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“Satan Entered into Him”

Was Judas Truly Free To Resist?

By Tim Kelley

In **Jesus Christ Superstar**, the rock opera by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, the central character among the disciples is Judas. The composer and the lyricist powerfully reconstruct this infamous disciple as a modern skeptic who “only wants to know” whether Jesus is all that the church claims him to be. Judas’ motives are pure throughout; and, as he betrays Jesus, he pleads, “Just don’t say I’m damned for all time.”¹

Others have also taken a closer look at Judas; and, if they have not attempted to redeem him, they have at least tried to place Judas within his historical context. One such attempt was done by James Smart in his book, **The Quiet Revolution**.² Smart addresses three descriptions of Judas found in the secondary literature. In the first description Judas is seen as a divinely appointed agent who is predestined to play his role as betrayer and who has no freedom to resist that destiny. In the second description Judas is understood as a pawn of Satan. Satan selects him, enters him and uses him to carry out his purpose, with Judas unable to resist. Smart rejects these portraits of Judas and instead describes Judas in a third way. In this view Judas is a free moral agent who, though at first in harmony with the ministry of Jesus, betrays Jesus for religious and ideological reasons (greed, for Smart, is an insufficient reason to explain Judas’ betrayal). Judas is free to act and stands as a warning to all disciples who can make the same deadly choices.³

A more recent work which attempts to recon-

struct the historical Judas is William Klassen’s article on Judas in the **Anchor Bible Dictionary**.⁴ Klassen is convinced that in the earliest tradition Judas was no worse than any other disciple. As for the picture of Judas in the Fourth Gospel, Klassen believes that the author has simply demonized Judas and made him more of an automaton than a human, which makes for good drama but not good history.⁵

The question before us, however, is whether Judas, according to the *Fourth Gospel*, acts as a free moral agent when he betrays Jesus. Our theological instincts, rooted in the Restoration Movement’s rejection of predestinarian theology,⁶ quickly moves to answer the question, “yes.” Yet, a careful look at the Fourth Gospel denies us any simple answer.

Portrait of Judas in the Fourth Gospel

The first reference to Judas is John 6:64-71. Here many of the disciples of Jesus respond negatively to the “bread of life” discourse. Jesus recognizes that “there were some who do not believe,” to which the author adds, “For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him” (John 6:64). It is not altogether clear what is meant by “from the first” but it seems to imply that Jesus knew of Judas’ betrayal when he chose Judas to follow him.⁷ This seemingly predestinarian point of view is strengthened by the words of Jesus which follow, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me

unless it is granted by the Father" (John 6:65).

In John 6:70-71 the idea of a predestined Judas appears further strengthened: "Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.' He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him." Here difficult questions abound. Does the reference to Judas as "a devil" imply only something about the moral character of Judas or does it suggest that Judas was already under Satan's control? Is the author asserting that Jesus knowingly chose "a devil" to be one of the twelve? Was Judas, according to the Fourth Gospel, chosen in order to fulfill the prescribed role as betrayer?

The next reference to Judas is found in John 12:1-7, a story which parallels Mark 14:3-9. The unnamed disciples who complain about the expense of the ointment used to anoint Jesus in Mark's account are identified in John, not in the plural but as Judas alone. In a parenthetical comment following Judas' objection, the author notes, "He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it" (John 12:6). Although Judas is identified as the one "who was about to betray him" (John 12:4), no statement about whether Judas was predestined to do this is found. Rather, moral categories are used, and Judas is called a thief. This is an important reference inasmuch as the Fourth Gospel is silent about Judas' receipt of money for betraying Jesus.

Passing over, for the moment, John 13, we turn to the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17. In verse 12 Jesus prays, "While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled." The phrase "the one destined to be lost" is literally "son of perdition" or "son of destruction." The *NRSV* has thus given the phrase a clearly predestinarian interpretation; but "son of perdition/destruction" may not necessarily imply such a rendering. It may be a description of Judas' character in much the same way "sons of thunder" describes the character of the sons of Zebedee or "son of encouragement" describes the character of Barnabas. In that case "son of perdition/destruction" might only imply that Judas' own moral character fitted him for destruction.

