

Module: Academic Skills

Assessment: Reference Focus (700 words)

Title: Encyclopedia Entry on Judas Iscariot

By Owen Walters (2508048)

Synopsis:

This encyclopedia entry outlines the infamous New Testament figure of Judas Iscariot. It will explore who he was, where he came from, and why he remains significant in Christian theology.

Introduction

Judas Iscariot is one of the most controversial and mysterious figures in the New Testament. He is infamously remembered for betraying Jesus Christ to the religious authorities and has become synonymous with moral failure. His character, actions, motives and fate have all been enduring topics of debate among scholars and theologians. This entry examines who Judas was, what he did, and why his actions continue to hold deep theological significance.

Judas' Identity and Background

Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus. The epithet Iscariot is widely interpreted as meaning “man of Kerioth,” referring to a Judean town named Kerioth-Hezron. Worthing adds that Judas’ father, Simon, also shares the name Iscariot, likely originating from the southern Judean village of Kerioth, which explains the name “man of Kerioth.”¹ Given the shared name, it makes sense that the term applied to the family, not just Judas. Alternative theories suggest the epithet may derive from a Latin term meaning “dagger-man” or “assassin,” implying association with revolutionary movements. However, this remains speculative, and the “man of Kerioth” interpretation is generally considered most likely, as Lioy observes:

The most widely held view is that “Iscariot” signifies a Hellenized form of the Hebrew phrase, איש־קריות, which means, “man from Kerioth.” In this case, the reference would be to the village of Kerioth, which was located near Hebron in southern Judah (Josh 15:25).²

¹ Mark Worthing, ‘Judas Iscariot: A Biblical and Theological Reappraisal of the Forgotten Apostle’, *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 52.3 (2018), 150–160 (p. 153).

² Dan Lioy, ‘Denial Versus Betrayal: A Case Study Analysis of Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot in the Fourth Gospel’, *Conspectus*, 32.1 (2021), 125–143 (p. 130).

Judas' Role in the Gospel Narratives

All four canonical Gospels portray Judas as the disciple whose actions lead to Jesus being arrested, as Paffenroth writes, "In all of the Gospels, Judas' main purpose in the narrative is to betray Jesus: any details about him beyond that action are tangential."³ Judas approaches the religious leaders and agrees to identify and hand Jesus over for thirty pieces of silver. Theologically, Judas' actions are complex, as Jesus predicts during the Last Supper that one disciple will betray him. Later, Judas leads an armed crowd to the Garden of Gethsemane, greeting Jesus with a kiss, a gesture that has become symbolic of ultimate betrayal.

Theological Interpretation of Judas' Actions & Motives

Judas' actions have led to many interpretations of his motives, revealing how theologically complex this figure is. The Gospel of John refers to Judas as a thief, aligning with Luke in attributing his betrayal to the influence of Satan. However, as Worthing discusses regarding Luke's statement that "Satan entered into Judas," this should not remove Judas' agency or free will but reflects an early attempt to make sense of an otherwise inexplicable act of evil by an otherwise seemingly faithful disciple.⁴

Matthew, by contrast emphasises the prophetic fulfilment of Judas' actions. Scholarly interpretations vary, some adopt Matthew's perspective and view Judas as a tragic instrument of God's plan, while others reflect more on Luke's account and agree with Worthing's interpretation of him being more symbolic of moral failure and the tension between external influence and human freedom.

³ Kim Paffenroth, 'The Character of Judas in Bach's St. Matthew Passion', *The Midwest Quarterly*, 36.2 (1995), 125–135 (p. 125).

⁴ Worthing, 'Judas Iscariot', p. 157.

Death of Judas Iscariot

The New Testament presents two differing accounts of Judas' death. In Matthew's Gospel, Judas hangs himself in remorse, while in Acts he falls headlong and dies violently. Matthew emphasises guilt and repentance, whereas Acts highlights divine judgment. These two canonical accounts are the most widely accepted, although later Christian writings also contain alternative versions, such as those in Papias and the Gospel of Judas. Oropeza suggests the idea that these conflicting reports arose because early Christian communities felt uncomfortable discussing Judas' fate and lacked firsthand knowledge of what happened after his betrayal. Over time, traditions developed, often drawing on themes of apostasy and divine punishment. Despite the variations, a consistent feature across all accounts is that Judas' end is portrayed negatively.⁵ These discrepancies add to the mystery of his character and have long been interpreted from differing theological perspectives.

Conclusion

Judas Iscariot remains one of the most complex figures in the New Testament. His actions not only led to Jesus' crucifixion but also raise lasting questions about human freedom, God's redemptive purpose, and moral failure. Throughout Scripture and later Christian thought, Judas encapsulates the paradox of a disciple who participated in God's plan through an act of betrayal. His story continues to challenge theologians and readers to grapple with the tension between sin, purpose, and grace.

⁵ B. J. Oropeza, 'Judas' Death and Final Destiny in the Gospels and Earliest Christian Writings', *Neotestamentica*, 44.2 (2010), 342–361 (p. 347).

Bibliography

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