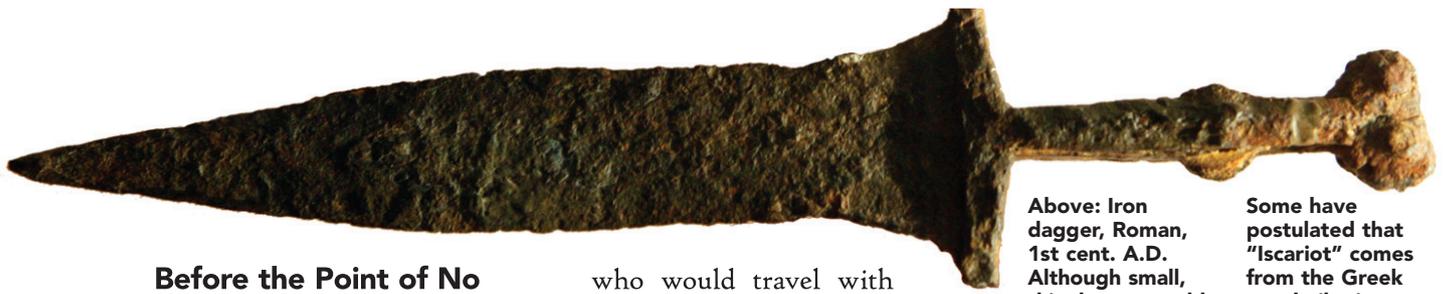


BY SHARON H. GRITZ

DO THE WORDS of a song ever get stuck in your mind? As I examined the life of Judas Iscariot, these lyrics echoed in my head: “past the point of no return.”¹ Judas passed the point of no return by rejecting God’s grace and forgiveness. His life illustrates the fate of those who turn from the Lord—lost for eternity.

the Betrayal

JUDAS ISCARIOT



Before the Point of No Return

Judas was the son of Simon Iscariot. Some scholars suggest the name “Iscariot” identifies the family’s hometown of Kerioth. East of the Dead Sea, Kerioth was the site of the ancient city of Ar, the capital of Moab. Others believe “Iscariot” refers to a dagger, thus an assassin, and they assign Judas to a Zealot-like movement. Others think “Iscariot” refers to Judas’s occupation—a red dyer or a fruit grower. Still other Bible students contend “Iscariot” means “false one” (betrayer). The most probable explanation is “man of Kerioth.”² This would make Judas the only non-Galilean of the twelve apostles.

Judas began his relationship with Jesus as a follower. Jesus chose this man from among many disciples to be one of the Twelve

who would travel with Him and learn from Him in a teacher-student relationship. Judas appeared to be a respected member of this inner circle. The other disciples trusted him to act as their treasurer. Jesus sent Judas out, along with the other eleven, to proclaim the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons. The future betrayer witnessed Jesus’ mighty acts and heard His teachings. Did he participate and listen halfheartedly and hypocritically, or eagerly and sincerely? We do not know.

At the Point of No Return

Judas’s first recorded words in the Gospels hint at a character weakness. While Jesus and His disciples were enjoying a feast in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, Mary poured

Above: Iron dagger, Roman, 1st cent. A.D. Although small, this dagger could be almost as effective as a sword.

Some have postulated that “Iscariot” comes from the Greek word *sikarios*, which means “dagger man” or “assassin.”

expensive nard on Jesus’ feet to anoint Him. Judas piously complained, “Why wasn’t this fragrant oil sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?” (John 12:5, HCSB). John explained, however, that this hypocrite did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. This selfish embezzler regularly stole from the disciples’ funds (v. 6).

Jesus rebuked Judas’s attitude. Shortly after this incident the dishonest treasurer plotted to betray Jesus. On his own initiative Judas went to the chief priests and negotiated to hand Jesus over to them for 30 pieces of silver, the value of a slave.³

Although the religious leaders had not intended to arrest Jesus during Passover for fear of the crowds, Judas provided the means of seizing Him without a riot. He could determine the right time at the right place. After meeting with the priests, Judas made a continual effort to discover the best opportunity to betray the Lord.

