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Servant of the Story: Judas as Tragic Hero in Film

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Abstract

Judas is perhaps best defined and best understood through mythic mediums such as story and film, as opposed to historical, scriptural studies that adhere strictly to the gospel texts alone. Judas, as seen in story and film, is not restricted to or defined exclusively by a series of actions that characterize him as a villain. Rather, especially in filmic depictions, he shifts from a villain to a tragic hero, and as such, allows for a fuller discussion of the various influences and choices with which Judas may have been faced than is possible in the genre of gospel text.

Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus Christ, the thief, the sinner, the conniving, hunched over, sinister, red-haired, selfish man, the one who sold out the Messiah for thirty pieces of silver, is perhaps the most loathed person in history. In the gospels themselves, Judas's actions are simple: he tells the Jewish authorities where to find Jesus, he takes money in exchange for the information, and he kisses Jesus, thus revealing his identity to the Temple authorities. And yet this set of actions - the "Judas event" if you will -- has come to symbolize the most fundamental and basic evil known to humanity. This character of Judas as evil incarnate, the mythic Judas, in some very real ways overshadows the historic Judas.

I argue here that the very structure of narrative has shaped the image and portrayal of Judas to such an extent that he is perhaps best defined and best understood through mythic mediums such as story and film, as opposed to historical, scriptural studies that adhere strictly to the gospel texts alone. Judas, as seen in story and film, is not restricted to or defined exclusively by a series of actions that characterize him as a villain. Rather, especially in filmic depictions, he shifts from a villain to a tragic hero, and as such, allows for a fuller discussion of the various influences and choices with which Judas may have been faced than is possible in the genre of gospel text.

Film portraits of Judas provide an under-examined lens for exploring this presentation of a revised Judas and serve as a type of contemporary text reflecting

on scripture - a midrash on the text itself. In unpacking two films in which Judas is a dominant character, I will examine how the narrative demands of film require a more tragic, less villainous characterization of Judas than the gospel texts themselves. More importantly, I argue that the narrative demands of the genre of modern film - as opposed to the narrative demands of the genre of ancient gospel texts -- leads to a possible new interpretation of Judas as not villain, hero, nor misunderstood confidant, but rather as a person struggling to retain the old tradition while simultaneously embracing the radical reinterpretation of that tradition - hence, his fatally conflicted character. Because scripture itself is so silent on the motive or character of Judas, examining his character through filmic depictions can expand a purely textual understanding. By understanding Judas as a character in a story, in a specifically structured narrative, and by exploring influence of the narrative structure itself in shaping that character, his incomprehensible, reprehensible choice becomes not only understandable, but also classically tragic.

While it certainly can be seen as a version of modern storytelling, drawing on traditional elements as presented in Aristotle's Poetics, classical film structure (and by "classical" I here mean usual, traditional, rather than merely original or old)[1] can also be seen as having its own particular set of narrative tropes. There are certainly numerous films that break with conventional form, that use elliptical storytelling styles, and multiple points of view, but by and large there are still some

consistent patterns of storytelling, and a standard format for screenplays. Movies are, for example, usually about two hours long. One minute of screen time is roughly equal to one page of screenplay. Syd Field, in his book Screenplay, delineates a three-act structure that has been largely accepted as standard within the industry: the setup, in which the initial situation is established; the complicating action, which takes the action of the story in a new direction and the subsequent development in which the protagonist struggles towards his or her goals; and the climax, in which the desires are achieved and the results of that achievement felt.[2] Kristin Thompson, in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, asserts: "in virtually all cases [of film narratives], the main character, or protagonist, in a classical Hollywood film desires something, and that desire provides the forward impetus for the narrative. . . . Almost invariably, the protagonist's goal defines the main lines of action."[3] Similarly, she argues that plots involving a central character that gradually grows or changes are some of the most common in film narratives.[4]

This idea of a character flaw driving the plot becomes challenging when confronted with the character of Jesus in film. By definition, Jesus has no flaws; thus, how to have a character arc that will help drive the story? In trying to solve this problem, many films turn, in different ways, to Judas. He is a clear source of

conflict that can help drive the action; thus, he assumes a dominance in film that he never had in the gospels.

