MATTHEW'S MOTIVE FOR THE COMPOSITION OF THE STORY OF JUDAS'S SUICIDE IN MATTHEW 27:3-10

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author tries to show that Matthew's intention with the Judas story is not to report the manner of Judas's death, but to provide a particular version of the story in order that the more important motifs of the rest of the gospel can be contained in it. By means of these motifs Matthew wants to indicate who is responsible for Jesus' death. The combined quotation from Zechariah and Jeremiah provides a basis for the interpretation of Judas's suicide in such a way that the guilt of the chief priests is stressed. Therefore the story of Judas's suicide is much more about the chief priests and elders and that which they represent, than about the fate of an individual Judas.

1 INTRODUCTION

Matthew and Luke's (Acts 1:15-19) reports on Judas's death are so different that the historical authenticity of both is questioned (cf Senior 1974:34). As a result of the differences, discussion mostly concerns the origin and interpretation of the pericope, especially because scholars cannot find a historical basis for the events, but reconstruct other models from the Old Testament on which the story of Judas's death is based. This does not mean that his death is a fabrication, but that the pericopes are a literary creation of the authors.

Matthew's intention with the Judas story is not to report the manner of Judas's death, but to present a story in which important motifs of the rest of the gospel are reflected. By means of these motifs Matthew wants to indicate who is responsible for Jesus' death. The combined quotation from Zechariah and Jeremiah provides a basis for the interpretation of the story. The result is that most scholars have presented different models from the Old Testament as an explanation for Matthew's motive for his portrayal of Judas's betrayal and suicide.

Derrett (1980) gives an extensive and interesting interpretation of Judas's betrayal which he bases on the 'masor that hands over (property or) a person from the "inside" to the "outside" (1980:3), and the Joseph story as the greatest masira in Jewish legends. His starting point is the price that Judas received for his betrayal. In the light of this business transaction he bases the story on the selling and betrayal of Joseph. Joseph went and told his father about the deeds...
of his brothers which resulted in them selling him for twenty pieces of silver (Gen 37:28). Because of that, the brothers betrayed Joseph and their father, but did not know that it would lead to their eventual prosperity and the redemption of the people of Israel. Derrett also argues that Iscariot is not the man of Keri- oth (Jos 15:25), but a nickname derived from the business world and that Judas was probably called ‘isqa’-rê-‘ût which means ‘he makes a commerce out of friendship. He turns friendship into a business’ (1980:10).

Derrett’s explanation has merit, especially the way in which the Old Testa­ment traditions are used to explain the composition of the story. The question, however, is whether the Joseph story, which does not appear anywhere in Matthew, forms the actual background to the death of the betrayer of the Messiah. Matthew also gives no reason to suppose that he does not accept Judas as hailing from Kerioth. With so many assumptions derived and explained from the perspective of business transactions, the context and relation with the rest of Matthew tends to be lost.

Another explanation, more generally accepted by scholars, is that the story is based on the suicide of Ahithophel in 2 Sm 17:23. This is the only other place in the Old and New Testament that reference is made to someone hanging himself. This explanation fits the framework and background of Matthew better, especially because of the place of David in Matthew. But Van Unnik is correct when he rejects this model, because Ahithophel did not betray David (it is implicitly supposed) and the similarity only lies in the ‘hanging of the self’ of the named persons (1974:51).

There are other Old Testament motifs which are given as explanation of the Judas story. These will come up for discussion in our treatment of Mt 27:3-10. If motives for the composition of the Judas story are sought, the context and appearance of Judas in the rest of the Gospel of Matthew should be taken into consideration.

2 THE ROLE OF THE TWELVE DISCIPLES OF WHOM JUDAS WAS ONE

The importance of the theme of disciple and discipleship is not only based on the 73 times the word μαθητής/μαθηταί is used, but also on the manner in which Matthew uses his sources and the way he changes them. For example, he adds the specification μαθητής/αί to his versions of the parallel sources (cf Mt 8:21 and Lk 9:59; Mt 26:8 and Mk 14:4). He also adds details and comments by the disciples which are lacking in his sources (cf Mt 15:23, 16:22-23, 17:6,13, 18:1, 19:10). Whereas Mark sometimes refers to people or crowds, Matthew replaces them with the disciples or adds the disciples (Mt 9:19, 36-37, 12:46-50, 13:10, 23:1). Matthew’s aim is to focus on the disciples and the way that Jesus taught them and instructed them to serve the people (cf Wilkens
In order to determine the role of Judas as disciple, the appearance of the disciples in Matthew can mainly be divided into three parts:

