

Trinity College Cambridge
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PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Judas

Song of Solomon 1: 2, 4: 11, 5: 13, 8: 6–7
Matthew 26: 47–56

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*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:
for thy love is better than wine.*

In the dew-filled, chill light of a Passover moon, in a slow, still midnight second, Judas and Jesus collide in a kiss. The kiss arrests them both and promises a spiritual passion lost in translation. More than just a greeting, Matthew's Gospel set the kiss as intense, fervent, lips pressed to lips, flesh against flesh, breath into breath. The kiss recalls Solomon's Song where a bride and groom long to kiss the other's lips cast as lilies, milk, honey, as better than wine. No wonder that later writers spiritualise the kiss in Solomon's Song to express God's love for Israel, or Christ's love for the Church, or the mystic's love for Christ. For a second, the kiss of Judas promises the light of soulful union with God.

But no-one sees Judas' kiss in this way. *Profuse are the kisses of an enemy*, so Proverbs tells us.¹ Judas' kiss indeed signals betrayal, plunging both him and his master into a darker arrest and passion than promised. The kiss of Judas cues the crowd with swords and staves to seize Jesus, hurtling him into pain and death; but the kiss also binds Judas in fatal remorse for his betrayal. Judas gives a kiss that kills God and damns himself. It would have been better, the Scriptures say, if Judas had never been born.

Is this all that can be said of Judas? I think not, but the initial prospects look bleak. Who Judas really was, and why he betrays Jesus with a kiss, nestles far beneath a hard shell of historical ambiguity and cruel invention. Pulling apart the hardened scales of this suffocating shell remains almost impossible: a learned hate, after all, is hard to unlearn. The descent of Judas begins in the Gospels: Judas turns from being a typically obtuse disciple in Mark, into a repentant friend who kills himself out of sorrow in Matthew, into a follower possessed by Satan in Luke, and finally (in John) into a devilish treasurer who sells Jesus and becomes a lost son of perdition. Postbiblical interpreters push Judas further down into the abyss: over centuries, sermons, art, and folklore mutate Judas into an inhuman monster. This tragedy soon becomes more than personal: all Jews are grafted onto Judas' horrific stock and held to account for his crime. As early as the fourth century, Saint Jerome asked, 'Whom do you suppose are the sons of Judas?' before quickly answering,

¹ Proverbs 27: 6.

‘the Jews [who] take their name...from the betrayer.’ From this spurious genealogy springs a terrible history of anti-Semitic violence: the inhuman image of Judas haunts Jewish graves and lives from medieval pogroms until the mass murders of the Holocaust.

But the human kiss in Gethsemane that ignites all this hatred remains buried, virtually unseen. In an unrelenting darkness, the kiss needs to be uncovered in order to say something else about Judas. Two paintings, both lost for two hundred years and recently rediscovered themselves, can in turn help us rediscover what else might be said: Carracci’s *Kiss of Judas* (1589–90) and Caravaggio’s *The Taking of Christ* (1602). The two images might seem unpromising at first sight: one critic rightly points out that, in both images, Judas is ‘undoubtedly the most unattractive and most uncouth’² character, and takes on the sinister racial features stereotypically given to Jews. Yet, there is an undoubted disturbing quality to the kiss in both images which might disturb our learned hatred of Judas. They might show how the grace of kissing Christ lingers even on the lips of Judas, with hope for us all.

Whereas earlier artists took in a panoramic view of the betrayal of Jesus, distancing the viewer from the terrible act before them, Carracci’s *Kiss of Judas* puts us uncomfortably close to the kiss. With gripping realism, and painted in life-size proportion, Carracci shows only the upper half of Judas and Jesus at the ‘singular moment of enormous emotional intensity.’³ The scene might depict the lovers’ kiss in Solomon’s Song. Jesus is the centre of the canvas, his full lips open to receive a kiss, his eyes downcast. His cheeks flush pink; his alabaster white shoulder and neck are bared as his soft clothes drape down. The saturnine Judas strains around Jesus, looking down at the mouth his lips will touch, gently placing his hand on Jesus’ chest. The erotic tension is inescapable: ‘Judas engages in such a passionate kiss that it could be interpreted as a prelude to further physical intimacy.’⁴ But out of the gloom around the pair looms and lurks an impending violence that will, in a second, disrupt the kiss and shatter any illusion that this is the loving union of humankind and God. A conspiracy circle of naked hands wall in the pair and threaten to rip them apart as they seek Jesus’ death. Above Jesus and Judas hovers a noose like a halo. Carracci reveals impersonal harbingers of violence: hints of cold armour and a half-glimpse here and there of a soldier’s face. Jesus limply lets his left hand be tied, ready to be led like a lamb to slaughter. On closer inspection, his eyes seem unfocused, even dazed, his fervour not physical but otherworldly. The passion of Jesus is not the same as Judas’ passion. The red and white clothes of Jesus prefigure the blood of his innocent martyrdom for the salvation of the world.

In Carracci’s *The Kiss of Judas*, then, the kiss strangely binds and separates Judas and Jesus as surely as does the descending noose. For Jesus, the noose prefigures his halo: his death on the Cross expresses the depth of his love for the world, brought to new life with him.