Following the idea of a character arc as a driving force for the plot, how does this character arc create a structure? Drawing on the analyses by Field in his book *Screenplay*, Robert McKee in his book *Story*, and Christopher Vogler in *The Writers Journey*, three of the most popular screenwriting books in Hollywood, the following breakdown is generally accepted: the first act (pages one through thirty in a one hundred and twenty page screenplay) establishes the character in her ordinary world, and displays her flawed characteristic. The end of the first act moves the main character into the "new world" of the script. This new world may be a physical new world or simply a new emotional state.

For example, *Jesus Christ Superstar* opens with Judas, who takes center stage, in the visual forefront, as he pleads with a far away, tiny Jesus:

> My mind is clearer now - at last all too well
>
> I can see where we all soon will be
>
> If you strip away the myth from the man
> You will see where we all soon will be
> Jesus! You've started to believe
> The things they say of you
> You really do believe
> This talk of God is true
> And all the good you've done
> Will soon get swept away

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You've begun to matter more
Than the things you say.[5]

Immediately, we understand that Judas is conflicted and doubting. Judas here is worried that the message itself is being lost in the fanatic adoration of Jesus the person (or Godhead). In some sense, Judas is seeking to keep the goals pure, to keep it about the message - never stated explicitly, but implicitly a message of helping the poor, engaging in doing good, and of radical love -- not the messenger. In the opening twenty minutes to half hour, Judas, once a loyal apostle, is entering into a "new world" of doubt regarding Jesus and the effectiveness or choice of message.

The first half of the second act has the main character seeming to find success, until about page sixty. At this point, halfway through the script (and halfway through the second act) there is a climactic event. This event, ideally, will set up clearly what is really at stake, and will alter the direction of the hero's journey. From a character arc perspective, this point is also when the main character thinks he has mastered his flawed trait, only to have it proven that he has only superficially mastered the flaw, but has not really changed. Again, to trace *Superstar*: halfway through, about forty-five minutes into the ninety-minute film, Judas goes to Caiaphas, and agrees to tell him where Jesus will be. This moment reveals Judas thinking he has mastered his doubt and conflict, thinking he has found the correct solution, but also reveals that he has some hesitation about his decision,

indicating that he has yet to come to terms with his doubt and conflict. It also sets up the inevitable conflicts at the end between Judas and Jesus.

Stunningly, it is only Judas who seems to realize the long-term effects of Jesus' ministry -- that the current path of embracing Jesus' teachings cannot co-exist with the old ways of the Jewish tradition. It is this realization that propels his action. As Judas explains when first coming to the Sanhedrin:

> I came because I had to I'm the one who saw
> Jesus can't control it like he did before
>
> . . . .
>
> Annas you're a friend a worldly man and wise
> Caiaphas my friend I know you sympathize
> Why are we the prophets? Why are we the ones?
> We see the sad solution - know what must be done.[6]

His handing over of Jesus comes from trying to preserve a new message and preserve the identity of a people in danger, who are oppressed. The sudden looming of military tanks behind Judas emphasize that his fear is real - the occupying forces are easily able to wipe out the small group. Judas is trying to preserve two things: first, his people, second, what he sees as Jesus' "proper" message of a new understanding of love and inclusion, which from his perspective, is getting increasingly off-track. In this sense, Judas is caught in an impossible situation. He cannot straddle the divide. He cannot hold on to the old and embrace the new. He cannot bring Jesus and Caiaphas into agreement.

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The second half of the second act - roughly pages sixty through ninety - involves the hero facing a large ordeal, attempting a big change, facing both improvements and setbacks as a consequence. The end of the second act, at about page ninety, or an hour and a half into a two-hour film, is marked by a low point. This moment is the lowest moment for the hero, the one where all seems lost. In *Superstar*, the end of the second act is marked with Judas arriving in the garden, with the troops, and bestowing his infamous kiss. The low point comes about an hour and ten minutes into the film when Judas realizes, too late, the result of his action, and hangs himself from a tree.

