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Why did Judas betray Jesus?
Paul V.M. Flesher

That question has occupied the minds of Christians for nearly two millennia. The gospels give two answers. He was greedy and attracted by 30 pieces of silver he was paid. Or, Satan entered Judas and caused him to betray Jesus. For many modern people wrestling with the various scenes of the Easter story, neither response seems satisfactory. Few Christians today believe in a personified Devil who takes control of people, and thus Flip Wilson's exclamation, "Da Devil made me do it!" constitutes a cop-out.

Greed does not seem a sufficient motive either. After all, Judas was a disciple. He forsook his family and friends to wander with Jesus on his preaching journeys for three years. When the disciples themselves are sent out to preach the message and to heal, the gospels assume Judas is among them. No text singles him out by saying, "Jesus sent out everyone except Judas." So something else must have caused Judas to turn on Jesus. But what?

The 1973 film, "Jesus Christ, Superstar," shapes the role of Judas to address this question. The film opens with Judas singing, and immediately two points become clear. First, Jesus is off-message, that is, he is off his own message. What message is that? Across the next few scenes of the movie, it becomes clear that from Judas' perspective, the message is that the poor should be helped and the sick should be healed. So Judas is angry with Jesus for straying from this main theme.

Second, it is the way Jesus has strayed that prompts Judas to action. As Judas says to Jesus, "You've begun to matter more than the things you say." In other words, Jesus has become a superstar. Like they do with rock-and-roll superstars, the crowds gather to be near him, no longer just to hear him. This personality cult has scared Judas, for Israel is occupied by the Romans, who crush anyone capable of gathering crowds and who

might lead them to rebel. Thus, according to this film, Judas' motives are anger and fear. His goal is to calm matters down.

The 1960s film, "King of Kings," by contrast, portrays a Judas who wants to stir up a rebellion. In this epic, Judas is a double agent. He serves both as a disciple of Jesus and as a partisan of Barabbas, who is portrayed as the leader of an underground rebel army. Judas is convinced that by bringing together the two groups, Israel will overthrow the Romans and establish an independent kingdom--with Jesus as its king and Barabbas as his general. The key is to get Jesus to use his divine power.

Judas initially persuades Barabbas to start a rebellion, believing that Jesus will join in once he sees the people's will. This fails, and the Romans put down the rebellion quite viciously. In desperation, Judas decides that Jesus will only use his great powers when he is personally threatened. He therefore comes up with the scheme to betray Jesus, assuming that once attacked, Jesus would draw upon his powers to overthrow his attackers, and, that this process would not stop until Rome was overthrown. Of course, the gospel story makes it clear that Jesus did not react this way. The point about Judas is that he did not betray Jesus from traitorous motives, but from a desire to help Jesus fulfill his destiny, which Judas thought was the liberation of Israel.

Both of these films try to depict a fuller psychological picture of Judas and his motives to satisfy a modern question. And their portrayals are clearly cast in terms of current culture in order to answer that question in a way that people in our time can understand.