Chapter 8

Friend or Foe? Nationalist or Innocent? Greed, Glory, or God?

Judas’ Betrayal of Jesus

Of all the characters in the gospel story, Judas probably leaves the most for authors to develop. Judas’ role in the life of Jesus and the disciples is the most well-known, the most problematic, but also the most necessary. As Theodore Ziolkowski writes in Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus, “The inevitable complement to Jesus is Judas, without whom the Passion cannot come to pass” (281). Because Judas is the most important secondary character in Jesus’ story, the motivation for his betrayal becomes even more important. However, that motivation, biblically speaking, remains a mystery, though scholars have been struggling with it for centuries.1 Concerning this mystery, Paul Casey writes, “The story of Judas Iscariot as it descends to us is almost entirely fictional, yet that does little to affect its status as myth. . . . What we know of Judas is paltry: we learn virtually nothing in the scriptures of his background or the meaning of his surname Iscariot” (102). This mythologization of Judas, combined with the lack of biblical knowledge, provides authors with a richer material source than most histories, giving them room to invent motivations and actions to explain Judas’ character. Contemporary authors draw from these scholarly accounts and their imaginations, though they mainly let Judas off the hook, one way or another. In his discussion of modern stories of Judas, Hugh Pyper writes, “Rather than the demonic figure of the gospels driven

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1Not only scholars have been struggling with it; creative writers have, as well. Paul Casey, in “Judas and His Role in Early Modern German Drama,” points out that in the European Middle Ages, Judas was known as “a despicable traitor” (106), and, “As the German Middle Ages progressed, literary representations of Judas increasingly stressed solely the motive of avarice for his actions” (107). It is only in the Late Middle Ages that questions about Judas’ motivation first began to be raised, as Richard Axton points out in “Interpretations of Judas in Middle English Literature” (a chapter in Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England).
by greed and envy, the new Judas is represented either as choosing himself to bear the blame for handing over Christ in order to serve the higher good his actions may enable, or else as the victim of misunderstanding. His story becomes a tragedy in which he is cast either as a Promethean figure defying the God who dupes Jesus or else as a hapless yet conscious Kafkaesque pawn of an incomprehensible doom” (115). These authors add to that list a character who willingly goes along with Jesus’ plan in order to help Jesus fulfill his destiny of crucifixion. Only Mailer creates a Judas who willingly, maliciously betrays Jesus. Burgess’ novel shows an innocent Judas who accidentally delivers Jesus into the hands of those who would kill him, while Ricci’s Judas is guilty for his name and his background as a Zealot. Saramago’s Judas turns Jesus over to the authorities because Jesus asks him to.

As Judas is the most problematic character in the gospel stories, all of these authors have to struggle with Judas’ motivation for betraying Jesus. Most do so by providing him with a background that leads him to the betrayal when the time comes. Burgess’ novel shows him as well-educated, but also naïve, which leads him to trust the wrong people. Ricci, Kazantzakis, and Mailer depict Judas as part of a Jewish nationalist group, varying in degrees of violence, while Saramago’s novel has Judas fulfill his role as betrayer because Jesus asks him to.

In Man of Nazareth Judas enters rather late, the last of the disciples to join Jesus. Here, in contrast to the gospel writers and most other re-tellers of the gospel stories, disciples join Jesus slowly, as they encounter him along their way. Thus, Judas is actually only in the book for less than the last half; however, as with the gospel stories, his impact is felt more than that of any of the others, including Peter.

This novel presents Judas as highly educated, yet terribly naïve. He is a young Pharisee, who is multilingual. Burgess comments about his Judas, “I had to remake Judas from scratch. I remade him first as a decent American college boy, well read in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, devoted to his widowed

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1There is actually little evidence in the gospels to suggest that Judas acted out of greed, given the amount of money he received (see note 5) and there is no evidence at all that he acted out of envy.
mother, charmed at first by Jesus, later wholly convinced of his divinity, but so politically innocent that he runs to the Sanhedrin . . .” (YH 304). An interesting note is that Burgess has the narrator also work as a translator trained in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and this connection reminds the reader that many people are like Judas, though many would be hesitant to admit it. Making Judas educated also separates him from the typical characterizations of the disciples, the rest of whom are largely uneducated, except for Matthew the tax collector. Even though the novel does not develop the idea that his education makes him different from the rest of the disciples, this idea should occur to the reader.

Jesus is answering questions when Judas first meets him, and Judas asks one of his own. When Jesus tells the crowd that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves, Judas is the person in the crowd who asks, “Who is my neighbor?” However, unlike the gospel account in which the teacher of the law is trying to justify his actions, Judas seems to be truly curious as to Jesus’ answer: “The question he now asked was no carping question,” and Jesus responds by saying, “Well asked” (171). Thus, from the outset, Judas is portrayed positively as one who is seeking truth. The contrast between Judas’ attitude and that of the teacher of the law in the gospel accounts simply heightens the reader’s surprise at seeing Judas as one truly interested in what Jesus is teaching.

In contrast to this presentation of Judas as a seeker of truth, the novels of Ricci, Kazantzakis, and Mailer portray him, from the outset, as a nationalist who seeks to overthrow Rome. We know that Judas’ last name is Iscariot—or, as Luke says, he was “called Iscariot” (Luke 22:3)—and his name may have something to do with this portrayal. One theory concerning the name “Iscariot” is that it is related to sikarios, the Greek form of sicarius, which is Latin for “dagger-bearer.” Concerning this background, Barclay writes, “The sicarii were wild and fanatical nationalists, pledged not only to war against the Romans, but to murder and assassination at every opportunity.

