

TANAKH SOURCES OF JUDAS ISCARIOT

LAWRENCE BRISKIN

INTRODUCTION

[Note: This Introduction is a revised and shortened version of the Introduction to the first of my articles in this series, "Foretold, Fulfilled, Copied" in JBQ XXXI (April-June 2003). For scholarly citations to the present introduction, please refer to that article. SMALL CAPS are used where emphasis has been added. – LB]

For at least 1800 years Christianity and Judaism have been two separate religions. At its beginning, however, Christianity was dependent upon Judaism and needed to establish its legitimacy. This was for two reasons. First, in ancient times legitimacy and authenticity depended upon the age of the sources. Many parts of the Tanakh were already old and well known when the Gospels were being written. Second, the early Christians (perhaps a better term would be Jewish-Christians) had no direct knowledge of Jesus.

Therefore, with wholesale use of eisegesis (interpreting the text of the Tanakh by reading into it that which they wished to find), they assumed that everything in the life of Jesus was foretold in the Tanakh, and that his life was a fulfillment of these prophecies (see my article cited above). The Tanakh became a source book for the life of Jesus.¹

The Torah was translated into Greek, the language of the Gospel-writers and of Paul, between 300 BCE and 100 BCE. This translation, known as the Septuagint, was done by Jews for the Jews of Alexandria. When early Christians referred to Scriptures, it is probably to the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew original. The Christian Scriptures (hereafter CS) commonly known as the New Testament, had not yet been written. They consist of the four Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles or Letters of Paul, and Revelation. Mark, Matthew and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels. With differences, they are still very similar. John is more theological.

Lawrence Briskin is a retired engineer. His long-time interest in the Gospels led to the research for this article. He lives near Dayton, Ohio.

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The Christian Scriptures (CS) were written in the first and second centuries C.E. Of the Epistles or Letters, seven (possibly nine) were actually composed by Paul about 50 C.E, that is, about 20 years after the death of Jesus. Other than Acts, the remainder were written over many years. The years are best approximated as: Mark, 70; Matthew, 80; Luke, 90; Acts, 95; John, 100; and the other epistles up to 150. The correct names of the authors of the four Gospels are unknown. The current names were given about year 200.² The Revised Standard Version is the source of Christian scriptural citations.³ In this article, we are primarily concerned with the Tanakh sources of the story of Judas Iscariot.

SYNOPSIS OF THE STORY

Following a brief, possibly three-year-long ministry, Jesus and his followers went up to Jerusalem. Jesus gathered his disciples for a Thursday evening meal. In the Synoptic Gospels it may have been a Passover eve meal, but not the seder as we know it today. That was developed after the fall of the Second Temple. In John, the meal took place two days before a Saturday Passover. It could not been a Passover meal. Matthew records,

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14-16).

When it was evening, he [Jesus] sat at table with the twelve disciples; and as they were eating [the meal], he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me" (vv. 20-21).

Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Is it I, Master?" He [Jesus] said to him, "You have said so" (v. 25).

Later, at Gethsemane:

While he [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him."

And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him (vv. 47-49).

Mark, Luke and John have variations of these events.

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At the trial, the Roman prelate Pontius Pilate condemns Jesus. Afterwards, Judas is struck with remorse. He brings back the 30 pieces of silver to the priests and elders in the Temple. They will have nothing to do with him. So ". . . throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself" (Matt. 27:1-9). The priests use the 30 pieces of silver to buy a potter's field.

Matthew concludes with the statement: "But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (26:56). My earlier article showed that the authors of the Gospels had no direct knowledge of the life of Jesus. Therefore, they made heavy use of eisegesis. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas in the Gospels was probably based on two events from the Tanakh: (1) Judah and his brothers' sale of Joseph to Ishmaelite traders, and (2) the revolt of Absalom against his father King David. We shall see how the process worked with respect to Judas Iscariot.

