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John Dart
jdartnews@aol.com

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Judas the Film: Storytellers Then and Now

Abstract

Judas blends the gospels and adds ingredients not found in scripture, the made-for-television film may be distinctive as the only U.S. production to focus centrally on the difficult New Testament character of the betrayer of Jesus. *Judas* does not break particularly new ground for Jesus movies. Judas, played by Johnathon Schaech, hopes Jesus will lead a revolt, a warmed-over motive for betrayal explored before in movies and novels.

Author Notes

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Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) opens with Mary Magdalene in a scene that tries to establish an "unconvincing romantic triangle involving Mary, her lover Judas Isacariot and Jesus," says an illustrated history of Jesus in films. Learning that Judas left her to join Jesus' disciples, Mary goes to confront Jesus, said coauthors Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis (*Divine Images*). Then the film moves to a reverent treatment of the New Testament accounts, according to reviewers of that time.

DeMille's silent film was not the first Jesus movie to introduce imaginative elements. Nor will *The Passion of the Christ* now in theaters or ABC-TV's two-hour *Judas*, showing March 8, be the last cinematic portrayals to weave in subplots to intrigue audiences.

In addition, Jesus films usually harmonize the details and theological variations in Matthew, John and Luke-Acts whose first-century authors - like today's filmmakers - saw that questions raised in Mark's pioneer gospel needed to be explained. Only rarely is one gospel used: *The Gospel of John*, a faithful rendition released last year; *Jesus* (1979), the film based on Luke's gospel and used for evangelism by Campus Crusade, and the Italian-made *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1966).

Although *Judas* also blends the gospels and adds ingredients not found in scripture, the made-for-television film may be distinctive as the only U.S. production to focus centrally on the difficult New Testament character of the betrayer of Jesus. *Judas* does not break particularly new ground for Jesus movies. Judas, played by Johnathon Schaech, hopes Jesus will lead a revolt, a warmed-over motive for betrayal explored before in movies and novels.

Yet, *Judas* the film could remind biblical students and scholars alike of a historical conundrum some say was fashioned by the Gospel of Mark. The Apostle Paul refers to Jesus being betrayed but does not say by whom (1 Cor 11:23). Burton Mack and Hyam Maccoby are among scholars who argue that Judas Iscariot was a Markan fiction. On another level, scholars John Dominic Crossan, Werner Kelber and Theodore Weeden contend Mark had depicted as deserting failures *all* of the Twelve and the scared-into-silence women at the empty tomb (16:8). To be sure, most scholars say that Mark indicates the women will eventually tell the disciples to look for the risen Jesus in Galilee. Matthew, Luke and John apparently felt Mark's portrayals were unsatisfactory. They selectively omitted or softened Mark's polemics and described reunions of the risen Jesus with followers. The reputations of most followers were refurbished.

Alas, Judas Iscariot never received a pardon. Alone among the synoptics, Matthew (27:3-5) says Judas repented, then hung himself. Luke (22:3) and John

(13:27) both say Satan entered Judas during the Last Supper, but John described Judas earlier as a thief who stole from the disciples' common purse (12:6). In John, Jesus is the master of his own fate. He directs Judas to go quickly and do his deed; at his arrest Jesus readily identifies himself as the one the soldiers seek. After Jesus is seized, Mark and John speak no more of Judas. The author of Luke-Acts says Judas died by falling and busting a gut in a field he bought with "the reward of his wickedness" (Acts 1:18).

Many viewers of *Judas* may initially compare it to Mel Gibson's movie. Partly because *Judas* was made for TV, it shows relatively little torture and bloodshed. Catholics produced both films, but Gibson reflects a pre-Vatican II triumphalist view of the Roman church and Paulist Productions vetted the *Judas* script in keeping with Catholic bishops' guidelines to avoid anti-Jewish depictions. The crowd that demanded Jesus' crucifixion in *Judas* does not call a blood curse upon themselves and future generations of Jews. Not only that, while loosely following Matt 27:20 by having the chief priests sending lackeys to infiltrate the crowd, *Judas* portrays the Romans pulling the same deception - making the final condemnation a double Judean-Roman plot.