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3Two other meanings of Judas’ name also fit with his character, in the gospels. It could simply mean “carrier of the leather bag,” which would fit with his role as treasurer of the disciples (Blair 1006). However, it could also come from an Aramaic root which means “false one, liar, hypocrite” (Blair 1006).
If this is so, and it is by no means impossible, Judas was a violent Jewish nationalist, who had attached himself to Jesus in the hope that through Jesus his nationalist dreams might be realized” (74). Further evidence of Judas’ possible involvement with the sicarii comes from Josephus, who, as William Klassen reports, “mentions nineteen men with the name Jude and thirteen with the name of Judas, most of them leaders in the Zealot-Sicarii group” (30). Klassen adds, “The fact that the name Judas was used by patriots may have influenced Jews who were known as Zealots and Sicarii to use it as well. Moreover, the image of Judah the Patriarch in the first century, as well as the Testament of Judah in The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, may have had a bearing” (31). While the fact that several leaders of the group bore the same name and that such a name was popular in the Zealot-Sicarii movement is certainly not conclusive evidence that Judas was a member of this group, it is enough to provide a creative writer with a basis for a character.

Christopher Moore, in Lamb, does not present Judas as a member of the sicarii, but he does show their role in Jewish society at that time. One of his minor characters belongs to the sicarii, who later turns out to be Mary Magdalene’s (Maggie’s) uncle. He appears in the book only a few times, but each time he is either killing someone or attempting to do so. Thus, Moore’s book provides the reader with background about the sicarii without using Judas for that end. In this way, Moore’s Judas can be a positive character in a book that indicates the violent nationalism that was rampant in first-century Israel.

There are two ways that Judas’ background as a Jewish nationalist might have motivated him to betray Jesus. First, he may have been disappointed that Jesus does not live up to Judas’ idea of a Messiah; thus, Judas might have turned Jesus over to the authorities (Blair 1007). Second, Judas may have been trying to force Jesus to act the part of his idea of a Messiah, believing that, faced with death, Jesus would cooperate. Barclay writes, “If that is so, the last thing in Judas’ mind was any desire that Jesus should be crucified; the only thing in his mind was to create a situation in which Jesus would be compelled to unleash his power” (79).
Chapter 8: Friend or Foe? Nationalist or Innocent? Greed, Glory, or God?

Ricci uses this background to fashion a Judas who is part of a group that is planning a rebellion against the Romans; his group, in fact, can trace its roots to Judas the Galilean (who is briefly mentioned in the book of Acts). Judas shuttles back and forth between this group and Jesus’ disciples throughout the book, torn between the two missions. He doesn’t feel that he fits in with either group, and it is ultimately unclear which side he chooses. Wald-Hopkins observes that Judas is “a spy in the field when he first encounters Jesus . . . , he is indecisive and fearful, concerned with his own skin and more suited to whispering reports than taking action” (Wald-Hopkins EE-01).

Judas first meets Jesus when he is waiting for a contact in En Melakh. Jesus is squatting outside his lodging house, cold and hungry, but is doing nothing to remedy this situation. Judas feels sorry for Jesus, and so he gives him his cloak. This act does not feel natural to Judas: “What struck me as I draped the cloak over him was how peculiar this act of charity felt, how alien to my nature, as if I had now truly become a man whom I’d thought I merely feigned to be” (Ricci 6). This admission suggests that Judas has already grown as a person, just from a brief contact with Jesus, but the reader later sees that he did this as much to get credit as for any other reason: “And yet he did not think to thank me [for the cloak]. So it seemed I must wrestle him for my blessing” (Ricci 11). But Judas does buy Jesus food in the morning.

Testament’s opening scene between Judas and Jesus sets up two themes. One is the idea that Jesus simply makes Judas feel uncomfortable. Judas does not know how to respond to Jesus, though he spends most of his time with Jesus trying to satisfy him. Judas is not used to trying to please someone who has no standing in his group or in society, yet he feels compelled to do so anyway. The other idea is related to that, in that Judas does things for Jesus, not just because he wants Jesus’ approval, but because he wants people to see him as a person who does important things. No matter which group he is with Judas always wants the people around him to notice what he is doing. This underlying narcissism runs throughout the novel, but Judas’ seeking of approval keeps it in check and certainly keeps him from doing anything to purposefully betray Jesus.
Kazantzakis is more interested in Judas than in any of the other characters in his novel, save for Jesus. Like Testament, *The Last Temptation of Christ* shows Judas as a Zealot, which supplies a political motivation for his interest in Jesus. Judas knows Jesus before the ministry, and he seeks to have Jesus join his group, though he is repulsed by Jesus, who spends his time making crosses the Romans use to crucify the Zealots whom Judas believes might be the Messiah. He is so disgusted by Jesus, in fact, that the group of Zealots to which he belongs sends him to kill Jesus for making the crosses. Despite their long acquaintance, Judas is willing to kill Jesus for the cause of independence. Michael Antonakakes writes, “Kazantzakis’s Judas is . . . filled with a violent hatred for the Romans and believes that force is the solution for the people of Israel. Even though he has intimations that Jesus is not an ordinary man, he tries to convince him that armed conflict is the way to restore freedom” (98). Sending Judas to kill Jesus echoes the biblical idea of Judas’ action leading to the death of Jesus. But this echo sets up a conventional expectation of the role of Judas that will be challenged as the novel progresses.

