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Film Depictions of Judas

Abstract

This article analyzes the depiction of Judas in the seven best-known Jesus films. Perhaps surprisingly, all the depictions are positive, on the one hand breaking with centuries of traditions that depicted Judas as the basest of villains, but on the other, following a persistent minority tradition that portrayed him sympathetically.

The enigma of Judas has been elaborated throughout Christian history. Even in the canonical texts themselves, the development in his character is noticeable. In Mark, probably the earliest Gospel, Judas and his motives remain utterly mysterious: the amount of money paid to him is not specified, nor is the delivery of it even mentioned, and what happens to him after Jesus' arrest is left unsaid. Luke and John make him much less ambiguous, crafting him into a greedy, thieving villain who then becomes an instrument of Satan. But Matthew elaborates Judas' character much more sympathetically, recounting Judas' remorseful return of the "blood money" to the chief priests, as well as his subsequent death by suicide. Although Judas is still conceived by most as a traitorous villain and thief, Matthew's more sympathetic depiction of him has also been influential throughout Christian history, as positive portrayals of Judas have existed from the 2nd century to the 21st. Building on Matthew's version and adding their own speculation, film makers have continued this tradition of a tragically misunderstood Judas.

The King of Kings. Cecil B. DeMille's silent epic *The King of Kings* (1927) follows a common speculation that it was Judas' attraction for a woman and the resulting jealousy that contributed to his betrayal of Jesus.¹ Here we have an attempt to make psychologically plausible what was essentially an enigma of unmotivated malice in the Gospels. It also has the added bonus of making a religious tale into a secular one of lust that would be more attractive and understandable to a modern

audience. The film begins with a long sequence of Mary Magdalene cavorting in a palace somewhere. Played by Jacqueline Logan, I would consider her the most beautiful and erotic Mary Magdalene of any Jesus film (with all due respect to the voluptuous Barbara Hershey of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and the waif-like Catherine Wilkening of *Jesus of Montreal*). She is jealous because her lover Judas has run off to follow some Galilean carpenter, and she leaves the palace in a huff on a chariot driven by zebras - a scene not designed for subtlety, but for overkill in its animal sensuality.

Mary's prominence in this film is part of its general emphasis on Jesus' relations with females. Mary Magdalene, the woman taken in adultery [John 8:1-11], and Martha and Mary [John 11:1-44] dominate the first half of the film, to the exclusion of any of Jesus' teaching.² The role of these women is augmented by two very touching, non-canonical scenes of Jesus with female children. Jesus is first seen through the eyes of a blind girl whom he heals, and later he repairs a doll for a little girl.

When Mary Magdalene meets Jesus, she is mesmerized by him and gives up her wanton ways. Judas looks quite disappointed at this. This disappointment clearly augments his frustration at Jesus' refusal to establish an earthly kingdom. The combined image of Judas as lover and Judas as ambitious patriot is another attempt to make his actions understandable, an effort that has been popular

since the eighteenth century and the rise of rational, scientific attempts to explain and understand Biblical stories. In the end Judas betrays Jesus because all his expectations of him and his kingdom are disappointed and he is "bitter, panic-stricken. . . desperate. . . all hope of earthly kingdom gone," as the words on the screen inform us. Judas loves his country and women more than he loves Jesus. Though we may blame him for this, it is clearly an attempt to make his actions understandable: he is not an inhuman monster driven by unmotivated evil, but a man divided in his allegiances and beliefs.

King of Kings. Removing the love interest and focusing exclusively on Judas' misguided nationalistic ambitions, we have *King of Kings* (1961), directed by Nicholas Ray.³ Ray is best known for his classic *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), which was nominated for three Academy Awards (including one for the screenplay by Ray), and in 1998 he was named one of the 100 Greatest American Movies by the American Film Institute.⁴ In the film Judas is played by actor Rip Torn. The film adds several scenes between Judas and Barabbas as they plot an armed uprising against the Romans. During these meetings, Judas even tries to convince Barabbas to listen to Jesus' alternative, non-violent way of opposing the Romans' oppression. When this fails and Barabbas leads an unsuccessful uprising that kills many people (in one of two vivid battle scenes that Ray uses to liven up the Gospel account), Judas then hits on the idea of turning Jesus over to the authorities in order to force

him to use his divine powers, to call down the violence of heaven on his earthly enemies. In a bold move, the film omits any mention of Judas being paid for his information, so the act is portrayed as purely one of principled calculation.