However, a predestinarian interpretation seems more evident in the words that follow, "so that the scripture might be fulfilled." A particular scripture is not mentioned in 17:12; but in 13:18, Psalm 41:9 is quoted. While a thorough discussion of the

Johannine concept of fulfillment is impossible here, it is clear that the author has a more nuanced conception than mechanical fulfillment in which Psalm 41:9 predicted Judas would betray Jesus.⁸

In John 13:2, Satan's role in Judas' betrayal of Jesus is stressed: "The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. . . ." Following Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus asserts that not all disciples are clean, and adds, ". . . I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' . . ." (John 13:18, Psalm 41:9) Again this raises the possibility that Jesus chose Judas knowing that he would fulfill the role of betrayer. The high point of the drama is reached during the Supper as Jesus gives a morsel to Judas. The text then reads, "Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' . . . So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night" (John 13:27b, 30). Then Judas, at the behest of Satan, leaves the company of the disciples and goes into the darkness.⁹

When we come to the actual betrayal, John's account is simple and straight forward. Judas is silent throughout and relatively passive. Klassen sees in this passivity another indication of the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Judas as a programmed instrument rather than a human with authentic freedom of choice.¹⁰

All of these texts suggest a predestinarian view of Judas' betrayal. Taken by themselves, they assert that Jesus chose Judas with full knowledge that he would betray him; that Judas had already been a devil and thief; that the betrayal by Judas had been foreordained in scripture; and that (if the *NRSV* is correct in 17:12) Judas was destined for destruction. However, taking the texts by themselves, apart from their larger theological context, is precisely what we should *not* do. Two considerations need to qualify these results. The first is the larger context of the Johannine theology of belief and unbelief. The second is the way in which the Fourth Gospel describes the events in the upper room which end in Judas' departure.

Belief and Unbelief in the Fourth Gospel

Even a brief survey of the Fourth Gospel makes it obvious that the author holds that both belief and unbelief are human choices for which the individual is held responsible.¹¹ The purpose statement in John 20:31 makes human freedom and responsibility clear, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

It is also clear that those who do not believe are held morally responsible for the choice of unbelief (9:41; 12:42-43).

Schnackenburg correctly summarizes the evidence:

The moral duty to believe (6:29) is not seen as impossible to fulfill. The possibility of faith derives from the very fact that Jesus makes a constant and unwavering approach to *all* his listeners (cf. 8:51; 10:37-38, 12:36). . . . In addition to this, responsibility for individual choice and the inexcusability of unbelief is heavily stressed: the non-believer pronounces his own sentence (3:18, 36; 8:24; cf. 8:26; 12:48), unbelief is a lack of will (5:40; 7:17), sin (8:21; 9:41; 16:9) and as such inexcusable (15:22, 24). Finally, the ability of human beings to believe is shown by the fact that a good number of Jews, in spite of the adverse currents of unbelief and the hostile propaganda of the ruling groups, did in fact believe: (cf. 6:69; 7:31; 8:30-31; 9:38; 10:42; 12:42; 17:8), a fact which the evangelist sets in theological contrast to the hardening willed by God (12:42)¹²

John, then, sets predestinarian language beside language which asserts human freedom and responsibility. These seemingly contradictory views are held in paradoxical tension, and the Fourth Gospel resists any attempt to resolve this paradox.

That the freedom side of the paradox applies to Judas is made clear in the upper room scene. In the upper room, the beloved disciple is reclining next to Jesus, "in his bosom." Peter, who will later show himself quite willing to resort to violence (18:10), is seated far enough away that he must ask the beloved disciple what was said (13:24). The place of honor at the table, however, may very well have belonged to Judas, who reclined to the left of the host.¹³ The entire scene takes on the appearance of a final appeal to Judas. Jesus does not expose Judas to the volatile disciples. Instead, Judas is protected. When Judas finally departs, the disciples are unaware of the true reason. To reduce this episode to an "acted out" scene in order that Psalm 41:9 might be fulfilled is to do violence to the theology of the Fourth Gospel. Judas is called upon to choose and has the freedom to do so. The paradox remains.

The Biblical Doctrine of Hardness of Heart

The paradox of predestination and free will is not to be resolved since the Bible consistently holds the two sides in tension. It does so through the concept of hardness of heart.¹⁴ Two Old Testament examples illustrate the doctrine.