THE PRICE OF THE BETRAYAL

THE CS: In the Gospels the story of the betrayal is a composite of various sources in the Hebrew Bible. The idea of betrayal by a brother (literal or figurative) may have been based on the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers for a sum of money. It is also based on the revolt of Absalom against his father King David. Other sources are Jeremiah and Zechariah.

Matthew reports (26:14-16) that Judas contracted to betray Jesus for THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, "and from that time he sought an opportunity to betray him." How Matthew chose this sum is open to question. He appears to have conflated the story of Judah's sale of Joseph with events in Jeremiah and Zechariah.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me" (27:9-10).

THE TANAKH: Joseph was sold for 20 PIECES OF SILVER. Joseph's 11 brothers discussed this sale at a meal. Joseph was cast into a pit by his brothers.

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from GileadThen Judah said to his

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brothers, 'What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites' . . . His brothers agreed . . . They sold Joseph for TWENTY PIECES OF SILVER to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt (Gen. 37:25-28).

The Prophet Jeremiah:

The word of the Lord came to me: 'Hanamel, the son of your uncle Shallum, will come to you and say, "Buy my land in Anathoth . . ."' And just as the Lord had said, my cousin came to me in the prison compound and said, 'Please buy my land in Anathoth . . . ' So I bought the land in Anathoth. . . I weighed out SEVENTEEN SHEKELS OF SILVER (Jer. 32:6-10).

The Prophet Zechariah:

Then I said to them, 'If you are satisfied, pay me my wages; if not, don't.' So they weighed out my wages. Thirty shekels of silver - the noble sum that I was worth in their estimation. The Lord said to me, 'Deposit it in the treasury.' And I took the THIRTY SHEKELS AND DEPOSITED IT IN THE TREASURY IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD (Zech 11:12-13).

The idea of a sale or betrayal in connection with a meal appears to have come from the sale of Joseph.⁴ Matthew stated that the idea of the betrayal as a Tanakh fulfillment came from Jeremiah. He erred. There are no 30 pieces of silver in Jeremiah. He probably meant Zechariah.

THE JUDAS KISS

THE CS: Judas identified Jesus by a kiss (Matt. 26:47-49).

THE TANAKH: Absalom, King David's son, had rebelled. Joab, David's general, remained loyal to the King; Amasa, another general, had gone over to Absalom. Note how Joab greeted Amasa and then killed him.

Joab said to Amasa, 'How are you, brother?' and with his right hand Joab took hold of Amasa's beard as if to kiss him. Amasa was not on guard against the sword in Joab's [left] hand, and [Joab] drove it into his belly . . . and he died (II Sam. 20:9).

Proverbs: 27:6: *Wounds by a loved one are long lasting; / The kisses of an enemy are profuse.*

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Genesis 33:4: *Esau ran to greet [Jacob]. He embraced him and, falling on his neck he kissed him and they wept.* Much earlier, Jacob had to escape from his brother's hatred, but now Esau overcame his anger and kissed his brother with love.

AGAIN - THE CS: These incidents, together with the wise saying of Solomon as a general observation, might have been enough of an attraction to the Gospel-writers to heighten the drama of the betrayal by one of the brotherhood of the disciples of Jesus. What greater example of treachery can there be than Joab's ironically calling Amasa "brother" and stabbing him? Both Mark (14:45) and Matthew especially echo this treachery by having Judas call Jesus "master" before applying the kiss of death. The villainy of Judas' kiss contrasts with the sincerity of the kiss Esau gave to Jacob.

THE DEATH OF JUDAS

THE CS:

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.

The chief priests were reluctant to place in the Temple treasury the blood-stained pieces of silver thrown by Judas:

Taking the pieces of silver, [they] said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money. So they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in" (Matt. 27:3-7).

Here, Matthew combines the buying of land in Jeremiah 32:8-11 (see above) with the potter in Jeremiah 18:1-5: *Go to the house of the potter, and there I will impart my word to you.*

Luke, author of Acts, gives an alternative version. Judas' bowels burst open.

Now this man bought a field [no potter here] with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the

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inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood (Acts 1:18-19).