This is closely following the so-called DeQuincey Theory, named for Thomas DeQuincey (1785-1859), who made widely known to the English speaking world the theory that Judas was trying to force Jesus' hand, to force him into violence, but not to harm him. Judas was therefore misguided and mistaken, but not treacherous or malicious: at most he was guilty of presumption, thinking that he knew better than Jesus what Jesus should be doing, but in this he was only more aggressive and overt than the other disciples. Judas seems to maintain his hope that Jesus will resort to divine violence right up to the end, closely following Jesus to Golgotha and witnessing his execution. But when he sees that his plan has failed, Judas hangs himself in sadness over his miscalculation, and Barabbas rather lovingly and poignantly takes his friend's body down from the tree. Judas is tragically portrayed as torn between two charismatic leaders and ultimately destroyed by their competing and contradictory visions of the good. Again, here we have an understandable and eminently entertaining tale of human mistakes, rather than a more troubling rumination on the mystery of evil.

The Greatest Story Ever Told. Practically every version of Judas' story since Mark's has sought to fill in his silence about Judas' motives and character, but

an interesting exception to this is found in perhaps the best-known Jesus film of all time, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), directed by George Stevens.⁵ Among the film's many shortcomings (its most noticeable being its numerous and absurd miscastings), are its flat, static quality and its attention to visual effect without any equivalent interest in characterization or narrative: "Yet, the viewer may also discover that *Greatest Story* is less a story ... because it contains less narrative structure, less plot, and less character interaction."⁶ Although sensitively played by David McCallum (who went on to huge fame as Robert Vaughn's sidekick in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*), Judas is a glaring example of this lack of characterization. He is the first disciple called, and in an early scene (with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus), he is even seated closest to Jesus. But nothing is ever made of this.

At the confession at Caesarea Philippi, Judas is given his own confession: "You are a great leader, and the greatest teacher I have ever known." This is again a good start, hinting perhaps at the kind of nationalistic, revolutionary tendencies that we have seen in the other films, but again there is no sequel. Judas is outraged at the anointing, but we have no idea why, as he has evinced no special interest in the poor, nor does he show any interest in money himself. At the betrayal, Judas seems distraught, but there is no indication why he is betraying Jesus, nor why he would be distraught over it. Finally, his death is visually stunning, as in an extreme long shot we see him throwing himself into an enormous sacrificial fire in the

temple, but again there is no indication whether we should take this as remorse, despair, or just punishment for his evil deed.⁷ (Much the same could be said for Jesus' crucifixion, which is shot from way too far away for it to be compelling or even emotional.)⁸ In a fast-paced story like the Gospel of Mark, an enigmatic character like Judas is intriguing; in a 4-hour biblical epic like *Greatest Story* that lacks any fleshed-out characters, he is annoying.

Godspell. Besides the misguided revolutionary, there is the even more positive presentation of Judas as Jesus' only obedient disciple. This is found in the musical *Godspell*, with songs by Stephen Schwartz, made into a movie directed by David Greene (who is known primarily for his work in television).⁹ Although clearly dated and at times silly, the work nonetheless presents some touching insights. Jesus first gathers his disciples in New York's Central Park, and they then frolic throughout a New York City that is miraculously empty of all people other than Jesus and his band. Along the way, Jesus pronounces many of his ethical teachings, and he and his disciples act out many of the best known parables: the sower (Mark 4:1-9), the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-34), the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), and the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14).

Having removed all plot, the movie focuses on Jesus' teaching much more than other Jesus films. This creates some narrative difficulties, as there are no

opponents for the final segment of Jesus' life, no one to kill him. This is solved in a strange scene in which some of the disciples build a large puppet that confronts Jesus and makes the accusations against him made by the Pharisees in the gospels. Then at the Last Supper, Jesus simply commands Judas to betray him, Judas leaves, and then returns with police cars (the policemen never appear).¹⁰ Judas cannot bring himself to kiss Jesus, so Jesus kisses Judas instead. Judas then ties Jesus to a chain link fence. As Jesus dies on the fence, Judas and all the other disciples assume similar crucifixion postures against the fence. Then all the disciples, including Judas, lovingly take Jesus' body off the fence and carry it through the city, which magically repopulates after they turn a corner and leave camera view.