When Judas confronts Jesus, he is unable to kill him because Jesus is willing to die. Judas is accustomed to killing those who resist him, so he is puzzled by a willing victim. Judas’ culpability in the execution of Jesus remains in force in this novel with Jesus’ willingness to die at the hands of Judas; this scene should remind the reader of Jesus’ sending Judas out to betray him and of his willingness to die on the cross. However, after talking with Jesus, Judas is unable to kill him because he begins to see that Jesus might be the Messiah: “The halo of light around the youth’s head grew brighter; his sad, wasted face flashed like lightening and his large, jet-black eyes seduced Judas with the unutterable sweetness. The redbeard felt troubled and lowered his eyes. I wouldn’t kill him, he thought, if I were sure he would go out to speak and rouse the hearts of the Israelites, rouse them to attack the Romans” (158). Instead of showing the reader a Judas who betrays Jesus because he is the Messiah, this novel reminds the reader that it would be difficult for a Jew, especially a Zealot who sought the overthrow of the Romans, to kill anyone who might be the Messiah, who might be the one to deliver Israel from the Roman occupation.
The Gospel According to the Son also makes Judas a nationalist, but one focused on social justice. Oddly enough, Jesus doesn’t trust Judas, yet he chooses him anyway: “I wished him to be among my twelve even if I could not see what was in his heart. His eyes were too full of fire. Indeed, I felt blinded by the blaze of his spirit. Notwithstanding, I welcomed him” (Mailer 84). And Jesus notes that Judas’ problem is that he “could not be taught. He was too proud” (85). In fact, Jesus believes that Judas may be “Satan’s gift” to him (84).

Regardless of his understanding of Judas’ character, Jesus selects him to be his disciple. In Mailer’s book, Judas is concerned for the poor, so much so that he is willing to put aside his doubts about Jesus because Judas sees Jesus as someone who will help the poor, no matter what else he may do. When he and Jesus discuss why Judas even bothers to follow Jesus, Judas tells him, “Having grown up among [the rich], I know what is in their hearts, and I detest them. They continue to believe they are good. They see themselves as rich in charity, in piety, and in loyalty to their people. So I scorn them. They not only tolerate the great distance between the rich and the poor, they increase it” (143).

Judas’ emphasis on social justice for the poor makes him the perfect disciple to protest the woman who anoints Jesus with spikenard shortly before the arrest. The gospel of John tells us that Judas keeps the money for the group (John 13:29), primarily in a negative fashion. When Jesus is anointed by a woman (Mary of Bethany in John’s account), the disciples object to the waste involved, as the perfume was quite expensive, and the money should have been given to the poor. In the book of John, only Judas raises this objection, and it is not the poor he has in mind; rather, “he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:6). Thus, John sets up Judas’ negative character early on. However, the explanation in Mailer’s book goes farther than even the Synoptics do to make Judas’ protest look noble. Now, he is protesting that the poor need help for their own sake, not so that he can line his pockets.

Mailer’s book adds one other component to Judas’ character. It completely omits Simon the Zealot from the narrative, other than a brief mention in
listing all the disciples and explaining why Jesus changed Simon Peter’s name to just Peter. Judas takes the place of Simon the Zealot to advocate an overthrow of Rome. Not only does Judas hate the rich, he also believes that the gap between the rich and the poor cannot be overcome while the Jews are enslaved by the Romans: “Before the Jews could come to know the brotherhood of man, they must be free of the Romans. . . . That was the only way, he declared to all of us, that the Jews could be free of the shame that kept them apart, some few rich, so many poor, and all subservient to the Romans” (222–23). The combination of an interest in social justice with a dedication to Zealotry creates a Judas who is richer than one with a single focus. Not only does this portrayal help explain Judas’ protest over the spikenard, it also helps give his opposition of the Romans a convincing backstory.

This Jesus initially distrusts Judas, but when Jesus is in the dungeon, awaiting his hearing before Caiaphas, he wishes for Judas’ advice. He knows that Judas understands the political system much better than he does. Judas, of all the disciples, “had been the wisest in explaining how our priests went about arranging matters with the Romans” (221). But Judas has already committed suicide, though Jesus does not know it at this point. Thus, Jesus learns for himself how the priests arrange matters with Rome. He has not heeded Judas’ advice because he “did not feel subservient to the Romans. They might hold us in their grip here on earth, but they were as nothing compared to the Kingdom of Heaven” (223). Judas cannot accept this idea; instead, he believes they must overthrow the Romans and restore social justice; Jesus, however, believes in a kingdom that is beyond this world. It is that conflict that leads Judas to betray Jesus.

Unlike both Ricci’s and Kazantzakis’ Judases, who doubt that Jesus is the Messiah, Burgess’ Judas, after joining Jesus, seems convinced that Jesus is the Messiah from the outset. When Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, Judas concurs with the answer that Peter gives. This book seems to imply that Judas operates on the same level of understanding as Peter, but he’s not quite as willing to speak out as Peter is. However, Judas is not well-suited to the ministry to which Jesus has called his disciples. When the disciples are sent out to teach, Judas strikes people as overly educated, and,
thus, they do not listen to him as they do to the others. This effect is in stark contrast to Peter’s who speaks with simple language, and, thus, is successful in reaching the people.

