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“Jesus: His Life from the Perspectives of Judas and Pilate” (Pt. 3)

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As the trailer points out, the distinctive feature of the eight-episode History Channel series, “Jesus: His Life,” is that it looks at the life and ministry of Jesus from the perspective of key figures within the gospel narratives. The first four episodes assessed the life of Jesus from the perspectives of Joseph, John the Baptist, Mary, and Caiaphas; [1] Episodes Five and Six review the life of Jesus from the perspectives of Judas and Pilate. From the top, we are once again reminded of the 1965 epic film title that the story of Jesus is “the greatest story ever told,” and the executive producer Joel Osteen helps present-day audiences identify with one who “felt what we felt,” and who “faced what we face today.”

As the third showing of double episodes (April 8, 2019) focused on the perspectives of Judas and Pilate, two looming questions were raised within each episode. First, why did Judas betray Jesus? And second, whose fault was it that Jesus was crucified—the religious leaders (such as Caiaphas) or the political leaders (such as Pilate)? While the answer to each of these questions is terribly elusive, the series nonetheless offers a series of contextual possibilities, helping viewers dig a bit more deeply into the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus as Viewed by Judas

As Robert Cargill points out, even the name Judas is synonymous with the word, “traitor,” but is that the best way to understand Judas of Kerioth, or Judas Iscariot? He certainly is labeled the traitor in all four Gospels (Matt 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16; John 6:71; 12:4; 13:2), but why did he really hand Jesus over to the authorities in the dead of night? This is an enduring question, and this episode explores several possibilities along those lines.

Opening in Bethany, the village where Jesus had commanded Lazarus to come forth from the tomb, Mary is presented as anointing the feet of Jesus with expensive nard (John 12:1-8). The value of the ointment is listed as 300 denarii (a full year’s salary, not a week’s wage, Mark 14:5; John 12:5), and yet Judas objects to this excessive demonstration, arguing that the perfume could be sold and the money given to the poor (Matt 26:9; Mark 14:5; John 12:5). On one hand, this seems to be a virtuous interest, and Cargill notes that Judas must have been trustworthy, as he served as the treasurer of the group. On the other hand, the Gospel of John presents this as the subversion of virtue, noting that in addition to Judas holding the money bag for the disciples, he also tended to dip into it, as he was a thief (John 12:6).

With a bit of speculation between the gospel accounts, the episode notes that this scene proves pivotal in Judas’s plan to hand Jesus over to the chief priests (Mark 14:10-11). Assuming that having been told to let Mary alone in her anointing Jesus (John 12:7), Judas might have felt rebuked and offended (yelled at?) by Jesus (Cargill). This, however, can only be a speculation, and the episode continues to raise the question as to why Judas betrayed Jesus, when following Jesus might seem to have been the most

meaningful development in his life. Along these lines, speculation ranges from the inference that Judas had miscalculated—not thinking that things would turn out as tragically as they did, to Judas forcing the hand of Jesus—expecting him to demonstrate is power and overthrow the Romans. Whatever the case, the gospel texts are open to interpretation, and the attempt of Judas to return the thirty pieces of silver, seeing them as blood money, punctuates his remorse, followed by his suicide (Matt 27:3-5; see also Acts 1:16-20).

The final entry into Jerusalem by Jesus is rightly presented in this episode as a triumphal entry, riding on a donkey's colt. This would be seen as fulfilling the prophecy of Zachariah 9:9, that Israel's king would be both humble and victorious in doing so. Cargill correctly notes that Jesus is presented as orchestrating the entire scene, reenacting the coronation of the ancient kings of Israel. The Jews were looking for a savior to save them from the Roman oppression, and yet such an action would also have been an affront to religious and political authorities, alike. By entering Jerusalem in that way, Jesus was setting himself up on a collision course with both Rome and the religious establishment.

This provocation is heightened by the temple incident that followed, as Jesus cleared the temple of its money changers, of sacrificial animals, and of their sellers. God's house shall be called a house of prayer, not a den of robbers (Mark 11:17)! Only pure sacrificial animals could be offered, and they had to be purchased with Jewish coin, as Roman currency featured the head of Caesar, which was considered idolatrous by Jewish codes. Thus, the poor could not afford to achieve ritual purity, and the temple system made the Jerusalem authorities richer at the expense of the disparaged poor. Cargill speculates that everyone making money off the populace has made Jesus angry, although Mark 11:11 notes that Jesus arrived at the temple at the end of the day, looked around, and came back the next day. This detail suggests a more determined intentionality rather than a Jesus who lost his temper, flying into a fit of rage.

