

JUDAS ISCARIOT

By Mark Moore

We really know very little about this man. His name, Judas, was common enough in Jewish circles. His surname, Iscariot, was not. Some argue that it identifies his hometown, Kerioth in Judea. That is possible, but it may also be a Hebrew nickname meaning “the betrayer.” Both suggestions are speculative. What we do know is that Jesus selected him to be an apostle and that none of his comrades suspected him of avarice. This colossal villain fit in with God’s people surprisingly well. In fact, he was honored among them. He was the treasurer for the group (John 12:6; 13:29) and was granted the most honored seat at the last supper.

Clearly he distinguished himself by betraying Jesus. In fact, whenever he is included in the list of Apostles, he is identified as “the betrayer”(Mt 10:4; Mk 3:19; Lk 6:16; Acts 1:16). The real question is, “Why did he do it?” Some suggest that he was trying to force Jesus’ hand. That is, he wanted Jesus to boldly declare himself as the Messiah. While this is possible, it hardly would have done Judas much good. After all, who would make Benedict Arnold the Secretary of State?! Another suggestion is that Judas was disillusioned with Jesus. He thought he would overthrow the Romans but Jesus persistently sticks with this Spiritual stuff and Judas just got tired of it.

Perhaps this is so. But the Scriptures only give two clues as to Iscariot’s motive. First, the incident of Mary anointing Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume is taken out of chronological order and placed next to Judas’ secret meeting with the Sanhedrin. In the first incident Judas objects to Mary’s lavish gift to Jesus (John 12:4-6). In the second, Judas agrees to betray him for the negligible sum of 30 pieces of silver (Mt 26:14-16; Mk 14:10-11; Lk 22:3-6; Jn 13:2). This was the price paid for a slave in the O.T. Somehow Judas’ love for money played a key role in his betrayal of Christ.

The second clue is the sovereignty of God. The O.T. predicted Judas’ betrayal (Psa 41:9; 109:8), even the specifics of thirty pieces of silver and buying the potter’s field (Zech 11:12, 13). Jesus also foretold his defection (Mt 26:21-25; Mk 14:18-21; Lk 22:21-23). John 13:18-26 says this fulfilled Psalm 41:9. Jesus explicitly states he was “Doomed to destruction” (Jn 17:12). Apparently God gave him over to the Devil. Luke 22:3 and John 13:2, 27 identify when Satan actually entered his heart. This raises more questions than it answers. Suffice to say, he was clearly predestined by God to this task, and also clearly held responsible for his own dastardly deed (Acts 1:16-20).

That fateful night Judas led a considerable company of soldiers to one of Jesus’ favorite haunts. He knew they would find him there. Although Jesus first spoke and first identified himself as the wanted Galilean, Judas still carried through with his treachery. Feigning friendship he cried out, “Hail Rabbi,” and kissed him profusely (Mt 26:47-50; Mk 14:43-45; Lk 22:47-49; Jn 18:2-5).

After Jesus’ arrest and execution, Judas felt sorry. He wanted to undo his act. That, of course, was impossible. But at least he thought he would return the silver. When the chief priests wouldn’t accept the blood-money, he threw it into the temple (Mt 27:3-10). This presented a problem to the priests who had to retrieve their tainted cash from the holy place. With it they later purchased the field where Judas hanged himself. Luke, however, says Judas fell and popped open, leaving his entrails splattered across the steps of Gehenna. This does not contradict Matthew’s rendition, but rather complements it. Judas hanged himself. His bloated body began to rot in the hot Palestinian sun. Perhaps it was the earthquake that broke the branch or perhaps a shakily tied knot finally slipped loose. But somehow Judas fell down the cliffs leaving his mark as he went. Thus the place was named after him, “Akeldama” meaning “field of blood” (Acts 1:18-19).