Judas reached the point of no return during Passion Week. On the night of the Lord's Supper, Jesus stunned His intimate group by announcing that one of them would betray Him. None of the other eleven disciples even suspected Judas. In fact, each

asked Jesus, "Surely not I, Lord?" (Matt. 26:22). They did not trust themselves, knowing their own fears and weaknesses. Even the hypocrite asked Jesus, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus' response, "You have said it," informed Judas that He knew his scheme, but the ambiguous words did not alert the others (v. 25, HCSB).

Peter wanted to know the identity of this betrayer. He asked John, who was seated at Jesus' right hand, to find out. In answer to John's inquiry, Jesus identified the traitor as the one to whom He would give a piece of bread after dipping it in the

common bowl, a sign of friendship, courtesy, and esteem. Judas sat at Jesus' left, in a place of special honor. Jesus gave the bread to

LESSON REFERENCE
ETB: Matthew 26–28

Page 59: A hoard of silver coins in the Jericho area. The coins date from the 1st century A.D. and are the type of coins Judas received for betraying Jesus.

Right: A multigenerational family shares in a Passover meal.

Below: West of the Dead Sea, in the region of Kerieth-hezron. Some have identified this region as that of Judas' family home.



Above: Artist's rendition of nard (*Nardostachys jatamansi*), from which anointing ointment was made.



Left: The small Green monastery of St. Onuphrius on the south slope of Mount Zion overlooking the Hinnom (Gehenna) Valley. The monastery is built over a cave where, according to tradition, the apostles may have hidden during and after Jesus' crucifixion. This is also the traditional site of Judas's suicide by hanging (Matt. 27:3-5) and the field called Akeldama (also Aceldama). According to tradition, Judas's 30 pieces of silver were used to purchase the burial site for strangers, a potters field. Akeldama means literally the "field of blood."

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO KEN TOUCHTON (8/13/17)

him. Middle East tradition considered it scandalous to betray a friend after sharing a meal.⁴ After receiving the bread from Jesus, Judas left the room. Yielding to his own selfish ambition, Judas opened himself to satanic control.

Past the Point of No Return

After leaving the Passover meal, Judas probably reported immediately to the chief priests. They provided temple police, armed with weapons and carrying lanterns and torches. A company of Roman soldiers accompanied this group—a necessity because the Jewish leaders believed Jesus guilty of an offense requiring capital punishment. Judas led this mob to the private place of prayer on the Mount of Olives, at Gethsemane where Jesus often met with His disciples (John 18:1-4).

Because it was dark, Judas had arranged a sign to identify Jesus. He walked up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" (Matt. 26:49, HCSB) as if all was well. Then Judas kissed Jesus. Jesus confronted him, "'Friend,' Jesus

asked him, 'why have you come?'" (v. 50, HCSB). The symbol of friendship became a signal of deceit and betrayal. The officials then arrested Jesus.

Judas was full of remorse after learning Jesus had been condemned and handed over to Pilate. He tried to return the 30 pieces of silver, but the religious leaders refused to take the money. So Judas threw the money into the sanctuary—then he went out and hanged himself (27:3-5).

Luke later described Judas's betrayal as fulfillment of Scripture, noting that Judas "fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out" (Acts 1:16-19, NIV). Writers have tried to harmonize Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Judas's death by saying that after Judas hanged himself, the rope or tree branch broke.⁵ At any rate, Judas died a violent death.

Questions Raised by Judas's Life and Death

Why did Jesus choose Judas as one of the Twelve knowing he

would betray Him? Jesus saw in Judas what He saw in the other eleven—potential. He saw a traitor He wanted to save. Perhaps He selected Judas as an example of warning that all of Jesus' followers should take heed lest we too fall.