Burgess’ novel portrays Judas as one who is so convinced that Jesus is the Messiah that he is willing to do anything to help bring that kingdom about; however, he also is presented as rather naïve about what it is, exactly, that Jesus is doing. Samuel Coale writes of Judas’ innocence, “In his [Burgess’] portrayal of Judas as a political idealist and innocent . . . he creates a valid and interesting character. Burgess’ Judas thinks that Christ wants both an earthly kingship and a spiritual rule within it” (181). After witnessing Lazarus’ resurrection, Judas goes to Jerusalem ahead of the other disciples and Jesus. Thinking of the gospel, the reader expects that he is going to turn Jesus in. In the book, Judas seeks out Zerah, a former student who has become quite powerful as a Pharisee. Judas is afraid of Jesus’ talk that he must be killed when he comes to Jerusalem. He wants Zerah to convince the other Pharisees of Jesus’ Messiahship and also not to do anything to Jesus but to help bring Jesus’ kingdom to fruition. Coale comments, “He betrays Christ to the priests, because he thinks they will keep him safe until the appointed hour of his triumph” (181).

This idea of Judas as naïve and innocent is compelling in that, in the gospels, none of the disciples, including Judas, seem to believe that Jesus could possibly be crucified. In fact, they all seem baffled whenever he talks of going to Jerusalem and being put to death: William Klassen writes, “The Gospel accounts also agree in affirming that not one of the disciples thought for a moment that Jesus would be crucified. There is, then, no reason to believe that Judas thought he would assist in bringing about Jesus’ death when he brought Jesus and the authorities together. . . . It may well be that Judas believed most strongly that in any confrontation between Jesus and his enemies, Jesus would triumph” (45). Thus, Judas in Man of Nazareth simply does not believe that Jesus could possibly be executed by the Jewish leaders; instead, he thinks that Jesus will convince them that he is the Messiah and bring his kingdom to the people. It is precisely his belief in Jesus as Messiah that provokes him to this action.
They Love to Tell the Story

*The Last Temptation of Christ,* in contrast, shows a conflicted Judas who, even after he refuses to kill Jesus because he might be the Messiah, struggles with that idea. Judas ultimately joins Jesus, though it is clear he still does not believe Jesus is the Messiah, nor does he even believe much of what Jesus says: “Judas listened to him and knit his brows. He was not interested in the kingdom of heaven. His great concern was for the kingdom of the earth—and not the whole earth, either, but only the land of Israel, which was made of men and stones, not of prayer and clouds. The Romans—those barbarians, those heathens—the Romans were trampling over this land. First they must be expelled; then we can worry about kingdoms of heaven” (196).

In fact, not only does Judas not believe everything Jesus teaches, he seems to be leading Jesus, rather than following him: “Watch out, son of Mary. I’ve said it once and I say it again: watch out, take the road I tell you. Why do you think I go along with you? Well, you had better learn: it’s to show you your way” (204). However, since Judas believes that Jesus might be the Messiah, even when Judas doubts, he has reason enough to follow Jesus: “I don’t want to rush into this and kill the Saviour; no, I don’t want that! . . . He might not even know it himself, I said. Best be patient and let him live awhile, let him live so that we can see what he says and does; and if he isn’t the One we’re waiting for, there’s always plenty of time to get rid of him” (205).

Here Jesus seems to be the one who is confused, not Judas. Jesus is the one who asks Judas what they can do to solve the problem of Jesus’ identity, and it is Judas who comes up with the idea of going to John the Baptist to discover whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. Leavitt comments, “Judas is the one disciple to understand and oppose his master’s new teaching: The Savior he seeks carries an ax and not a flowering branch. Ordered by the Zealots to kill the maker of crosses, Judas becomes his follower instead, for he suspects before anyone else that his childhood friend may be the Messiah” (70–71). Judas has the answers, while Jesus only has questions. This portrayal of Judas, though it diminishes the presentation of Jesus—making him seem wishy-washy and almost spineless—is consistent with a Judas who has a background as a Zealot, and who is a killer, at that. He is not used to taking direction from anyone else; he is used to giving it, and he expects Jesus to follow him rather than vice versa.
Chapter 8: Friend or Foe? Nationalist or Innocent? Greed, Glory, or God?

However, after Jesus’ time in the wilderness, the relationship reverses, especially when it comes to Jesus’ death. Jesus believes that the only way he can fulfill the mission of the Messiah is to offer himself up as a sacrifice on the cross. However, he needs one of the disciples to help him do so; he needs someone to betray him. He chooses Judas because he is the only disciple he can rely on. Judas, however, questions Jesus: “I’ve asked you before, Rabbi—is there no other way?” and it is now Jesus who has the answer to the question: “No, Judas, my brother. I too should have liked one; I too hoped and waited for one until now—but in vain. No, there is no other way. The end of the world is here. This world, this kingdom of the Devil, will be destroyed and the kingdom of heaven will come. I shall bring it. How? By dying. There is no other way. Do not quiver, Judas, my brother. In three days I shall rise again” (420).

This change in the relationship does not mean that Judas no longer questions Jesus. When Jesus heals the daughter of a Roman centurion, Judas’ zealo-try flares up again: “You dissipate your strength on unbelievers. You help our enemies. Is this the end of the world you’ve brought up? Are these the flames?” (Kazantzakis 324). Says Leavitt, it seems that “this Judas is disturbed by his friend’s seeming passivity, by the forgiveness which he preaches, above all by his refusal to lead their rebellion” (68). Judas does, however, fulfill his mission, and he betrays Jesus so that Jesus can be crucified.