The most obvious example of hardness of heart is that of Pharaoh. Here the paradox of the divine will and human freedom is presented in its strongest form. In Exodus 3:19 Pharaoh's resistance to Israel's freedom is attributed to his own stubbornness, yet in 4:21 God tells Moses that he will harden Pharaoh's heart. A double description of Pharaoh's hardness of heart continues throughout Exodus. Pharaoh hardens his own heart and God hardens Pharaoh's heart.¹⁵ This twin description of Pharaoh's hardness of heart makes it clear that, on the one hand, God has not taken an otherwise compliant person and hardened his heart against his own will. On the other hand, it is clear that God plays an active role in Pharaoh's hardness. Put another way, God uses the very opposition of this unbeliever to fulfill his own purpose, and even hardens that opposition to further those purposes.

The second is that of Cain, who has an important place in the Johannine literature: "We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). The description of Cain as "from the evil one" bears remarkable similarity to the Fourth Gospel's description of Judas as "a devil" and one whom "Satan entered." Notice, however, that Cain is held responsible for his evil deeds. It is Cain's moral failure that makes him "from the evil one," not the will of God nor the overpowering of Satan.

Genesis 4:6-7 makes this powerfully clear: "The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'" Cain is responsible for mastering sin; yet it is also clear that sin can become the master. The choice is whether or not Cain opens the door to the sin which lurks there. Once the door is open to sin, however, freedom is diminished and sin gains control.

Seeing the connection between ethical character and human freedom is vital if we are to understand the portrait of Judas in the Fourth Gospel. If the description of Judas as a devil (John 6:70) is a statement of Judas' own moral failure, and not simply Satan's control of Judas, we begin to see how the Fourth Gospel views Judas. When Judas is described as a thief (John 12:6), it is not simply the author's way of attributing the betrayal to greed. It is to suggest

that Judas' moral character has taken shape. The betrayal is an act which is consistent with that character. Satan entered into a willing heart, not a heart coerced either by God's will or Satan's desire.

In the discussion of free will and predestination, the game of chess often is used as an analogy. As it is typically presented, God is the player and humans are the chess pieces (pawns). Viewed from this perspective, Judas is a pawn God uses to fulfill his plan. That analogy is clearly not the picture given in the Fourth Gospel. If, however, the chess analogy is changed to one in which humans are themselves players it becomes helpful. If an inexperienced chess player engages a chess master, the results are quite predictable. The inexperienced player has full freedom to make any moves consistent with the rules of chess. The chess master has the skill to use the freely but unknowingly chosen moves of the inexperienced opponent for the master's own purposes. The inexperienced player freely chooses moves which inevitably lead to the chess master's victory. Something else happens in this hypothetical contest: with each poor choice by the inexperienced player, the future choices are limited. Step by step, the player loses chess pieces and has less of the board open to play.

Of course, every analogy has limitations and the above analogy is no exception. Clearly, God is not the opponent of humanity. Yet, particular humans may stand in opposition to God's will. God's purposes came to fruition in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Those purposes were accomplished, even through the choices and actions of those who became God's opponents. From the standpoint of those who were in opposition to God, each choice against God's purposes impacted human freedom, for their character was shaped and hardened, and their freedom was diminished.

This describes Judas in the Fourth Gospel.

We are not told when the character of Judas was hardened in opposition to God's purpose; but we are told that Jesus was aware of Judas' character and knew ultimately that it would lead to Judas' betrayal of him. Jesus' effort to convert Judas in the upper room is a powerful witness to human freedom. It is a statement that we are not doomed to follow our character. In the end, Judas did follow his character, and Satan found a willing accomplice. However, Jesus died because he chose to die, not because Judas betrayed him.¹⁶ That the betrayal was used by God to further his ultimate purpose affirms God's sovereignty but does not deny human freedom.

Was Judas free to resist? Yes—and Jesus tried to help him resist. Yet Judas' freedom had been narrowed by the choices in life which had turned him into a devil and thief. His act of ultimate betrayal flowed from that hardened character. The apparent predestinarian language in the Fourth Gospel is not meant to deny ultimate human freedom, but to affirm Jesus' foreknowledge and God's sovereign purpose.¹⁷ Finally, Judas stands as a powerful warning to all disciples who believe they are immune from the fate of Judas. We are shaped by the choices we make. It is the terrifying freedom God has given his creation. Judas remains a sobering reminder that we must, "Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end" (Hebrews 3:12-14).

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