In this version, Judas is in a way the epitome of the disciples, who as a group are completely faithful to Jesus throughout. Judas carries that faithfulness through to the unpleasant task of fulfilling Jesus' desire to be killed. Even if the puppet-opponent made by the disciples suggests "the presence of evil even in those closest to Jesus,"¹¹ it is significant that Judas is not one of those who builds the puppet. He stands alongside Jesus as he confronts it, and is then shown running down the street with him in an especially upbeat sequence. In the end, in absolute antithesis to the depiction of the disciples in Mark, Judas and the other disciples are willing and able to be crucified with Jesus, and they then do not run away from the tomb, but bring Jesus and his message back into a "resurrected" city.

The idea that the disciples take over Jesus' roles is shown clearly throughout: with his teachings, as they put on the skits of the parables; with the foot washing, as they wash one another after Jesus begins the process; and with their mass crucifixion together. But this elevated, Christ-like depiction of Judas and the other disciples is what disturbs some Christians about the musical, because it might seem to imply that the disciples are not merely imitating Jesus. They are replacing him. He loses his uniqueness by empowering them to do what he does: "His teaching is meant to free his disciples from what limits them and to allow them to free one another."¹² The idea that Jesus died for our sins has been reformulated slightly: Jesus commanded Judas to kill Jesus for our sins. For some people, this gives an uncomfortable amount of credit and approval to Judas and his actions. But it makes perfect sense in the context of the musical and in its historical context: a hippie Jesus would be expected to found a community of equals who would carry on his work, not a hierarchy with himself at the top.

Jesus Christ Superstar. The acclaimed rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice also depicts Judas as loving Jesus to the very end. This time he acts against him only in an attempt to prevent violence to his friend and their followers.¹³ Despite some rather dated dance numbers and costumes, there are still frequent moments of brilliance in the musical and the movie version (1973), directed by Norman Jewison. Jewison recently won the

Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for a lifetime of achievement in film making (1998), and directed many acclaimed movies, such as *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), and *In the Heat of the Night*, which won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1967.

In *Superstar*, the other disciples practically disappear, only appearing prominently to display their shameful self-serving attitude. This is seen at the last supper ("Always hoped that I'd be an apostle / Knew that I would make it if I tried / Then when we retire we can write the gospels / So they'll still talk about us when we've died"),¹⁴ and in Peter's cowardice at the denial. It is Mary Magdalene and Judas that rise to prominence. Their songs are haunting or jarring, and their depictions are passionate, much more so even than the depiction of Jesus, who seems rather too passive, confused, and weak, except for some annoying falsetto screams.¹⁵

The prominence given Mary Magdalene and Judas is also part of the convoluted context that makes choosing Carl Anderson, an African-American, for the role of Judas so provocative.¹⁶ Whether one is a racist who is quite comfortable thinking of a black man as the world's worst villain, or whether one reacts in the opposite way of being appalled that a black man would be cast as a villain, the portrayal here will undermine and call into question one's expectations. Either way, our expectations are subverted by having a black man as the problematic hero of

the story, a character we know we are "supposed" to hate, but who is quickly shown to be the most appealing and powerful character of the story.

In a racially charged context, the simultaneity of both hating and admiring a black man has to call into question the whole idea of race, as well as the whole idea of Judas' villainy. Jewison effectively used racial stereotypes to undermine the racism that lay behind them: "The 1970s interest in the black performer was still driven by white constructions of African American stereotypes, but the newly revised image of many minorities, including women, provided them with an active, even angry voice, a way to speak out against long years of repression."¹⁷

The story is told almost completely from Judas' perspective. The very first song is sung by Judas, as he laments the turn that Jesus' ministry has taken:

And all the good you've done
Will soon be swept away
You've begun to matter more
Than the things you say . . .
My admiration for you hasn't died
But every word you say today
Gets twisted 'round some other way
And they'll hurt you if they think you've lied . . .

