

Judas' Betrayal and the Rationale for Jesus' Execution

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Jesus' death by crucifixion was a deliberate premeditated criminal act shrouded in the pomp of prosecutorial procedure. Judas brought representatives of the Sanhedrin to the Garden known as Gethsemane where he kissed Jesus on the cheek. Matthew 26 recounts the exchange between Jesus and the chief priests that led to Jesus' arrest:

"What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?" So, they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over (Matt 26:16).

What does Book of Matthew mean when it says that Judas "watched for an opportunity to hand him over?" Judas' encounter with Jesus in Gethsemane was surely not the defining act of his betrayal. In fulfilling his promise to "deliver him over to" the Sanhedrin, had Judas "ratted Jesus out?" When Matthew says that "Judas watched for an opportunity to hand" Jesus over, does that mean that he served as an informant? Did he bear false testimony against Jesus to justify his arrest? The scriptures do not elaborate beyond the encounter. Yet, at the moment of his arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus seemed to challenge the pretext for his arrest:

"Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?" He then added, "Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. (Matt 26:55)"

Did Judas provide incriminating evidence against Jesus in a plea bargain that included Judas receiving clemency and a payment of thirty silver coins? Did Judas allege that his meeting with Jesus was to plan the next steps in Jesus' rebellion started with the sacking of the Temple (Matt 21:11-46)?

Those "out to get Jesus" had to "throw the book at him" and paint him as the leader of a rebellion to convince Roman authorities that his "seditious" activities warranted the death sentence. Jesus was portrayed by his accusers as an imminent danger to Rome.

He was depicted as a charismatic figure who, rather than fostering a spiritual awakening, was organizing an uprising that would jeopardize Rome's occupation of the Levant, a key land thoroughfare to Asia and Africa. The opposition thus denounced Jesus as a menace to society, a hostile actor, who was spearheading a campaign not only to halt the payment of tribute to the Romans authorities but to become the new ruler of Judea and Galilee.

Jesus was feared as someone who could destabilize the Roman and the Jewish power elites' hold on society. This is why his opponents insisted that Jesus needed to be stopped by cutting his life short.

Jesus challenged the status quo. However, more importantly, he offered humankind their best chance to recognize the true potential and greatness of being both "human" and "children of the Creator God." Tragically for all of us, that "best chance" was lost. Jesus instead was the victim of an orchestrated assassination.