It is not surprising that Judas’ betrayal of Jesus is the one aspect of his character that is consistent in all four authors, as even people who are unfamiliar with much of the Bible know the role that Judas plays in the gospel story. In fact, the authors of the gospels tell little about Judas beyond the fact that he betrays Jesus. While there are narratives about how many other disciples come to join Jesus, especially the major apostles, such as Peter, Judas simply appears in the list of the twelve, though the authors of the Synoptics make sure to mention that he is the one who betrayed Jesus (Matt. 10:4, Mark 3:19, Luke 6:16). Similarly, *Man of Nazareth* shows a Judas who accidentally

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4Reynolds Price stays so close to the gospel accounts, for example, that his Judas lacks any interest at all. He betrays Jesus, but Price gives him no motivation for doing so (275), and his Judas also commits suicide by hanging himself. Jesus does appear to Judas before Judas hangs himself, but all he does is touch Judas on the wrist.
They Love to Tell the Story

sends Jesus to his death, while the novels by Kazantzakis and Saramago show Judas merely doing what Jesus wants him to do. Ricci’s novel depicts Judas betraying Jesus in smaller ways, not by a one-time betrayal that leads to death. Only *The Gospel According to the Son* offers a malicious Judas who goes to the authorities because of something Jesus does.\(^5\)

In an interesting departure from these authors, Christopher Moore, in *Lamb*, makes it unclear whether or not Judas is doing what Jesus wants him to or not. When Joshua (Jesus) first meets Judas, he says, “I know who you are. . . . I’ve been waiting for you,” which clearly shows that Jesus knows the importance of the role Judas will play (365). However, when they are at the Last Supper, he whispers something to Judas that no one else hears. He then says, “One of you will betray me this very night. . . . Won’t you, Judas?” (414). Judas is surprised by this accusation, but, when no one comes to his defense, he flees. When Biff comes to kill Judas, Judas tells him, “He knew he had to die. . . . How do you think I knew he’d be at Gethsemane, not at Simon’s? He told me!” (434). Thus, it seems that Joshua tells Judas where he will be because he knows that Judas will go and tell the Pharisees. Joshua knows that Judas is going to betray him, so he gives him and no one else the information. In a sense, then, he sets Judas up to be able to betray him when he very well could have avoided it. Judas even says to Biff, “I had to do it. Someone did” (435). However, he adds that Joshua would have “just reminded us of what we’ll never be” (435), which seems to be another reason for Judas’ betrayal. It’s not just that Joshua admitted that he would never overthrow the Romans, which Judas, as a Zealot, would have wanted. Instead, Joshua’s mere existence would have shown the rest of humanity how far we are from perfection; thus, he had to die. Because he does not feel any guilt over what he has done, he does not commit suicide; instead, Biff kills him, and it only appears that he hanged himself.

\(^5\)It is interesting to note, though, that none of the authors choose the most obvious and simple motivation: Judas is simply greedy. Barclay points out that, if Judas betrayed Jesus for this reason, then he “struck one of the most dreadful bargains in history when he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, about fourteen dollars, the normal value of a slave” (79). E.P. Blair points out that “the sum of money appears trivial for a treachery so heinous, and the motive superficial” (1007). Paul Casey also reminds the reader that “the conclusion that Judas betrayed Christ for less than half the price of the ointment [used by Mary of Bethany to anoint Jesus’ feet] ought to spark some skepticism as to the sufficiency of the financial motive” (107).
Chapter 8: Friend or Foe? Nationalist or Innocent? Greed, Glory, or God?

The only two gospel accounts to give a reason for the betrayal at all (Luke and John) simply say that Satan entered Judas. Burgess’ novel rejects this idea, but still gives a motivation for the betrayal: idealistic innocence: “And so the arrest in the garden, Judas’ shocking loss of innocence, his suicide following his awareness of involuntary betrayal of the one he would never wish to betray. That was my first Judas. The final Judas was a palimpsest of Judas as sweet innocent, as higher zealot, as indiscreet babbler, as disappointed idealist. But the devil did not enter him” (YH 304). Judas simply does not understand the political climate of the situation. Coale observes, “Judas operates in a carefully drawn political landscape, which Burgess describes well: the Zealots willing to overthrow Rome, Pontius Pilate hoping to remain neutral as the procurator of Judea, and the priests attempting to prove Christ’s apparent blasphemy as actual treason in their successful effort to transfer the act and responsibility of Christ’s death from their hands to the state’s” (181–82).

Burgess creates a Judas who presents Jesus to the authorities in an effort to protect him, not to betray him. Unfortunately, Zerah, a Pharisee, is not a person Judas should trust, and he and Caiaphas prey on Judas’ innocence to arrest Jesus. Caiaphas tells Judas, “There is only one way out, as I see it. . . . He must be delivered into the hands of his friends—those of his friends, I mean, who are best able to protect him. Forgive me, my son, for implying that you and your companions are powerless. Powerful in grace you may be, but grace cannot contend with stones and swords and hangman’s nooses” (240). Because of his innocence and misplaced trust, Judas agrees to this plan, giving Caiaphas and Zerah the information they need to arrest Jesus.