Listen Jesus, do you care for your race?
Don't you see we must keep in our place?
We are occupied
Have you forgotten how put down we are?
I am frightened by the crowd
For we are getting much too loud
And they'll crush us if we go too far
If we go too far.¹⁸

Jesus does not appreciate the danger into which he has put himself and his followers (and perhaps his message) by letting others think he has militaristic ambitions (even if he rejects these in the song "Simon Zealotes"). But Jesus won't listen to Judas. Indeed, he does not seem to listen to anyone. Anger and confusion at Jesus' inability to see what is happening push Mary Magdalene into singing the most beautiful song in the work, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Similar feelings push Judas (after being chased by tanks and fighter planes that may be real or imagined) to try to stop his friend's self-destruction by going to the chief priests:

I came because I had to
Because I'm the one who saw
Jesus can't control it
Like he did before

And furthermore I know
That Jesus thinks so too
Jesus wouldn't mind
That I was here with you
I have no thought at all
Of my own reward
I really didn't come here
Of my own accord.¹⁹

When Judas sees that he himself has lost control as well, he realizes his mistake and the terrible, mysterious love that Jesus had for him. Judas echoes Mary's song, and goes on to see that his friend knew all along what would happen:

I don't know how to love him
I don't know why he moves me. . .
I've been used
And you knew
All the time
God I'll never ever know
Why you chose me for your crime
For your foul bloody crime
You have murdered me!²⁰

But as final as Judas' suicide appears, he surprisingly returns for one more number, with no less than a heavenly chorus (at least, they are dressed all in glittering white pantsuits) backing him up:

Jesus Christ

Superstar

Do you think you're what they say you are?

Tell me what you think

About your friends at the top

Now who d'you think besides yourself

Was the pick of the crop?

Buddha was he where it's at?

Is he where you are?

Could Mohammed move a mountain

Or was that just PR?

Did you mean to die like that?

Was that a mistake or

Did you know your messy death

Would be a record breaker?

(Don't you get me wrong) Don't you get me wrong.²¹

In the end, Judas does seem to be saved, even if his angry questions are still unanswered. He remains critical of Jesus (and God), but repeatedly asks him not to "get me wrong": his questions come from love, not hate, as accusatory as they remain to the end. As in the book of Job, the human need to question and even accuse God is affirmed, even if such a need must ultimately go unfulfilled in this life.

Jesus of Nazareth. An equally sympathetic, but much gentler and more insipid version of a non-violent Judas is given in the immensely popular television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977),²² directed by famous Italian director Franco Zeffirelli, with Anthony Burgess as one of the screenplay writers, better known for his controversial novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). In it Judas is the antithesis of the violent revolutionary we have seen above: instead, he is exactly the kind of banal and ordinary character to be expected from the non-threatening, numbing medium of television. He completely adopts Jesus' message of non-violence, peace, and love: he is even the one who converts Simon Zelotes away from violence and brings him into Jesus' circle of disciples.

If Judas doesn't conceive of Jesus as a violent revolutionary, however, he does seem to have extremely unrealistic political aspirations for his master. Judas thinks that by presenting Jesus to the Sanhedrin, they will proclaim him King of Israel, a proclamation that will meet with no resistance from Rome once they hear

Jesus' message of peace and love. Judas turns Jesus over to the Sanhedrin believing that they are only going to speak with him, and that his message will prove as irresistible to them as it has to Judas. More than anything, Judas seems merely naive, and his naivete is exploited by the extra-Biblical character of Zerah, a priest who misleads Judas into believing that Caiaphas only wants to meet and speak with Jesus.

In Judas' final appearance, he still believes in Zerah's lies, asking him where the meeting is to take place, to which Zerah replies that there is no meeting, only a trial. As part of the film's overall drive to make everyone likeable, Judas is almost completely exonerated (as are the Jews, the crowds, and the Romans): "In the end, Zeffirelli's Judas is a victim, not a villain."²³ Zerah is the betrayer, not Judas, but this makes the whole betrayal less dramatic, as Jesus is betrayed by a stranger, not an intimate. This is certainly in keeping with the overall tone of the work, which is rather banal and antiseptic (like most of television): "*Jesus of Nazareth* has been thoroughly banalized. . . . nothing in the film shocks or challenges. . . . In *Jesus of Nazareth*, nowhere is there even the breath of excess or exaggeration, for everything is in good taste."²⁴ As well-intentioned as Judas is in the film, a Judas who is in "good taste" is not particularly compelling. And a Judas who is merely duped into killing Jesus is bordering on the pathetic, not the tragic.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Finally, in the most provocative Jesus film of all we have the most provocative Judas of all, as Martin Scorsese's film version of Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* teases us with the idea that Judas is the one responsible for the crucifixion and the salvation of humanity more than Jesus is.²⁵ Often reviled for religious and aesthetic reasons, the film is powerful and challenging for its taking seriously exactly how tempted Jesus must have been (whether he was a man or God) by everything that is attractive about living a normal, human life, rather than going to a humiliating death. Giving up sex, love, comfort, children, and friends is a lot to ask of anyone, even (or especially?) God. And Judas' role in the film is to help Jesus overcome this temptation and his weakness in the face of it.