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Did his love of money, his greed, overtake him? Was he disappointed that Jesus was not the political Messiah who would topple Rome? Did he feel betrayed by this suffering Messiah and was trying to retaliate? Or was he trying to force Jesus to act, mistakenly believing that an arrest would cause Jesus to reveal Himself as the Jewish King?⁶ Luke attributed his actions ultimately to Satan's influence. We can only speculate about his mixed motives.

Did Judas have a choice in betraying Jesus? Yes, Judas had a choice. God's foreknowledge of Judas's act did not mean He deprived Judas of the exercise of his free will. Judas could choose between good and evil.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS?

BI: What do we know about the Gospel of Judas?

Wilder: We know that the book was not written by Judas Iscariot but rather by Gnostic heretics arguably around the mid-second century A.D. Much of what we know about the Gospel of Judas comes from Irenaeus, a second-century early church father. He wrote a work around A.D. 180 called *Against Heresies* in which he identified the Gospel of Judas as heretical. He associated it with a Gnostic sect known as the Cainites, who sought to portray positively many characters such as Cain who are depicted negatively in Scripture. Scholars have known these things about the Gospel of Judas for years. The recently discovered Gospel of Judas is not the original document but a Coptic translation that dates back to around A.D. 300. This work teaches that Judas did not betray Jesus but actually did what Jesus wanted him to do because he really knew the truth that Jesus taught. Such teaching is consistent with the Gnostics' emphasis on salvation through secret knowledge but is in direct conflict with what the canonical Gospels teach. The early church was correct when it did not recognize the Gospel of Judas as canonical Scripture.

BI: Why was it not included in the canon of Scripture?

Wilder: The early church asked the following questions when recognizing works as being

canonical: Was this book produced by an apostle or under the auspices of an apostle, and does it obviously correspond in doctrine to what the apostles themselves taught when they were on the earth as God's divinely appointed spokesmen? The Gospel of Judas failed miserably on both counts—it did not attain canonical status because it was neither written by an apostle nor was its content in accord with what the apostles taught. The Gospel of Judas is neither an authentic gospel nor an authoritative one.

BI: How should Christians today respond to these "missing books of the Bible"?

Wilder: While such documents have some value in that they teach us much about the heresies they represented and promoted, Christians should never treat the false Gospel of Judas, or any of the other so-called "missing books of the Bible," on the same level as authoritative Scripture. They are not accurate gospels. The discovery of such writings changes nothing as far as the beliefs of orthodox Christianity are concerned. They do, however, confirm for us that the early church gave us accurate reports of false teachers and "got it right" when recognizing canonicity—and for that we can be extremely grateful! **B**

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He was not born a traitor. He became a traitor. As the "son of destruction," he gradually yielded himself to Satan's influence and evil. Satan was able to have that influence because in Judas he had found a willing instrument. Judas's treachery involved both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God acted to redeem, leading to salvation. Judas acted in evil intent, leading to his eternal damnation.

Judas passed the point of no return because he never sought forgiveness for his sin. Peter denied Jesus the same night Judas betrayed Him. Peter's remorse led to repentance and

forgiveness (Matt. 26:69-75). Judas's remorse led to suicide. He had the opportunity to repent but did not (27:5).

Finally, what can we learn from Judas Iscariot? Judas reminds us how sin's gradual pull can eventually overtake us if we do not flee its grasp. He also proves that environment alone—Judas lived with Jesus!—does not make an individual become a Christian. A person must respond in faith to the Lord. This betrayer illustrates that God's grace can be resisted and His truth rejected until our hearts become hardened past the point of no return. **B**

1. From Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*.

2. William Klassen, *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 32; D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (EBC), Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 239.

3. Carson, 528.

4. Walter W. Wessell, "Mark" in EBC, vol. 8, 759; Carson, 534.

5. Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts" in EBC, vol. 9, 263-264; D. J. Williams, "Judas Iscariot" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 408.

6. Williams, 406-407; Merrill C. Tenney, "Judas Iscariot" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 732; G. W. Buchanan, "Judas Iscariot" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 1153.

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