In that sense, the temple incident certainly follows the prophetic challenges to institutional leaders levied by John the Baptist in Episode 2, and one wonders if the chronology of John 2 might pose an alternative insight into the ministry of Jesus over and against the Synoptic Gospels. While most scholars would agree with the chronology of the Synoptic presentation, as does this episode, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem already want to kill Jesus at his second and third visits (John 5:18; 7:1), which implies an earlier prophetic inaugural demonstration, rather than a final provocation alone. One

can understand that scholars have tended to see the arrest and trials of Jesus following directly as a result of the temple incident, but Jesus is not arrested immediately after it—even in the Synoptics—and if Mark has located all the Jerusalem events at the end of Jesus’s ministry, lasting only one year as opposed to two or three years as presented in John, Mark’s order might reflect a general chronology rather than a knowing one. Whatever the timing might have been, seeing the temple incident as a prophetic demonstration is worth considering, as well as seeing it as a final protest.

The last supper is portrayed in this episode as a Passover meal, as it is in the Synoptics, although Jesus is not killed on the Passover in Mark, but on *the day before* the Passover. Thus, John’s presenting the event as happening on the day before the Passover (John 13:1) has raised another question of chronology between John and the Synoptics. In that sense, it is not simply John that disagrees with Mark, but Mark is also a bit at odds with itself. Here, Mark Goodacre and Mark Leuchter note that the supper is presented as taking a well-known Jewish meal and adding new meaning to it. Thus, for followers of Jesus, the meal of remembrance is not primarily the Jewish Passover, but one that commemorates the body of Jesus, broken for his followers, and the blood of his covenant, poured out for believers—signified by the bread and the wine of the Lord’s Supper. Cargill further notes that the symbolic meal of remembrance marks a point of separation between Judaism and Christianity, although the parting of the ways happened several decades later. This is reflected in Paul’s moving a fellowship meal to a symbolic meal of remembrance in 1 Corinthians 11, and Luke follows Paul’s lead in showing the transition from the contents of the cup (the blood of the covenant) to the container of the contents (the cup of the new covenant) as a liturgical development.[2]

It is within the context of such a meal that Jesus dips the bread in the sop and gives it to Judas, declaring that one of his own would betray him. While it is uncertain that Judas had heard what Jesus said to Peter along those lines (John 13:21-30), he directly departs following Jesus’s instructions to carry out quickly what he is about to do. Here Witherington’s insight makes sense: the disciples did not understand why Judas was leaving the group, but he had already set out to hand Jesus over to the authorities. At this point, John’s narrator simply notes that Satan entered Judas, and this detail is also echoed in Luke (John 13:27; Luke 22:3). Judas then agrees to take the temple police to the place where Jesus would meet with his disciples—in the Olive grove of Gethsemane—in exchange for thirty pieces of silver.

Because Judas knew the place that Jesus and his disciples were accustomed to meeting, outside the city, he was a resource for Caiaphas and his servant, Malchus. Here the arrest of Jesus could take place without creating a disturbance in broad daylight, in front of the Jerusalem crowds. With a great deal of irony, Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, and Peter (identified only in John 18:10) severed the right ear of Malchus, which Jesus healed on the spot (mentioned only in Luke 22:50-51). Upon the arrest of Jesus, he is presented as meeting Caiaphas for the first time, and here the innocent man confronts the religious authority, who sees Jesus as a rabble rouser.

The trial of Jesus in the mansion of the high priest is riddled with curious features. The Sanhedrin, or the chief council of the Jewish leadership (Goodacre), takes place in the middle of the night; it happens on a holy day; it receives input from false witnesses. All of these would have been illegal, or at least sub-standard, within Jewish customary practice. A curious feature also is mentioned in Mark 14:58 (also echoed in 15:29), where the prediction of Jesus that “this temple” would be destroyed and raised up in three days (narrated only in John 2:19) is presented as part of the case against Jesus. As Nicola Denzey Lewis notes, the Jews thought the Messiah would lead people into freedom from Rome, yet Judas might have thought that turning Jesus in to the authorities would allow that to happen. Whatever the case, Judas is presented as feeling devastated that he had played into the hand of the high priests, and his attempt to return the blood money shows his remorse.