When they arrive to do so, they hand Judas the thirty silver pieces, and Zerah says, “Jesus of Nazareth, you stand under arrest on a charge of

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*Mary Called Magdalene* is the only book here to allude to the idea of Satanic possession, as it seems to relate Judas’ becoming possessed by Satan, though it’s never clear. When they are camping at Dan, a place with an evil history for the Israelites, Judas “felt its evil influence. In fact, this morning his eyes looked clouded, different” (434). This description is reminiscent of Mary’s eyes when she is possessed by the demons. After Mary learns of Judas’ plan to betray Jesus, she thinks that Satan may be behind it: “Could Satan have entered into [Judas] back at that dreadful, haunted altar at Dan? Satan tried to get Jesus in the desert; he failed, but he got Judas instead at Dan” (487).
They Love to Tell the Story

blasphemy. The charge comes from the mouth of your own disciple here. He sold you” (246). Judas becomes like a wild animal, running around the garden until he finally flees, looking for rope with which he can hang himself. Judas suffered from too much innocence, as Zerah sees it: “You have taught innocence, so I hear, Jesus of Nazareth. You had a good pupil here in my old fellow-student, ever ready to learn. Good at Greek, good at innocence. The innocence of one who wished to see the salvation of the world” (247). Klassen argues that, from the perspective of the Bible, Judas’ suicide also shows his innocence in turning over Jesus to the authorities: “Matthew reports that Judas changed when he saw that Jesus was being handed over to Pilate. The implication is clear: this is not what he had intended” (161–62).

It then becomes hard to fault Judas for believing too much in the salvation of the world and in Jesus as the means by which that might be accomplished. Burgess’ novel raises the question of intentions and actions by presenting Judas in this manner, in addition to merely providing a motive for Judas’ actions. Humans often do horrible actions for truly good reasons, which is a way to let Judas off the hook.

In a similar manner, Margaret George, in Mary Called Magdalene, seems to create a Judas who betrays Jesus in an attempt to protect him, only to see him executed instead. After Herod’s soldiers have warned Jesus about his gatherings, Mary and Judas talk about protecting Jesus from himself, though Mary is much less sure of this than Judas. To her, it sounds as if she is “disloyal” and “conspiratorial,” but she is relieved when Judas says that they will prevent him “by persuasion” and that Jesus’ “mother would help [them]” (408). Even though Mary has visions of what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem, she does not attempt to protect him from himself, and she does talk to him of what might come. Judas, on the other hand, meets with Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas to let them know where they can capture Jesus quietly. While he insists on being paid for his information, he tells Annas, “I think he should be protected from himself. . . . He has raised enormous expectations that he can never fulfill. When he cannot, people will turn on him. This should give him a chance to think, before it is too late” (477). In the Garden of Gethsemane, he tells Mary that Jesus will be taken “to the house of Annas,
and thence to Caiaphas’s palace. Jesus will be examined and questioned there, and detained until after the crowds have left Jerusalem. Then he can go back to Galilee with his faithful, peaceful, . . . brave, loyal . . . followers” (508). It is only when he hears Jesus’ sentence pronounced that he realizes what he has done: “Oh, God, you lied! I have sinned, sinned in betraying innocent blood” (520).

However, *Mary Called Magdalene* may offer another reason for Judas’ betrayal, though it is never explicitly stated. Shortly after Judas joins the group of disciples, he begins showing an interest in Mary passing beyond that which the other disciples show. He is the first to sympathize with Mary after Joel’s death, and he volunteers to take care of the money that she has recently inherited so that she will not have to deal with it. When Peter accuses Mary of being Jesus’ favorite disciple, Judas is the only disciple who defends her. When Jesus is leading them toward Dan, which the disciples perceive as dangerous, he tells Mary, “As a woman, . . . surely you must be concerned for your safety,” and then he moves “closer to Mary, implying his protection” (427). Just before that, when asked why he has followed Jesus, he states that Jesus “seemed to have all the answers,” but his response is so quick that it “was obviously rehearsed” (427). Judas seems to be following Jesus only to be close to Mary. He confirms this when they arrive at Dan, and he proposes to Mary after asking her to visit his family with him. She rejects both offers. It might be this rejection, not Satan’s possession, that causes his eyes to darken and leads him to betray Jesus. Because it has been evident to all of the disciples that Mary cares for Jesus, Judas may simply be betraying Jesus to get back at Mary for rejecting him. Even without Mary’s affection for Jesus, betraying Jesus would ruin Mary’s life, which may be reason enough for Judas to turn him over to the religious leaders. This motive, more than the possession by Satan, would make Judas a more human character, one whom readers could more easily identify with.

In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Judas betrays Jesus, but only because it is his mission to do so; in fact, Jesus encourages him to do so. Antonakes comments, “Kazantzakis presents Judas as a collaborator of Jesus in his effort to carry out the divine plan. However, it is not made clear how the
divine plan serves Judas’s initial revolutionary plan” (98). Klassen argues that such an interpretation of Judas might well fit with what actually happens. He points out that “what our earliest sources do say is that Judas did nothing until Jesus told him to do it. Later, the final editors of the Gospels, beginning with Luke, Matthew, and John, found this possibility so difficult to swallow that they felt they had no choice but to ascribe dark motives to the actions of Judas. Yet they never imputed one saying to Jesus that actually criticized Judas, nor did they ever imply that Jesus considered what Judas was doing to be a sin” (45). Kazantzakis’ novel draws on this idea of Jesus as the one behind Judas’ betrayal and presents a Judas who goes to the authorities reluctantly, only because he clearly believes Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus is asking this one action of Judas.