At this point in classic film structure, the hero will incorporate the desired, new behavior, master his flaw, and prepare himself to confront the enemy a final time. This final confrontation and its immediate results form the third, final act of a screenplay, and often include a dramatic fight or chase scene or some large physical finale, or, in a romantic comedy, the couple finally realizing their love for each other and surmounting the final obstacles - such as a wedding to another, or stopping the other before they depart for good. In *Superstar*, Judas re-appears after his death in glistening, gospel white, with a heavenly backup chorus, for a final round of questioning and challenging Jesus. It is worth noting in this film that Judas gets resurrected, not Jesus. Judas is still questioning, but seems to embrace the questions, rather than struggling with them; he is calm, not threatened, resigned and

celebratory, rather than doomed and fatalistic. Kim Paffenroth, in his book *Images of the Lost Disciple*, describes this as a shift in tone within Judas from despair to "wonder, doubt, or criticism - a criticism that perhaps implies hope or confidence that the criticism can be accepted and the situation and relationship improved." Thus, "the human need to question God is affirmed,"[7] and Judas, at last, after his moment of tragic recognition, seems to have learned how to be at peace with his questions.

In this interpretation, Judas' final questions resonate deeply: "Who are you? What have you sacrificed?"[8] Jesus has clearly sacrificed his life, but he has also, in some ways, sacrificed the old tradition. This is, perhaps, the essential difference. Jesus was willing to walk away from the traditions, Judas is not. This is also a deeply resonant question: how many of us have struggled with how to create our own lives separate from our parents, or to leave generations of family behind to start a new life? It is Judas who is struggling desperately to reconcile two irreconcilable worlds, and thus is faced with a losing choice: abandon his heritage, or abandon his beliefs.

Instinctively, Judas would seem to be a villain character - an opponent, an adversary -- in any film about Jesus. And yet, Thompson, in *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, makes an effective case for seeing Judas as a parallel protagonist, rather than an antagonist. Parallel protagonists, according to Thompson, "pursue distinctly

different, sometimes conflicting goals."[9] This argument would place an emphasis not simply on Judas' acting against Jesus, but rather on what Judas' goal may be, and how he is different in his character and his goals than Jesus. Further, as seen above, if Judas becomes a tragic hero, he cannot be a villain, and does indeed seem better characterized in films as a parallel protagonist to Jesus.

An excellent example of Judas as a parallel protagonist, rather than a villain, is *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Structurally, the film follows Jesus' character arc as he struggles to accept his identity as both human and divine. While some gospel accounts do present glimpses of a human side to Jesus, they stop far short of the existential, extreme doubt that characterizes Jesus throughout this film. Where *Superstar* pushed the character arc onto Judas, *The Last Temptation* chooses instead to have the human, flawed, doubting side of Jesus drive the action of the film. Even so, Judas still manages to be a dominant figure. *Last Temptation* offers perhaps the most radical, and most sympathetic of all filmic portrayals of Judas. Far from betraying Jesus, Judas is seen as the very instrument of the salvation of humanity:

> Jesus: Without you [Judas], there can be no redemption, understand that.
>
> Judas: If that's what God wants, let God do it. I won't.
>
> Jesus: He will do it, through you.[10]

Judas, in this portrayal, is not only Jesus' intimate friend, but also his conscience and his strength. Indeed, Judas marks every significant plot point from the opening

through the final return to the cross. The opening of the film cuts immediately from Jesus lying on the ground to Jesus working, making crosses for the Romans. Judas bursts into his workshop, and the first spoken words of the film, "Are you ready?" are from Judas to Jesus. This first exchange between the two men also lays out the struggle to avoid God that is Jesus' world up until that moment:

> Jesus: I'm struggling.
>
> Judas: With whom?
>
> Jesus: I don't know. I'm struggling.
>
> Judas: No. No. I struggle. You collaborate.[11]

The first act ends with Judas confronting Jesus in the desert. Judas, sent there by the Jewish zealots to kill Jesus, in fact pushes Jesus to recognize that he no longer resists to God, that he is, more importantly, ready to return to the world and preach - a new world for Jesus. Structurally, Judas is the one to bring a hesitating Jesus into the second act, setting the stage for the final act, in which Judas will again push a reluctant Jesus into his final acceptance of his identity.