While the gospels present Judas as one who played something of a divinely ordained role in the arrest and death of Jesus, the historical question remains as to what his real motive might have been. Again, given that he is the only disciple from the south (Judea), he may have been motivated by a distinctive set of political interests that went sideways. Or, it could be that “Iscariot” denotes the “Sicarii”—dagger men, who used violence and terrorism to subvert Roman occupation and Jewish collaboration with Rome (Denzey Lewis)—implying a violent overthrow of Rome as a motive. No one knows for sure. At this point, the episode’s conjecture that the clandestine Sanhedrin meeting in the middle of the night included Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea is overdone. They may have been present, but such is not mentioned in any of the gospels, so it cannot be inferred that they betrayed Jesus by not opposing the decision to put Jesus to death. Further, they were also present at the crucifixion, and according to John 19:38-40, they retrieved the body of Jesus from the cross and buried it in an unused tomb. Thus, that conjecture seems unlikely to me, though not impossible.

A further point in the irony of the trial of Jesus is that while Jesus is being judged for blasphemy, he promises to return as the Son of Man, to judge all of humanity at the end of the age (Witherington and Cargill; Mark 14:61-62). At this, the high priest tore his clothes and declared a guilty verdict. While this might not have been the end Judas had been looking for (Goodacre), the betrayal of Jesus plays a crucial role in the development of the story. Had it not been for the betrayal, arrest, and trial of Jesus, he would not have died on the cross, and the history of the Jesus movement would have been far different. Nonetheless, why Judas betrayed his master remains a mystery, even though he is remembered as the ultimate traitor among the Twelve.

Jesus as Viewed by Pilate

Episode 6 in the “Jesus: His Life” series focuses on how Pilate viewed Jesus, and the central issue here orbits around the question of who is to blame for the death of Jesus. On one hand, it seems like Pilate has full authority to kill Jesus or to set him free. On the other hand, he seems pressured by the religious authorities to have Jesus crucified, and the episode raises the question as to whether that reflects actual history or later apologetic interests, as interests in reaching later Roman audiences allow the Jewish leaders to be credited with the death of Jesus.

Along these lines, Nicola Denzey Lewis points out that Pilate had been quite ruthless and ready to exact harsh penalties on his subjects earlier and later in his career, so his presentation as reluctant to put Jesus to death (especially in the Gospel of John, I might add) seems highly suspect. Then again, as the series has noted that Jesus clearly distanced himself from violent messianic attempts to overthrow the Romans by revolutionary means, Pilate (in my view) seems justified in not wanting to put a harmless and peaceable figure to death, especially if he had done nothing more than offend religious leaders by his healing and teaching works. After all, if Pilate was primarily concerned with not agitating the crowds—which would inevitably lead to a bloodbath—he might have been hoping to not aggravate the masses, who had just hailed Jesus as Hosanna, the blessed one coming in the name of the Lord, as he entered the city just a few days earlier.

Here Cargill's point is well taken, that Pilate likely hated Jerusalem. After all, Pilate lived on the Mediterranean coast (at Caesarea Maritima—one of Herod's palaces), and yet, he had to visit Jerusalem during its national holiday (Passover) to make sure that riots did not happen and to hold the masses and the religious authorities in check. Thus, when Pilate received a notice in the middle of the night that the Jewish supreme council was trying Jesus for criminal behavior, this must have been greatly disconcerting. While they were by no means friends, Pilate and Caiaphas had to work together to get along, to insure stability and safety for the populace overall.

Following the Jewish trial, Jesus is now subjected to a Roman trial before Pilate. As Cargill notes, in all four Gospels, Pilate summons Jesus with the same question: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Matt 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33). At this point, the series focuses on the trial of Jesus before Pilate in John 18, which raises the question of truth. Jesus is a king, but his kingdom is one of truth; and that is why his disciples cannot fight (John 18:18:36-37). After all, truth cannot be furthered by force—it is not a matter of permission; it is a matter of possibility, as Jesus's kingdom is not of this world. Exposing his jaded incapacity, Pilate asks ironically, according to Michael Peppard, "What is truth?"

For the majority of this episode, the blame for Jesus's death is leveraged toward the religious leaders by Pilate and toward Pilate by the religious leaders. As Witherington points out, everyone is trying to pass the buck, and Pilate even sends Jesus to be tried by Herod Antipas, as the northern regions were a part of his jurisdiction. Herod had killed John the Baptist, so one might have thought that he would have been willing to put Jesus to death, but he could find no fault in him either. Pilate then had Jesus whipped and scourged, and he was further mocked and ridiculed by the soldiers, as was part of the punishment leading up to crucifixion (Denzey Lewis). Pilate also offered to release Jesus over Barabbas, but the crowd chose Barabbas instead—again, a huge irony, given that one Jesus (Jesus *bar-abbas*—son of the father) was chosen over another (Jesus—Son of the Father).