Not surprisingly, then, especially given his earlier role as the driving force in their relationship, Judas seems to be the one who saves Jesus from his temptation and forces him to go through with what Jesus asked Judas to begin. In the vision of marital bliss that the Devil presents to Jesus on the cross, it is only Judas, of the disciples, who criticizes him for leaving the cross. Writes Leavitt, Judas is

the only realist in a crowd of self-seekers and dreamers, and he is the one disciple able to act, a colossus stronger than the master himself. Thus it is he who must betray Jesus, to enable him to fulfill his mission, perhaps to become the Messiah . . . When Jesus dreams on the cross that his crucifixion has never occurred, that he has lived instead a pedestrian life, it is his uncompromising disciple who compels him to return to his mission, to awake on the cross and call out to God. (71)

He will no longer even acknowledge him as Rabbi, let alone Messiah: “As he faced the cross this fake Messiah went dizzy and fainted. Then the ladies got hold of him and installed him to manufacture children for them. He says he fought, fought courageously. Yes, he swaggers about like the cock of the roost. But your post, deserter, was on the cross, and you know it. Others
can reclaim barren lands and barren women. Your duty was to mount the cross—that’s what I say” (Kazantzakis 491). In fact, Leavitt observes, “In both [visions, the one at the beginning of the novel and the one at the end], it is Judas the patriot who compels his younger and weaker friend to fulfill his mission, to save . . . what? Himself? Israel? Mankind? Neither is sure” (Leavitt 64).

Jesus needs Judas as much as Israel needs Jesus. Without him, he cannot fulfill his mission. In fact, Jesus believes that Judas has the harder path. Judas asks him if he can betray his master, and Jesus replies, “No, I do not think I would be able to. That is why God pitied me and gave me the easier task: to be crucified” (421). Jesus has to rely on Judas, then, trusting him to help with the completion of his mission.

Judas plays a lesser role in Saramago’s work than he does in other narratives, both gospel and adaptations. He is, however, still the person who turns Jesus in to the authorities, but here, as in Kazantzakis’ work, it is Jesus who asks him to do so. Jesus is trying to avoid being sacrificed as the Son of God, so he decides that, if he can be crucified as the King of the Jews, he will thwart God’s plan, which will result in so much bloodshed to come. However, he needs someone to help him execute his plan, and Judas is the only disciple who volunteers. The others, in fact, draw their daggers and threaten to kill him to prevent his doing so, but Jesus has them put away their weapons and encourages Judas to go quickly.

Judas does not take any money from the authorities for his information, but he still hangs himself for what he does. In fact, he hangs himself at a place where Jesus will pass, and his body is still warm when the authorities examine it while they are taking Jesus to Golgotha. Saramago’s book does not make it clear why Judas commits suicide, but the reader may infer that he expects that Jesus’ plan will fail, that God will succeed in the end, and that he will be the means of that sacrifice and, thus, vilified for all eternity. Saramago’s Judas seems at least to want to remind Jesus of the sacrifice he is making for Jesus’ sake.

Judas in Testament attempts to earn Jesus’ approval, and that ultimately leads to Jesus’ death, even though he does not intend that result. Judas takes
They Love to Tell the Story

part in a riot after Pilate put up Roman standards near the Jewish Temple; the Jews are highly offended, interpreting the standards as idolatry. Judas joins this protest because he feels that he has been idle from his Zealot group for too long. Pilate lures the group of protesters into a stadium under the pretense of talking to them, but he surrounds them with soldiers, instead. Rather than fearing for their lives, the Jews, one by one, kneel down and bare their necks to be struck by the soldiers; Judas joins them in this action. This action begins to change his view on how to work against the Roman government: “The object, in this case, was our freedom, which I had always imagined was a thing that had to be wrested away from our enemies like a trophy or prize. But in the stadium, when we’d been kneeling there, it had seemed something more subtle than that, not to be captured or won but somehow called into being, conjured up like a spirit” (73). Jesus does not praise him for what he has done: “I began to speak to him of the events in Caesarea but he was strangely distant and cool, treating me as if I had betrayed him by going off or by daring to learn things that might compete with his own teaching” (77). This is the type of betrayal that Judas is described as doing in Ricci’s novel, not the proactive betrayal of Jesus that leads to his crucifixion, as in the gospels. Instead, it is the minor, day-to-day betrayals that loom so large to Ricci’s Jesus.

Judas’ association with this group is what directly leads to Jesus’ death. After a riot in the Temple, Aram (a follower of Jesus who splits from him for a while but who ultimately returns) tells the examiners in the jail that Judas is often with Jesus; the examiner seems more interested in this news than any other that Aram shares. The authorities believe that Jesus is somehow associated with a rebel group that seeks to overthrow the Roman government. Because they do not understand Greek, Peter and Simon the Canaanite, believe that Judas has betrayed Jesus:

The truth was that neither of them had followed the trial well, not speaking much Greek. They hadn’t gathered that it was Aram who’d betrayed Jesus and assumed it was Judas, since his was the name they’d made out during the charges—I
Chapter 8: Friend or Foe? Nationalist or Innocent? Greed, Glory, or God?

[Simon of Gergesa] ought to have set them straight then but didn’t want to admit that I’d knelt there beside Aram while he’d sealed Jesus’s fate, and hadn’t done anything. (435)

This approach is similar to what several scholars have hypothesized about Judas, which Klassen summarizes: “In order to protect Jesus and Judas from making serious mistakes of judgment several scholars have even conjectured that Judas was taken captive by the high priests during the time of the Temple action and he was then forced to reveal where Jesus could be apprehended” (51). While Ricci’s Judas is not forced to tell them where Jesus can be apprehended, Judas’ being imprisoned because of the events in the Temple directly leads to Jesus’ arrest.