2.1 Matthew 4:9 only reports about the circumstances of five (six) disciples that Jesus called: Andrew and his brother Peter, James and John, the sons of Zebedee (Mt 4:18-22), Matthew the tax collector (9:9-13) and the calling of an unknown disciple, who initially offered an excuse (8:21). The reference to 'the disciples' in these chapters must be interpreted in a broader sense than the five mentioned. This probably refers to the collective twelve. In chapter 12 Jesus' disciples are clearly played off against the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist to make it clear to the readers that they were followers of Jesus. They became the new Israel and 'replaced' the Pharisees as labourers for the harvest, 'because the crowds were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36).

2.2 Matthew 10-25. The names of the twelve disciples are made known and they become the official fellow-workers of Jesus in his ministry. The first time the name of Judas appears it is with the qualification that he is the one who betrayed Jesus (10:4). In spite of this disqualification, Judas also receives the power to drive out evil spirits and to cure every kind of disease. We must assume that the reaction and behaviour of the disciples in these chapters were also the reaction and behaviour of Judas, because, even though less often than in Mark, Matthew refers at least eight times to the twelve disciples (10:1, 2, 5, 11:1, 19:28 by implication, 20:17, 26:20) and Judas is twice specified as being one of the twelve (26:14, 47).

The picture drawn of the disciples in these chapters is not very flattering: ignorance, inability to understand, unbelief, pride and arrogance are features that emerge (14:15, 31; 5:15, 23; 16:8-11, 17; 18:1-3; 19:13-14; 20:20-28 cf Wilkens 1988:129-141). Yet they left their homes, family and belongings to become his and one another's brothers (19:27-29). To them it was given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (13:11) and they confessed him as the Messiah the Son of the living God (16:16). That is why the positive features are so striking and important (cf Kingsbury 1988:14). They also had to endure the criticism of the Pharisees because they did not fast (9:14) and did not keep the Sabbath (12:1-2) or the traditions of the elders (15:2). These contrasting characteristics of the disciples are maintained throughout. There is however no development in the sense of their becoming less ignorant and disbelieving. The positive and negative characteristics vary constantly.

The key issue in this part that is important for the theme of this paper is the
sharp contrast between Jesus' view of his coming suffering and the viewpoint of the disciples (16:21-22; 17:23b). This contrast causes a clash between two systems of value respectively based on the mind of God and the mind of men. Jesus considers the things of God and that is why he regards his suffering in terms of self-sacrificing service (20:28). Peter and the disciples consider the things of men, they are self-centred and out to save their own lives and avoid suffering and death (16:25) (cf Kingsbury 1988:16). This is confirmed when all his disciples leave him and flee when he is taken prisoner (26:56b).

These characteristics are ascribed to the twelve disciples of whom Judas is one. He thus shares the positive and negative features. In the Passion story he appears more prominently as an individual, but also as one of the twelve.

2.3 Matthew 26-28. As far as Judas is concerned, this part may be divided into two. Chapter 26 which features the motive for the betrayal of Jesus and chapter 27 that describes Judas's death. It is not as simple as is generally assumed to say that Judas was the only one that turned against Jesus. The ignorance and inability of the disciples reach a climax. Jesus has taught them what discipleship means, namely that their solidarity with him implies that they have to share in his authority and suffering. But because they do not think about the things of God, they do not understand the essence of Jesus' preaching and so do not understand what is happening (Wilkens 1988:153). In 16:21 on the first announcement of his suffering and death the ἀπὸ τότε ἔρχομαι indicates that they were not left ignorant of what was going to happen. On their arrival in Jerusalem Jesus spells out his mission and the things that are about to take place for the third time. The events described in 26:1-5 correlate with the suffering pronouncements and indicate that the time has come for the things that he spoke about to happen.

When Jesus enters his suffering, the disciples are not ready to cope with the situation: They show their lack of understanding when they criticise the woman who anoints Jesus, because they do not realise that it is a preparation for his burial (26:8). Judas offers himself to the chief priests to betray Jesus (26:14-16). In spite of the fact that Judas has already decided to betray Jesus, he asks Jesus whether he is the betrayer as though he expects a negative answer (26:25). The other disciples clearly demonstrate their false confidence in their ability to remain loyal to him. Each of them assures Jesus that they will rather die with him than let him down (26:33,35b); Peter, James and John (inner-circle disciples) do not even have the perseverance to stay awake for one hour to help him in his hour of need (26:40-45). Judas gives himself over to the chief priests (26:48-49); at Gethsemane Peter tries to defend Jesus because he still does not understand what it is all about (16:22) but then flees with the other disciples.
when their courage finally fails (26:56b) (Kingsbury 1988:16). After Jesus’ arrest, Peter follows him at a distance into the courtyard. Matthew agrees with Mark in his description of Peter’s denial of Jesus but accentuates his denial and self-doubt. On this negative note we take leave of the character of Peter in Matthew (Wilkens 1988:205-206). It appears that the inability of all the disciples to understand Jesus has reached a climax.