Apparently a friend of Jesus even before the film begins, Judas is always at Jesus' side throughout the movie. Played by Harvey Keitel (with annoyingly orange hair), he is thuggish and decisive to Willem Dafoe's neurotic and disassociated Jesus: "Two men, closer than brothers, with complementary abilities and obsessions, who must connive in each other's destiny."²⁶ While Keitel is almost never appealing, he is effective here as the strongest and most intelligent of the disciples, and that is why Jesus picks him as his betrayer: he knows that neither he himself nor the other disciples could go through with it, and he encourages Judas by telling him that God picked him for this task and made him stronger than Jesus.

More surprising than his role in the betrayal, however, is Judas' role in the final controversial dream sequence of the film. As he is dying on the cross, Jesus imagines his last temptation. The devil comes to him in the shape of a beautiful little girl, pulls the nails from his hands and feet, tenderly kisses his wounds, and leads him away. He imagines himself living a normal life of marriage (and adultery), work, and children, and dying peacefully at a ripe old age. All of this is his reward for all the pain he suffered for God's cause. But as he imagines his peaceful death, Judas intrudes. He is introduced by the craven and indecisive Peter with the warning, "He's still angry." Judas then shames Jesus into rejecting this devilish vision of domestic tranquility and ordinariness, telling him that he doesn't belong there. He was supposed to die on the cross and he is not only a coward if he rejects this call, but a traitor to his loyal friend Judas, who had gone through the painful act of betrayal at Jesus' command. (Jesus had already been given a taste of this embarrassment by Saul, who had calmly rejected him, the un-crucified and pathetic Jesus, in favor of his own powerful, crucified Christ.)

Although it is disturbing to some critics that "only through the efforts of Judas . . . is the establishment of Christianity made possible,"²⁷ this film is a powerful culmination to a tradition that sees Judas' act as one of self-sacrifice and submission to the divine will. He is as much the actor and the accomplisher of God's plan as his friend Jesus.

¹ On the film, see L. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997) 12-13; R. C. Stern, C. N. Jefford, and G. Debona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) 27-57.

² Cf. Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 31, 40-41.

³ On the film, see Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 18-24; Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 59-91.

⁴ On *Rebel*, see this excellent website ([http://allmovie.com/cg/x.dll?UID=8:06:48|PM∓p=avg∓sql=A40604](http://allmovie.com/cg/x.dll?UID=8:06:48|PM&mp=p=avg∓sql=A40604)).

⁵ See the analyses of the film by Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 24-32; Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 127-60.

⁶ Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 130; cf. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 29-30.

⁷ Cf. Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 139-40.

⁸ Cf. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 31.

⁹ On the movie, see Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 42-47.

¹⁰ Judas is equated with John the Baptist in *Godspell*, an identity that is also hinted at in *Jesus of Montreal*: see Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 123.

¹¹ Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 44.

¹² Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 45.

¹³ On *Superstar*, see the excellent discussions by Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 35-41; Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 161-93, esp. the discussion of Judas, 169-71; Mark Goodacre, "Do You Think You're What They Say You Are? Reflections on Jesus Christ Superstar," *Journal of Religion & Film* Vol. 3, No. 2 (October 1999).

¹⁴ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "The Last Supper."

¹⁵ Cf. the waggish comment of Michael Singer, recorded in Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 249: "Ted Neeley-Jesus' 'irritating falsetto' is the reason 'why Yvonne Ellimann's Mary Magdalene didn't know how to love him.'"

¹⁶ On the casting, see Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 37; Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 192-93.

¹⁷ Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 192-93.

¹⁸ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Heaven on Their Minds."

¹⁹ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Damned for All Time/Blood Money."

²⁰ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Judas' Death."

²¹ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, "Superstar."

²² On the film, see Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 72-83; Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 195-229.

²³ Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 76.

²⁴ Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 74, 77, 77.

²⁵ For analysis of the film, see Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 51-71; Stern, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 265-95.

²⁶ Richard Corliss, quoted in Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 56.

²⁷ am Cook, quoted in Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 69.