² Franco Mormando, ‘“Just as Your Lips Approach the Lips of Your Brothers”: Judas Iscariot and the Kiss of Betrayal,’ in *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio & the Baroque Image*, ed. Franco Mormando (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 179–190; quotation from 182.

³ Susan Gubar, *Judas: A Biography* (Norton & Company, 2009), 194.

⁴ Gubar, *Judas*, 197.

The kiss below the noose reveals how Jesus desires God, his eyes gazing like a mystic at the invisible, unfolding kingdom, whatever the cost. For Judas, however, the noose foreshadows his despair and suicide. Carracci's painting disturbs, however, any easy judgement: Judas, like Jesus, desires something, but the right thing in the wrong way. If Jesus desires God, then Judas desires to possess, on his own terms, the Son of God. So it is that Judas' closed eyes contrast with the eyes of Jesus gazing to the kingdom of God. No-one knows the reason why Judas betrays Jesus: some scholars claim he wants to force Jesus into being an armed revolutionary figure; others that Jesus is not the kind of messiah that Judas expects or wants. Whatever the truth, Judas' lips ironically betray what he wants most: to live with God, but a God made in his own image and hopes. Yet, whatever the lurking terror that Judas' kiss unleashes, Carracci's painting still leaves us more with a sense of Solomon's Song than of blame. Might not the noose which becomes a halo for Christ also become one for the tragic, terrible Judas through the lingering grace of Christ's kiss? After all, Jesus calls Judas to be his disciple, only calls him 'friend', and reveals that 'this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that all of which he hath given me I should lose nothing.'⁵

If Carracci's painting re-humanises Judas and breathes a whisper of hope into his kiss, then Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* instead places the artist and viewer uncomfortably close as complicit in the betraying kiss. The viewer is hurtled from right to left by a cacophony of figures all of whom threaten to topple over Christ and Judas. The only full face belongs to Jesus: his eyes closed, his face pallid, hands together, ready to fulfil his fate. Judas' kiss is interrupted: the passionate echoes of Solomon's Song go unheard. Judas seems overwhelmed by forces beyond his control: the large, threatening, metallic arm of the soldier seems to strangle him as much as Jesus. This impersonal, cruel arm of the law indeed dominates the centre of the painting: its reflective surface forms an imaginary mirror in which the viewer can see him or herself as immediately complicit in what is happening to Jesus and Judas. The artist includes himself in this judgement: the figure at the extreme right holds up a lantern which only casts light on his face; it is thought to be Caravaggio's self-portrait. Caravaggio wants us to see Judas, then, as an everyman, not as a scapegoat. The Judas kiss is *necessary* to begin the passion of Christ, but it is not *sufficient* for its completion: all humanity crucifies Christ. But Caravaggio's painting perhaps also shows that, just as we are complicit in the betrayal of Christ, we are complicit in the historical scapegoating of Judas too. In condemning Judas, we also condemn ourselves. Caravaggio refuses to allow himself or the viewer the comfort of judgemental distance.

The most disturbing figure, however, in Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* is the one not fully contained within its frame: the figure on the far left fleeing from the kiss of betrayal. The figure screams, arms outstretched beyond the frame, his cape billowing over the tragic Jesus and Judas. The figure is most likely the anonymous follower of Jesus who, in Mark's Gospel, flees away naked from Gethsemane. But perhaps he might also be yet another surrogate: for all the disciples who fled; and for you and me. As one critic suggests, perhaps he does not simply flee the scene; rather, as he moves beyond the frame of the painting,

⁵ John 6: 39.

he screams as he looks ‘outward at another traumatic conflagration before his very eyes...[the] infinite number of catastrophes toward which humanity is being hurtled’⁶ in the future. The figure witnesses, as it were, the betrayals of innocents and vitriolic scape-goatings to come. The history of the Jews gives, of course, one terrifying example. But we can also look to our own modern world and times to see other examples: the insidious stigma attached *en masse* by British politics to the poor on benefits; the thinly-veiled racism in debates about immigration; rampant Islamophobia which ostracises many and radicalises some in a violent cycle; or the way lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people are often demonised as corrosive of moral values, criminalised in seventy-eight countries, and subject to deadly hate crimes. Caravaggio’s painting refuses to let us be distanced from the catastrophe around Judas’ kiss. Like his fleeing figure, neither can we stay safely distant as such modern catastrophes unfold in the world.

Our silence would be our own kiss of betrayal, our compliance with the brute, impersonal, armoured forces of sin. Like Caravaggio’s fleeing disciple, we are called to be horrified at the betrayals we see in the world; but we are also called to propel ourselves into that world in order to give the grace of Christ’s kiss where it is most needed.

The last kiss and the last word comes not from Judas, then, but from Christ. The last kiss that touches Judas in Gethsemane graces his body, we can hope, as the love of divine lips open even to hell. That same, last kiss also graces with love the catastrophes which we face and in which take a share of blame. The last word coming out of this last kiss of Christ calls, then, to both Judas and us the sounds of Solomon’s Song after all: *My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it; for love is strong as death, its passion as fierce as the grave.* And this is a call to which we might respond: *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.*

⁶ Gubar, *Judas*, 204.