In chapter 26 it appears that Matthew has a special interest in the person of Judas. In spite of the fact that Matthew follows the history of the Passion as recorded in Mark accurately, he adds the following:

a) In Mt 26:14-16 the author creates an agreement between Judas and the chief priests by adding dialogue between them and hinting at the Zechariah reference of 27:9.

b) In 26:26 Matthew includes a discussion between Jesus and Judas when he predicted his betrayal.

c) Matthew adds Jesus’ words to Judas after he had given him a kiss as a sign for his arrest (26:50).

d) In 28:16 the absence of Judas is explicitly indicated by referring to the ‘eleven’. It is the only place in Matthew where the ‘eleven’ is mentioned (cf Senior 1974:30-31).

This interest in Judas probably goes further than a mere interest in Judas as a person and his fate, and probably serves to indicate who was responsible for the death of Jesus.

Another aspect that requires attention is the question whether Judas was present at the time of the institution of the Eucharist. Hein (1971:227) reckons that there were two meals and that the indication of Judas as the betrayer, which probably occurred at Bethany, took place in the course of the first meal, while Judas was not present at the time of the actual institution of the Eucharist. He bases his argument on the appearance of ἐσσωκτον in 26:21,26 which suggests two sources for two different traditions which, in turn, reflect two meals. According to Luke, these things happened at one meal and Judas was definitely present. Matthew follows Mark in this, but adds a few words between Jesus and Judas to indicate who the betrayer was. The reason for this is not very clear. Wilkens (1988:172) points out that Matthew exposes the behaviour and reaction of the disciples through his Christology. If this was Matthew’s aim, it means that he attempted to indicate that Jesus was not caught unaware by Judas’s betrayal (or Peter’s denial) but that he was destined and prepared to do his Fa-
ther's will, while this fact still does not take away a person's responsibility to do right (26:24).

The question whether Judas received the signs of bread and wine is not easy to answer and it is even more difficult to determine its significance. If Judas did receive the signs, does it mean that he rejected Jesus' redemption through his betrayal? Does it make his deed worse? If he was not present, does this serve as a sign that he had already been rejected by God and had forfeited any possibility of being redeemed, in other words the 'woes' of which Jesus had spoken? Before we attempt to reach a verdict on Judas, we should first look at his last deed (Mt 27).

Conclusion: In all three Matthean pericopes where Judas appears, he is identified and qualified as one of the twelve disciples. In 26:14 it is stressed that one of the twelve went to the chief priests. Judas is mentioned in order to specify which one. When Jesus points out his betrayer he says: 'One of you will betray me' (26:21) and in Gethsemane Judas, one of the twelve arrives with the soldiers (26:47).

Why then did Judas betray Jesus? Probably because he knew and understood as little as the other disciples who Jesus was and what he had come to do. The difference is that Judas turned his ignorance and unbelief into a negative deed. This is why Judas's betrayal is the extreme expression of the disciples' inability to understand who Jesus was.

3 MATTHEW 27:3-10

The course of the events is described in two distinct phases: Judas's return to the temple followed by his death (vv3-5), and the decision of the chief priests to buy the potter's field with the money (vv6-10). Even though it seems like two different traditions, the author links them to form a unit indicating who was responsible for the death of Jesus. The quotation in verse 9 indicating that the Scripture had been fulfilled does not only relate to verses 6-10 but also to verses 3-6. The pericope is thus regarded as a unit dealing with two different matters.

