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In Defense of Judas

by Kurt Saxon

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Possibly the most maligned man in history is Judas Iscariot, the supposed betrayer of Jesus. But by every standard of law and justice we have today, Judas was innocent of any wrongdoing. Furthermore, it is likely that Judas was a political militant, guilty only of a tragic blunder, shared equally by Jesus.

Even a cursory reading of the four gospels shows that Jesus was following a timetable to the crucifixion. For the greatest impact, and of course to fulfill various prophecies, the happening had to coincide with Passover. This was the greatest Jewish festival, celebrating liberation from the Egyptians.

At this time the people, and especially the Zealots, wanted a Messiah to rally the country and drive out the Romans. The Romans knew of this wish and were quick to jail any upstart who might trigger a revolt. (Mark 15:7)

The Jewish priesthood also knew of the people's wishes and of the prophecies of a Messiah. Caiaphas, the high priest, was worried lest a rebel catch the people's fancy and bring down the Roman wrath on the whole Jewish nation. (John 11:49-52) The writer's notion that Caiaphas also meant that Jesus' death should gather in the scattered Israelites was absurd. The last thing Caiaphas wanted was any fulfillment of any prophecies by the vulgar Jesus.

Caiaphas wanted Jesus dead, but not as a martyr and it is plain the priesthood wanted to prevent any Passover demonstration. (Matt. 26:3-5)

The problem for Jesus was not simply to get himself killed; by this time, many would have been glad to oblige him. The problem was the timing and the gesture. He did not want to die at all. (Matt. 26:39) But if he had to die he wanted to accomplish his mission.

Since the chief priests wanted to avoid a demonstration, at least until the Passover crowds had gone home, Jesus had to be handed over to less informed officials. Such persons would take Jesus and get things going too far to be stopped. This would take an intelligent manipulator

John 12:6 states that Judas was a thief. It is implied in Matt. 26:8-14 that

Judas, as well as the other disciples, being angered at the waste of the ointment a woman poured on Jesus, went to the chief priests and betrayed him. But the money Judas might have gotten from the sale of the ointment could not have been sufficient reason for the betrayal.

If Judas were really the son of Simon, called the Zealot in Acts 1:13, he was probably a Jewish super patriot. At any rate, had his brother disciples really believed him to be a thief, they would not have let him carry the money bag.

To go to the chief priests at that time would have been to give up the game entirely. As a militant, he must have conspired with some ambitious, but ignorant, temple flunky. Such a one would be anxious to make the capture, expecting thereby, a promotion in the priestly ranks.

There is confusion in the account of the Last Supper where Jesus indicates his betrayer. Matt. 26:21-25 is almost matter-of-fact in choosing the one to do the dirty work. Yet, for Jesus to say, "But woe unto that man-" would only have served to discourage the betrayal, had Judas been an actual traitor.

In John 13:21-30 there is no threat to the betrayer. But verse 29 says the listeners did not understand what Jesus meant when he gave the bread to Judas. This is impossible since verse 22 plainly shows the disciples all heard Jesus say he was going to expose the traitor and were waiting to see who he meant.

It should be obvious that a real betrayal, exposed as in verse 26, would have gotten Judas killed on the spot.

It may have been that the dipping of the bread into the sop and handing it to the betrayer came later in the evening. Jesus may have coached two or three potential betrayers and made his final choice in that way. Thus, the other disciples might well have been in the dark about Jesus' gesture.

Again, calling Judas a devil, as in John 6:70,71 and especially so early in the game, would have caused Judas to leave the group. Had the devil figured into the circumstances he would have upset the timetable. For Jesus to expect Satan's cooperation in his grand scheme would have been a foolish contradiction. Furthermore, had Judas been devil-possessed, or insane, attendant to his deed, he would have been held guiltless, even in his own time.

That even Jesus was confused about the events which were to take place is proved by Luke 22:36-38. It was possible that the betrayer might bring a group so undisciplined as to cut Jesus down in the garden and so they may have had to make a fight of it. As it turned out, the lack of discipline was in Jesus' own faction. (Luke 22:49,50)

For Jesus to command his disciples to arm themselves with swords, if

true, would make foolish the account of them going to sleep at such an exciting time. (Luke 22:-45,46)

The multitude who confronted Jesus in the garden would have had to be underlings, as implied in John 18:3. The chief priests knew Jesus; this mob didn't. (John 18:4-8) In Matt. 26:48, Judas identifies the victim with a kiss.

Had the chief priests known of Judas' plans they would have held up the capture until after Passover. They had spies. They could have found Jesus at any time. They did not want to pick him out from a mob of admirers. But at night, at that supper with his small band, he would have presented no problem. They simply didn't want him then

Jesus' premature capture by ignorant underlings no doubt frustrated the chief priests. But with the fat already in the fire they had to take charge and hope they could get Jesus out of the way without starting a riot.

The confusion that followed the capture shows that the disciples had completely different ideas about their mission than Jesus or later writers gave them.

Had they been only innocent pacifists spreading an idea, they would not have broke and fled after Jesus' capture. (Matt. 26:56) Nor would Peter have cursed and swore in his denial of Jesus. (Matt. 26:74)

They knew that only the Romans could impose the death penalty and Romans were not concerned with mere Jewish blasphemers. Pilate saw no reason to kill even Jesus. (Matt. 27:24) The chief priests would have had an impossible job getting eleven more men executed.

Had the disciples not seen themselves as revolutionaries they would not have panicked. But at one time Jesus had agitated them with such statements as, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I am come not to send peace, but a sword." (Matt. 10:34) When Jesus was really feeling confident, he knew no limits: "But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me." (Luke 19:27)

The time when Jesus turned his thoughts from physical to spiritual conquest is not clear. That the transition was vague to his disciples is obvious. In their minds they were political militants supporting a conquering Messiah, until the bubble burst and Jesus was captured.

To evangelists, Judas would have simply been a helpmate toward the glorification of Jesus. But to militants he would have seemed a traitor; a devil!

Judas' reaction to the capture is proof that he was not an evil man. When bands of angels failed to rescue Jesus; when the people did not rise up as one

against the Roman oppressor, Judas must have been shattered.

He saw, what would have seemed to him, the total failure of their dream. So he tried to return the thirty pieces of silver and then hanged himself. Hardly the act of a traitor, devil, or especially a thief. (Matt. 27:5-5)

For Judas to kill himself immediately after the capture would have been premature, since his dramatic friend might still maneuver himself out of a sticky situation. But if he waited and watched the crucifixion he would have had no other recourse but suicide.

Lurking among the other watchers, Judas would have seen Jesus hanging nailed to the cross. It would not have been a pretty sight. There was no loin cloth for modesty. Total humiliation was the name of the game. Jesus was buck naked and filthy; fouled by sweat and swirling dust and by his own body wastes.

Jesus' piteous cry of despair, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) would have been the clencher for Judas. Maybe Judas had read Deut. 21:22,23 "And if a man have comitted a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree:

his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shall in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;)---"

Somehow, it wasn't supposed to end that way. Later, Paul would try to make capital of the passage which heaped devine disgrace on Jesus. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, 'Cursed is every one that hangeth upon a tree'", Gal. 3:133.

The disciples who were with Jesus didn't see the crucifixion as a redemption as they fled into the night.

Paul's clever rationalization would have been no comfort to Judas, either.

Judas was part of a movement. It and he had failed. And so, like any man of honor in his position, he went and hanged himself.

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