Pilate's wife had warned him about a foreboding dream, and he is presented especially in the Gospels of Matthew and John as wanting to release Jesus instead of putting him to death. However, primary credit is accorded to Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders, and while the episode argues that this would have been conducive to later apologetic efforts in seeking to reach Roman audiences at the expense of Jewish ones, such an analysis

also has its problems. First, Jesus was more acutely a political threat to religious leaders in Jerusalem than to political leaders and military occupiers. Second, the offenses committed by Jesus in the temple incident, healings on the Sabbath, and challenging purity laws threatened holds on the populace leveraged by the religious authorities in Jerusalem, not the Romans. Third, claiming God as his father and acting and speaking on behalf of God, must have raised concerns over blasphemy, and just as they had earlier sought to kill Jesus by stoning (John 8:59), the Jerusalem authorities were likely highly invested in resolving the “Jesus problem” one way or another. Thus, the first level of history has its own levels of plausibility, and the Gospels of Matthew and John also sought to reach Jewish audiences as well as Greco-Roman ones, so doubting Pilate’s desire to avoid putting Jesus to death on the basis of secondary levels of historicity is less than compelling in my view. He might really have wanted to not kill a harmless teacher of social justice and nonviolence. Further, his presentations by Josephus are also clouded by the historian’s interests to justify the Roman quashing of Jewish insurrectionists, so Josephus is not an entirely objective source along those lines, either. [3]

Finally, however, the religious authorities had their way with Pilate, and despite claiming to have all authority to crucify Jesus or to let him go, he is presented as what I might call “the impotent potentate”—begging the crowd to let him let Jesus go. They refused, so he was actually the slave of the populace, having overplayed his hand with forcible crackdowns more than once. After all, he was removed from his post just a few years later because of his violet dealing with the Samaritan messianic leader, who scaled Mount Gerizim in search of relics of Moses, hoping to again conquer the occupiers of the land in the name of religious nationalism. Thus, the Jerusalem leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy—a crime deserving of death (Lev 24:16; Mark 14:64) and finally leveraged a charge against Pilate, claiming that he was no friend of Caesar if he did not deal with Jesus effectively (John 19:12).

As the crowd began calling for the crucifixion of Jesus, Pilate came to see that he would now be allowed to put Jesus to death without causing an uprising (Goodacre), so he gave the order, posting also a titulus: “Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews” in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (John 19:19-22). Upon being challenged to change the language to read “He said he was King of the Jews,” Pilate stayed with his original command: “What I have written, I have written.” In that sense, Pilate deserves full credit for the death of Jesus, and as Father James Martin, SJ points out, the death of Jesus poses no basis for

antisemitism. Rather, in Pilate's sentencing Jesus to death a further irony presents itself. Instead of being a relatively insignificant prefect assigned to a backwater region of the Roman Empire, because he crucified Jesus of Nazareth, his legacy will forever be remembered (Peppard), and Pilate's name thus made it into the confessional creed of the world's largest religion. Highly ironic, indeed!

- [1] See my treatments of these episodes posted on *The Bible and Interpretation* site (March 2019): "Jesus: His Life—Perspectives of Mary and John the Baptist," <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/jesus-his-life-perspectives-joseph-and-john-baptist-pt-1> (<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/jesus-his-life-perspectives-joseph-and-john-baptist-pt-1>); "Jesus: His Life from the Perspectives of Mary and Caiaphas," [https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/jesus-his-life-perspectives-mary-and-caiaphas-pt-2?](https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/jesus-his-life-perspectives-mary-and-caiaphas-pt-2?fbclid=IwAR1tx2zkuRok5MBLUayp4b3UxZXkxcJgJ4S0TqG9CK2Mn69PGT8ORBQj1yI)
[fbclid=IwAR1tx2zkuRok5MBLUayp4b3UxZXkxcJgJ4S0TqG9CK2Mn69PGT8ORBQj1yI](https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/jesus-his-life-perspectives-mary-and-caiaphas-pt-2?fbclid=IwAR1tx2zkuRok5MBLUayp4b3UxZXkxcJgJ4S0TqG9CK2Mn69PGT8ORBQj1yI)
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[fbclid=IwAR1tx2zkuRok5MBLUayp4b3UxZXkxcJgJ4S0TqG9CK2Mn69PGT8ORBQj1yI](https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/jesus-his-life-perspectives-mary-and-caiaphas-pt-2?fbclid=IwAR1tx2zkuRok5MBLUayp4b3UxZXkxcJgJ4S0TqG9CK2Mn69PGT8ORBQj1yI)).
- [2] See Willi Marxsen, *The Lord's Supper as a Christological Problem*, Facet Books (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1970).
- [3] See Harold W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 7 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).