THE TANAKH:

Notice that in Zechariah the shepherd deposited the money in the treasury. But Judas threw the money into the Temple, greatly heightening the dramatic impact.

The two versions of Judas' death, either by suicide or by his innards bursting open is taken from two separate incidents: the suicide of Ahithophel and the death of Jehoram.

Ahithophel was an advisor to King David. He went over to Absalom's side during the revolt:

When Ahithophel saw that his advice [to Absalom] had not been followed, he saddled his ass and went home to his native town. He set his affairs in order, and then he hanged himself. He was buried in his ancestral tomb (II Sam. 17: 23).

"Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah" (Matt. 27:9-10, follows Jeremiah 32:6-10), somewhat inexactly.

As for you [Jehoram] you will be severely stricken with a disorder of the bowels year after year until your bowels drop out (II Chr. 21:15).

JUDAS AS AN HISTORICAL PERSON

THE CS: To gain an added perspective on Judas Iscariot we must go back to Paul. Recall that the Gospels were written between 70 CE and 100 CE. Paul's authentic epistles are much closer to the events. Paul wrote his letters or epistles about 50 CE.

All he tells us about the situation is: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was BETRAYED TOOK BREAD . . ." (I Corinthians 11:23). Also he states:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that HE WAS RAISED ON THE THIRD DAY in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, THEN TO THE TWELVE (I Cor. 15:3-5).

Most Christian Bibles use BETRAYED in the earlier verse (11:23). However it is an incorrect translation.⁵ Fredriksen comments that BETRAYED is used in most Bibles "in deference to the Judas story," rather than as an accurate translation of PAREDIDOTO, the relevant Greek word.⁶ The correct translation is DELIVERED OVER. Thus Paul states: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was DELIVERED OVER TOOK BREAD...."

This casts doubt upon whether Paul knew of a betrayal of Jesus. Rather, it appears that for Paul, Jesus was turned over to the Romans in some manner, for some reason, in connection with a meal. Paul never tells us why or how. He also doesn't tell us that Jesus was turned over to the authorities at Passover. The theological implications are important. The tradition of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas at Passover, together with a Jewish trial, did not appear until 70 CE when Mark, the first Gospel, was written. Although these are arguments from silence, they are powerful. The betrayal and its occurrence just after the Last Supper, and the Jewish trial, have always been important in Christian theology. Their absence from Paul's early letter clearly tells its own story.

Further doubt is cast on the very existence of Judas Iscariot by Paul's statement: "ON THE THIRD DAY [after the crucifixion], IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES, Jesus appeared to Cephas, then to the TWELVE" (I Cor. 15:3-5). If Judas had already hanged himself, there would be only 11 disciples.

This contrasts with the Gospel versions of the reappearance of Jesus: Mark 16:14 relates: "Afterward he appeared to the ELEVEN themselves as they sat at table; and he upbraided them . . . because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen" (also Matthew 28:16, Luke 24:9).

Acts confirms the number 11. After the death of Judas, a replacement is added to the 11: "And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was enrolled with the ELEVEN apostles" (Acts 1:26).

In other words, Paul (50 CE) knew nothing of the betrayal by Judas. Why else 12? This contrasts with the Gospels and Acts (70-100 CE), which maintain 11, since Judas was dead.

Paul's statement reveals much about the situation. Using the words "in accordance with the scriptures," he is telling us that as early as the year 50 CE Jewish-Christians believed that Jesus' life was foretold in the Tanakh, the

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theme of my earlier article. Already Paul is using Hosea 6:2 (*On the third day He will raise us up*) as a predictor of the life of Jesus. When Paul refers to the 12 disciples immediately after Jesus' "resurrection," he reveals that the tradition of the 12 disciples of Jesus had already begun, and that he knew nothing of Judas who either committed suicide or his bowels burst open. If he knew of these events, he would have said "Jesus appeared to Cephas, then to the eleven," for Judas would have been dead immediately after the resurrection, a replacement not yet having been chosen.