Halfway through the second act, or halfway through the film, Jesus is faced with the tomb of Lazarus. Scorsese is very clear in his commentary that the moment of bringing Lazarus back from the dead is a pivotal turning point for Jesus. The first half of the film shows Jesus resisting his power, resisting God. At this moment, Jesus is literally pulled into the tomb, and the expression of fear on his face reflects

not only the fear of what has just happened, but also the fear inherent in the realization that his own fate is death. As he is being literally pulled into death, Jesus finally realizes the full extent of his power and accepts his identity. As seen later in the film, Jesus has not truly accepted his identity, and it is this issue that will be his final struggle at the end.

The low point of the film - the end of the second act - occurs just over two thirds of the way through the movie, and leads into what became the most controversial element of the film. Jesus, tempted by his "Guardian Angel" agrees to come down off the cross, and to live the life of a human. He marries, has children, and lives out his days in relative anonymity and happiness. The final act traces this imagined life, until, on his deathbed, Jesus must again face the issue that has plagued him since the beginning: his divine identity. Paralleling his encounter with Lazarus at the halfway point, Jesus must accept his power and walk into death. This is, again, classic film structure. Jesus thought he had learned his lesson with Lazarus in the tomb, but the events reveal that he has not actually mastered his fear and doubt regarding his identity. He is still all too willing to believe that he is not the Messiah, that he is an ordinary human. He must, in this final conflict, face the challenge again in a moment when the stakes could not be higher.

At this critical moment, it is Judas, not Jesus, who instantly recognizes the "Guardian Angel" not as a heavenly guardian, but as the same devil that tempted

Jesus in the desert. It is Judas who shames and chastises Jesus until he can see his destiny clearly. Just as Judas was the narrative tool that handed Jesus over to the authorities in the first place, it is now also Judas who hands Jesus over to God.

The Last Temptation presents Judas as siding with Jesus, and his act of handing Jesus over as an act of love and obedience. *Superstar* presents Judas as siding with the Sanhedrin, acting to protect a religion on the verge of being wiped out against a prophet who has taken things a little too far. While the two films present Judas choosing opposite allegiances, what is important is that they present the same choice: the old tradition or the new. Both films present Judas as a complex, sympathetic character who is trying to straddle these two worlds.

As in classical tragedy, in contemporary film Judas resists being portrayed as a villain, and seems to be more accurately described as a hero, albeit a flawed, tragic one. Suffering in order to come to greater understanding is part of the defining nature of tragedy, and also part of the narrative structure of film. The main character must go through trials and suffering before coming to a fuller, more complete understanding at the end. This deeper understanding, in film, is not possible without the second act journey and low point, which forces the main character into action, into decision, and into the final confrontation and choice. This struggle, this exploration of motive and choices for Judas is largely absent in the scriptures themselves, thus film provides a useful tool to illuminate the more

compelling and intriguing elements of Judas' character and the struggle he embodies. Judas, in film, is thus no longer an evil villain; rather, he is a human who will struggle to overcome his failings, who will yearn to be something greater than he is, and who will ultimately be faced with choices which present him with losing options.

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[1] While terms like "classical," and even "usual" or "traditional" are often subject to debate, I am here referring to "classical" film structure as discussed by Kristin Thompson in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, a discussion which itself draws from Syd Fields' book *Screenplay* and Robert McKee's book *Story* which are both largely accepted in the film industry itself as the dominant outlines of "classic" or "standard" screenplay structure.

[2] Kristin Thompson *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 28

[3] Thompson, *Storytelling*, 14

[4] Thompson, *Storytelling*, 50

[5] Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Heaven on their Minds."

[6] Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Damned for all Time/Blood Money."

[7] Paffenroth, *Images of the Lost Disciple*, (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 99.

[8] Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Superstar."

[9] Thompson, *Storytelling*, 46

[10] Paul Schrader, *Last Temptation*.

[11] Paul Schrader, *Last Temptation*.