, Judas does not face Jesus again, instead confessing to the high priests and returning the money.⁴⁴ Rembrandt’s *The Repentant Judas Returns the Thirty Pieces of Silver* shows the high priests are unable to even

⁴⁰ Volf, *Exclusion*, 199.

⁴¹ Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance*, 348.

⁴² Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, 123.

⁴³ Quoted in Bauckham and Hart, *At the Cross*, 30.

⁴⁴ Matthew 27:3-4

look at Judas, the man prostrate before them, hair torn out of his head, hands clutched together to the point his tendons can be seen.⁴⁵ Judas can find no solace in his former co-conspirators. If we follow the Gospel accounts of the death of Judas, he dies not coming into contact with either Jesus or the other disciples. It is important to note that the betrayal of Peter is forgiven, but in order for forgiveness to be given, Peter has to come back into contact with Christ.⁴⁶ Through the three-fold confession of his love for Jesus, Peter repents of his three-fold denial. Judas is denied this opportunity, unable to share of the meal with the resurrected Lord. But it is possible that Judas has already been restored. We can imagine Jesus seeking out the face of Judas, hanging from his tree in the center of hell, in order to forgive him.⁴⁷ And if we, as humans, can imagine this, is it outside God's nature to forgive Judas? If we, broken and selfish as we are, can forgive Judas, think of the infinite embrace of God's eternal and all-encompassing love, and how much easier it must be for him, as God, to do what we sometimes cannot. We are told to love our neighbors and our enemies; if Judas is our neighbor, our fellow sinner, it should be easy to love him. Ronald Goetz writes, "The best hope most of us have in facing the final judgment will be to stand in solidarity with Judas. For in pleading his case we will be pleading our own."⁴⁸ If he is our enemy, then by the words of Christ⁴⁹ it should be that much easier to love him as well.

Guirgis's *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* opens with a monologue from Judas's mother, "Henrietta," commenting on the world's judgment of her son:

On the day of my son's birth I was infused with a love beyond all measure and understanding ... the world tells me that God is in heaven and that my son is in hell. I tell the world the one true thing I know: If my son is in hell, then there is no heaven—because if my son sits in hell, *there is no God*.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Hollander, "Losses," 1336-7.

⁴⁶ John 21:15-17.

⁴⁷ For the idea of forgiveness through the act of facing, I am in debt to *The Faces of Forgiveness* by Shults and Sandage.

⁴⁸ Goetz, "Judas," 263.

⁴⁹ Matthew 5:44

⁵⁰ Guirgis, *Last Days*, 8.

Perhaps Christian imagination has missed the point when it has damned Judas; perhaps it has not looked at Judas with a mother's love, or even the love of God. Judas seems so far away to us—an underdeveloped supporting player in the life of Jesus Christ, a man who turned over a friend to be killed in a horrible and painful way. But, in a way, he may be considered someone we can all relate to, a man who betrayed Jesus—as we all do, a man who despairs in his sin—as we all have. Wills echoes the sentiments of Goetz, also referring to Judas as our “patron saint.”⁵¹ While Judas's actions are not worthy of our praise or our emulation, and not saintly in that regard, Wills and Goetz have found something in the image of Judas worth redeeming, in his despair, his betrayal and his death: that even the greatest sinner can find solace in the presence of Christ, be it in this life or the next. If we are to judge Judas, we should judge him as we would want ourselves to be judged—with a light touch. Therefore, it should not be considered a sin or heresy to assume, or even assert, that Judas is accepted into the loving embrace of God. To imagine Judas forgiven only affirms the love of God. As we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling,⁵² we can take heart that Judas is there with us, one who stands beside us, a patron saint indeed.

⁵¹ Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, 104.

⁵² Philippians 2:12 (NJB).

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