3.1 Matthew 27:3-5

The decision of the chief priests and elders to put Jesus to death (27:1-2) is the direct cause of Judas's next move. This decision constitutes the implementation of a previous decision described in Mt 26:3-4 and arising from their desire to put him to death. From Judas's reaction it seems that he did not expect that Jesus would be sentenced to death. Is this Matthew's way of revealing the treacherous plan of the chief priests, in that they had, under false pretention, bribed one of the disciples to betray the Master? Matthew suggests, through his description of Judas's behaviour, that this is indeed the case.
The sin Judas committed was regarded as the worst possible crime in Israel. This viewpoint is based on Dt 27: 'Then Moses, and the priests, who are Levites, said to all Israel, "...You have now become the people of the Lord your God....Cursed is the man who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person!"'. These instructions were part of the Covenant and of the Torah that was continually held before Israel. The shedding of innocent blood is punished by God himself, because the Lord is not willing to forgive such an action (cf Gn 9:6; 1 Sam 19:5; 1 Ki 2:5; 2 Ki 24:2-4; Jr 19:4; 22:3; 22:17; Ps 94:21). It renders a person unclean and brings terrible destruction. Such an iniquity renders a person unworthy of living in God's presence and being part of his holy nation (Van Unnik 1974:53). Jesus concurs with this judgment in Mt 23:35 when He condemns the Pharisees and implicates them in the shedding of innocent blood in Israel (cf Gen 4:8; 2 Chr 24:20-21; Zch 1:1). Moreover, Mt 27 does not only deal with the betrayal of an innocent man, but also with the fact of his being handed over to a gentile: 'The essence of the action (one of the most serious crimes known to Jewish law) is that a Jew, whether righteous or sinful, is put into the power of the gentile ruler (whether or not an oppressor), with the object of effecting his death, or the loss of his property (which was viewed as much the same thing)' (Derrett 1980:4). It reaches a climax in Mt 7:24-25 when even the gentile Pilate admits that to put Jesus to death, constitutes the shedding of innocent blood. To this the crowd answer: 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' (Mt 27:25). Even though the crowd utter these words it is the chief priests and elders who persuaded them to do so (27:20).

Judas is seized with remorse over what he did. Van Unnik reckons that the fact that Matthew uses the word μεταμέλημα and not μετανοεῖν, means that Judas changed his mind, but did not come to true repentance (μετανοεῖν). True repentance goes hand in hand with a reaction of faith (cf Mt 21:29 and 32). Schwarz (1984:227) argues that the genuineness and meaningfulness of Judas's regret does not depend on either the use or choice of words, but that other motives strengthen his regret and remorse. This is shown in different ways no fewer than six times: He repented (v3a), he took back the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and elders (v3c), he confessed that he had sinned (v4a) and that he had betrayed an innocent man (v4a), he threw the coins down in the Temple (v5a) and he went off and hanged himself (v5b).

The answer of the chief priests to Judas's confession of sin provides an important clue as to the motive for Judas's suicide. The background is found in Dt 19:15-21 that deals with testimony in a courtcase:

If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investiga-
Judas's confession of sin to the chief priests and elders, who acted as judges in Israel, placed them, as the representatives of the Lord, under the obligation to see to it that justice was done. But, 'esteeming themselves to be expert in matters of law, Scripture, and religion (cf 9:3,11; 12:2,10; 15:1-2; 19:3; 22:15-17,34; 27:6), they were in reality unable to “read” Scripture and discern its meaning' (cf 9:13; 12:3-4,5-7; 19:4-9; 21:16,42; 22:31-32) (Kingsbury 1987:61). Because Jesus was sentenced to death as a result of Judas's false witness, the priests should actually have put Judas to death, for such was the consequence of his admission of betrayal of an innocent man. The answer of the priests reveals their unjustice, corruption and spiritual bankruptcy and their withdrawal from the presence of the Lord. In reaction to the words of the priests, Judas threw the money into the Temple. Lachs says that 'the verb in Hebr, תָּפַל, does not necessarily mean “to throw something down violently,” but rather it can mean “to abandon,” cf Gn 21.15.' Through this deed of Judas the final rejection of the representatives of the law of God (Dt 19:17), then by hanging himself Judas executes his own sentence (cf Van Unnik 1974:50). Through this deed of Judas the law was restored and evil purged: ...a life for a life... (Dt 19:21). Did Judas give himself to God as a price for his sins to prevent the shedding of innocent blood? Derrett (1980:14) reckons that Judas's death wiped out his sin and that his sins were forgiven. Matthew however, says nothing about this.

In this pericope, the author uses the Old Testament motifs to present Judas's suicide in such a way that the guilt of the chief priests is stressed. Therefore it is much more about the condemnation of the chief priests and elders and that which they represent, than about the fate of an individual Judas. The following verses confirm this view.