Starkly different from Gibson's experiment with Aramaic and Latin dialogue, *Judas* has Jesus conversing in contemporary English. The director of *Judas*, Charles Robert Carner, evokes cowboy images in a showdown between

Jesus and Caiaphas, with soldiers on horseback circling Jesus at his arrest like the stereotypical seige on a wagon train in a classic western movie.

Judas, the last project of producer-priest Ellwood "Bud" Kieser (*Romero*), was slow to see light. Kieser and writer-producer Tom Fontana took the idea to ABC just weeks before the former died in 2000. A sneak preview was shown in late 2001 during the meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion in Denver. A tentative 2002 airing was scrubbed, said executive coproducer Frank Desiderio, because ABC, CBS, and NBC already had Bible-related specials then. The escalating controversy and publicity over Gibson's movie provided convenient coattails to air *Judas* during Lent 2004.

Judas, in the video sent to reviewers, begins by describing the film as an "interpretive dramatization based in part on biblical passages and historical research." It opens with eight-year-old Judas watching his father being crucified. Years later, Judas works as a wine seller and lives with his mother. Judas' anti-Roman sentiments are evident when hooded men take him to Caiaphas, the high priest, who warns the "agitator" that no rebellion will be tolerated. After witnessing a Roman tribune give money to Caiaphas, Judas tells co-workers that the high priest is collaborating with "Roman bloodsuckers" and it is fruitless to wait for a political messiah.

But seeing Jesus upset the tables of vendors at the temple, Judas thinks this man could be a rebel leader. Judas joins disciples already following the miracle-maker but he is frustrated by Jesus' peaceful role. Caiaphas continues to meet with Judas. When his ailing mother dies, Judas works a deal with Caiaphas to capture Jesus.

Judas' motives in the movie were not entirely clear to this reviewer. I could only conjecture that a revolt-minded disciple was confused in thinking that Jesus would be jailed for a while and become politicized before his release. For in the movie, as in Matthew, Judas repents when he hears that the Jewish council led by Caiaphas condemned Jesus to die. Judas throws down his 30 silver pieces in the temple and goes to hang himself. Disciples James, Peter and Andrew had distrusted Judas, according to the film. But they knew that Jesus liked Judas and entrusted him with the group's purse. The disciples removed Judas' body from a tree and prayed over him. "He [Jesus] would have wanted us to," says Peter.

Judas follows some other Jesus films in seeking a plausible motive, if not sympathy, for the character whose name is historically synonymous with betrayal. In *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), Judas conspires with Caiaphas to make Jesus' arrest possible even while saying he loves Jesus and does not want him harmed. Judas also declines money for his act, according to W. Barnes Tatum's book *Jesus at the Movies*, published in 1997. In *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973),

Judas and Mary Magdalene agree that Jesus "is just a man." But Judas frets that Jesus increasingly believes he has messianic duties. To avoid Roman recriminations Judas and Caiaphas conspire on what Judas calls "the sad solution."

Two later films call Judas Iscariot an ex-zealot or one still involved in the movement. Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) has Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15) and Judas Iscariot quitting the Zealots to become disciples. Judas is conflicted over political action (his preference) or peaceful change (Jesus' teaching). But, Zerah, a fictional leader of the Sanhedrin, tricks Judas into thinking that Jesus will be able to explain himself to the Jewish council with no trial. *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) depicts Judas as a zealot commissioned to kill Jesus. Instead, Judas joins Jesus but vows to slay him if he turns from the path of revolution. Jesus treats him as a confidant, later urging Judas as a friend to keep his vow.

ABC's *Judas* conveys the inevitability of Jesus' death. Jesus, played by Jonathan Scarfe, talks about doing his Father's bidding. But it is startling to hear Jesus' cry on the cross in Mark 15:34/Matt 27:46 changed to "My God, my God, this was my destiny."

Film versions may not be destined for canonical status, but screenwriters no doubt will continue to imitate first-century forebears in retelling the saga of Jesus the Christ and the infamous Judas.