It is not surprising that the disciples would assume Judas would betray Jesus, as they have not liked him from the outset. One of the reasons for this dislike may have been his geographical background. Ricci’s Judas is the only disciple from Judea, an idea that probably stems from Judas’ name. “Iscariot” could mean “the man from Kerioth.” If so, then, even according to the gospels, Judas would have been the only disciple from Judea (Blair 1007). This Judean background may play into the betrayal later, but it would also possibly have made him feel an outcast among the disciples. Concerning Judas’ role as outsider because of his heritage, Casey writes, “This hypothesis makes him by heritage an outsider, whose ancestry distances him from the rest of the disciples: it underscores the detachment of the other disciples from his deed” (103). Barclay even argues that the Judean background may have helped Judas see Jesus’ chances of succeeding in Jerusalem much more clearly than do the other disciples, or even Jesus. Because he sees Jesus losing against Rome and the Jewish leaders, he turns Jesus over in an effort to protect him from getting killed (77). However, Ricci uses this background only to reinforce the difference between Judas and the other disciples.

Judas recognizes fairly quickly that he does not fit in, though, from his point of view, his lack of acceptance is due to what he would see as positive

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Mary Called Magdalene also shows Judas as the only disciple from Judea, which makes him an outsider among the disciples.
causes: “From the outset it was clear that I was not well accepted by the other in Yeshua’s [Jesus’] inner circle. My education marked me, and my accent; but chiefly it was my willingness to challenge Yeshua’s views, which Yeshua applauded, saying it kept his mind sharp for his critics, but which in the men of the group brought out a brooding discomfort and in the women a fairly open hostility” (43–44). It is easy to see, because of his intelligence and education, why Judas, according to Hand, “is viewed with suspicion by the fishermen, masons, farmers and women who accompany Yeshua on his travels. Through one of Testament’s neater twists, we see how the gossip and mistrust rampant among Yeshua’s own camp cause the innocent Yihuda to become the now-familiar betrayer Judas” (Hand T6).

It is true that the women, especially Mary Magdalene, do not like Judas. She ascribes a number of problems to Judas: “By the following morning it was clear that along with the stranger [Judas] had come an evil influence. We awoke to the news of the prophet Yohanan’s [John’s] death—in Migdal the word came through at dawn, out of Tiberias”; and “While we were waiting, however, I saw the stranger approaching from the far gates, which led out to the Roman camp, and not long afterwards a contingent of soldiers arrived. I didn’t know what to make of this except that he was a spy who had been sent to us and had called the soldiers in the hope of provoking a riot, so that Yeshua [Jesus] might be arrested as the cause of it” (Ricci 158).

What is most interesting about Ricci’s portrayal, though, is that his book never shows us Judas’ reaction to Jesus’ arrest or crucifixion, and the reader never knows whether or not Judas knows that he has any role in Jesus’ death. In fact, Judas leaves Jesus a few weeks before Passover, even though his group wants Judas to reinsert the disciples and report back whenever they arrive in Jerusalem. Judas, however, does not do this. Instead, he ends his narrative section by merely reflecting on Jesus, and it seems that he has been dramatically changed by his encounter with Jesus, perhaps more so than the other characters: “But there was in Yeshua [Jesus] that quality that made one feel there was something, still, some bit of hope, some secret he might reveal that would help make this world over. Tell me your secret, I wanted to say to him, tell me, make me new. And even now, though I had left
him, I often saw him beckoning before me as towards a doorway he would have had me pass through, from darkness to light” (122). Perhaps Judas never attains the truth that Jesus has for him that would make him new. Or perhaps he sees Jesus more clearly than any of the others do. Ricci leaves the reader with a Judas who merely walks away, never to be heard from again.

Mailer’s Judas has warned Jesus earlier of what would happen if Jesus ceases to advocate for the poor: “I would turn against you. A man who is ready to walk away from the poor by a little is soon ready to depart from them by a lot” (144). Thus, Jesus is not surprised when he looks up and notices that Judas has left: “If he loved me, so did he also love me no longer” (201). Thus, his betrayal of Jesus comes as no surprise. Because he believes Jesus has turned against the poor, he turns against Jesus and turns him in. However, he suffers the same remorse he suffers in the gospel accounts, returns the thirty pieces of silver, and commits suicide. Jesus, however, does not understand what motivates Judas to this action: “How could I comprehend? Of what had Judas repented? Of his lack of belief in my Father? Or his lack of loyalty to me? No, I could not speak. Nor did I dare” (225). While Mailer’s novel gives the readers a clear reason for Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, he leaves the readers in the same situation as Jesus regarding Judas’ change of heart and suicide. We, like Jesus, simply wonder why he would do it, given how he felt about Jesus’ actions.

The books, with that by Saramago a notable exception, show a complex Judas who struggles with who Jesus is and how he is to relate. Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his Journals, “One will get a deep insight into the state of Christianity in each age by seeing how it interprets Judas” (qtd. in Pyper 115). In these authors’ works, Judas becomes more human, someone readers can relate to, rather than the abstraction of the gospels who betrays Jesus merely because Satan entered him. Burgess represents one extreme, presenting him as an innocent, while Mailer shows the other extreme, an angry nationalist who reacts to Jesus’ ignoring the poor by betraying him to the authorities. The other authors fill in the middle, providing readers with a wide spectrum of interpretations concerning Judas, although almost all leave him innocent. In the second half of the late twentieth and early
They Love to Tell the Story

twenty-first centuries, rather than condemning Judas, authors and readers seem to be looking for ways to excuse his behavior, much as we would like our own betrayals explained away.