3.2 Matthew 27:6-10

In verse 4b the priests exculpate themselves and blame Judas. They ignore his
confession and hand Jesus over to Pilate. Through this deed Judas's blame is transferred to them, so the handing over of Jesus is a confirmation that their deed was evil. The chief priests feel no remorse. Moreover their hypocritical behaviour is exposed when they do not put the money in the temple treasury because it is blood money. Through this action they implicitly admit that their deed is a crime (cf Schwarz 1984:230).

The Old Testament citation in verses 9-10 gives this part its weight and supplies a basis for the interpretation of the whole section: The thirty silver coins are mentioned in both sections (27:3 and 27:9). The action of the chief priests with regard to the money is based on a combination of mainly Zch 11:11-12 and parts of Jeremiah. The hand of the editor can be seen in the free handling of the texts to serve his purpose. The reference to Jeremiah, as the word that finds fulfilment, refers to a combination of the buying of a piece of ground in Anathoth in Jr 32:6-9 and to Jr 18:2-3 which relates to a potter. These ideas may be regarded as the background of 'the potter's field' in Mt 27:10 (cf Senior 1974: 24).

In the context of the story it is not clear why the author bases his version on the buying of the potter's field. Senior reckons it is probably a free interpretation of the Hebrew word רוטב or the variant רוטב. The literary meaning of the word רוטב is potter, while the actual root of the Judas story centres around רוטב or treasury. The author probably thought that the combination of the texts from Zechariah and Jeremiah supplied a satisfactory Old Testament prophecy for the Judas story (1974:26-27).

The reason for the combination of the Zechariah and Jeremiah motifs is most likely more than just the Hebrew word for potter, but it may also be a reflection on Jr 19:1-15. Senior (1974:32) points out several obvious similarities between Jr 19 and the Judas story. The overall theme of Jr 19 is the warning of condemnation and destruction for the leaders in Jerusalem; the repeated symbolism of the potter's vessel as a sign of destruction (19:1,10-11); the theme of innocent blood that the leaders of Judah shed and which added to their condemnation (19:4); the changing of the name of the valley outside the city from Ben-Hinnom to the Valley of Slaughter (19:6); the reference to the valley of Slaughter that would be made into a cemetery because there would be nowhere else to bury people (19:11). In view of all this, Jeremiah may be regarded as delivering a prophecy of judgment and destruction which aimed at the leaders of Jerusalem and Judah. Mt 27:9b emphasises the reference to the Israelites so that the motif of this quotation and the description of the events in 27:6-10 are aimed at transferring God's judgment to the chief priests, in other words the leaders of Jerusalem. The guilt of the chief priests is a double blood debt. The innocent death of Jesus as well as the death of Judas fall on their heads.
4 CONCLUSION

Matthew is the only Gospel that limits the mission of the disciples to Israel because Jesus himself aimed his mission at Israel (10:5; 15:24). From the beginning of the Gospel Jesus is portrayed as experiencing rejection, especially from the leaders of the people (16:21; 17:22; 20:18; 21:33-46; 22:1-14). In Chapters 26 and 27 this rejection reaches a climax when the chief priests sentence Jesus to death and incite the people before the gentile governor Pilate to call for his execution. On the other hand Matthew also stresses Jesus’ rejection of the leaders of Israel. In 8:12, 10:15 and 11:20-24 judgement is pronounced and Israel is explicitly rejected in Mt 11-12 (cf. Combrink 1980:95-96).

The old chosen people will be replaced by the new chosen people. This new chosen people is represented by the twelve disciples. Their solidarity with Jesus lies in the fact that they share in his authority and suffering. Yet their ignorance and inability to understand who Jesus is, reaches its climax in Chapters 26 and 27. Judas as one of the twelve disciples turns his unbelief into a negative deed when he fall prey to the chief priests and elders who wish to arrest and execute Jesus in an underhanded manner. He realises his mistake too late and attempts to hand back their corrupted money, but they reject his confession of sin and he goes off and hangs himself.

The legend concerning the end of Judas in Matthew is narrated in terms of Old Testamentic condemnation of the leaders of Jerusalem. In this story the rejection of the leaders by God reaches a climax. So the story of Judas’s suicide functions as proof that actually the chief priests were responsible for Jesus’ death. They carry a double blame: for the death of Jesus and the death of Judas.

In Mt 26:24 Jesus says: ‘The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.’ The paradox of the gospel is illustrated by these words: Judas is at one and the same time co-worker in the realisation of the kingdom of God, and also the one who has to pay the extreme price. ‘A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!’ (Mt 10:24-25).

WORKS CONSULTED


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