Clearly, Paul knows nothing of a Judas or his early death, a Jewish trial of Jesus, a Judas betrayal of Jesus, or that the crucifixion took place on or about Passover. His silence on these critical matters is deafening. These traditions had not yet arisen.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Judas is an enigmatic figure. In English, his name appears to be a variation of Judah, fourth son of Jacob. In Greek, Judah and Judas are spelled identically as IOUDAS. While at a meal, Judah [Yehuda] suggested selling Joseph into slavery. Similarly in connection with a meal, Judas delivered Jesus to the Romans. This lends credence to the idea that Judas was modeled after Judah.

His name may also have been chosen as reference to Jews. At that time, Jews were already known as Yehudim, a variant in plural form of Yehuda. Thus when Judas' name was chosen, he became both a reincarnation of Judah and a prototypical Jew. Unfortunately, as a prototypical Jew, reference to him in Christianity became a 2000-year subconscious anti-Jewish obsession.

Iscaiot may be related to *sicarii*, or short dagger, a reference to Jewish resistance fighters. This is "reasonable and suggestive" but cannot be proved.⁷

CONCLUSION

In an earlier article, I showed that much of the Gospel story is based on material borrowed from the Tanakh. The Gospel authors had no factual record of events in Jesus' life. They began with the fundamental belief that everything in his life was foretold in the Tanakh and he fulfilled all the "prophecies."

Here, we focused on how the character of Judas Iscaiot was developed, based on ideas borrowed from the Tanakh. We saw two basic thrusts. Paul,

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writing about 50 CE, gave us one version in which Judas does not appear. The Gospel-writers later substantially embellished Paul's sparse description by adding Judas and the betrayal.

Some of the patterns are: The 12 disciples were probably modeled after the 12 sons of Jacob. Judas was probably patterned at least partly after Judah son of Jacob. The Judas kiss was probably patterned after the Joab/Amasa incident. Judas committed suicide patterned after the suicide of Ahithophel. In Zechariah the money was deposited into the treasury of the House of the Lord. In the Gospel it was thrown into the Temple.

Paul told us that Jesus was turned over to the Romans in connection with a meal. He also told us that "in accordance with the scriptures" Jesus "was raised [from the dead] on the third day," and that immediately afterwards he was seen by the 12 disciples. The ideas of the "third day" and the "12 disciples" are ideas based on the Tanakh. This shows that the idea that Jesus was foretold and that he was a fulfillment of the [Jewish] Scriptures had already had already been imbedded in early Jewish-Christianity. Even if we assume that his "delivery" in connection with a meal is historic, the expanded treatment in the Gospels is based on Tanakh events.

Our interest here is in Judas Iscariot. After 70 CE, the Romans were persecuting Jews and Jewish Christians alike, because they could not tell the difference between them. The Romans had crucified Jesus. Introducing Judas (as Judah or as a prototypical Jew), blame for the crucifixion was shifted from the Romans to the Jews. In this article we have reviewed the many parallelisms in Judas' behavior, based on Tanakh events.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Briskin, "Foretold Fulfilled, Copied," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXXI:2, (April-June 2003) pp. 117-125.
2. Steven L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishers, 2000) p. 356.
3. *The Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, 1977).
4. Michael J. Cook, "Destabilizing the Tale of Judas Iscariot," in *An American Rabbinate: A Festschrift for Walter Jacob* (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom, 2000) pp. 116-9, 128.
5. "Betrayed" is not a correct translation. The critical Greek word is *paredidoto*. The RSV, KJV, American Standard version all use "delivered unto" in Romans 4.25, and 8.32, and Galatians 2.20, and the KJV in 1 Cor. 11.23. Only in 1 Cor. 11.23 do many translations use "betrayed." See George Berry, *The Interlinear Translation of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969).

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6. Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 1999) pp. 117,118.
7. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 14 (New York: MacMillan Co., 1971) p. 1491.

Author's note: I have prepared a book containing over 600 parallel passages relating the Gospels and the Tanakh. It is available for the cost of reproduction, \$18 U.S. postage paid: 880 Fernshire Dr., Dayton, Ohio 45459, USA.