

Love Tree

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Abstract

Judas Iscariot awakes in the ninth circle of hell, confused yet assured of his belonging there. He experiences multiple different realities simultaneously as he attempts to grapple with his situation and former life—a counternarrative focusing on the created realities of literature and legacies for fictional and religious characters.

Artist's Statement

I was raised in a Roman Catholic household. Around Easter time every year, I would hear the story of Judas betraying Jesus. Judas was used as an exemplar for a traitor; greedy, evil, and susceptible to the influence of the devil (*King James Version*, Luke 22:1-6). For a long time, this characterization of Judas was something that I did not push back on, even after separating myself from Catholicism. In the Spring of 2022, I was in a history class: "Varieties of early Christianity" with Rebecca Denova. Being a religious studies course, I was often left reflecting on my own experiences with religion: Sunday school, religious summer camps, heavy-eyed masses, and ultimately the story of Judas betraying Jesus. One thing that I came to realize, is that if those in Christianity believe that Jesus died so that humanity could be saved, his death is not possible without the betrayal of Judas. This thread led to more questions; is the story of Judas canon to the bible? Are there any similar stories in the Torah? If the story was not biblically canon, why add that element in? To answer many of my early questions, I emailed my former religious studies professor and historian Rebecca Denova.

Professor Denova was extremely helpful in informing me of the different problems that surround Judas' narrative. One of the major problems as Professor Denova states is, "We assume he existed because the gospels name him as an early disciple. However, what we cannot verify is any historical evidence of a story of his betrayal. It appears nowhere before Mark (70 CE). Paul knew of no such story or person" (Denova, Rebecca. "Re: Question about biblical canon." Received by Derek Graf, April 11th, 2024.). Professor Denova's comments really shaped the direction I wanted to take with the counter-narrative. I wanted to tell a story that looked at Judas trapped in the ninth layer of hell because of literature, like the bible or Dante's "Inferno" that portray him as a traitor to Christ.

In my short story, Judas struggles with his identity while in hell as he begins to remember what really happened during his life. The parts of the story that he can feel, and see to an extent, are what really happened. In Judas' real life he was a young follower of Jesus but left before he was crucified. He was arrested for stealing but eventually let go after some time. He then met a wife, and they had some children, and he died peacefully watching a "Judas" tree, also known as a "love tree." This reality of his life is muddled by the contrasting story that different literary sources, such as the bible, have provided.

I also thought that if Judas existed, and was not a lifelong follower of Jesus, then as a Jewish man, would be familiar with the story of David and Ahithophel. David was a prophesied king, much like Jesus, and was betrayed by a close friend and follower much like how Jesus was. (*King James Version*, Samuel 15:31). Judas' Judaism also explains why he refers to God as Yahweh at different times throughout the story. I also inquired to Professor Rebecca Denova on why Judas have been created as a scapegoat after Jesus' crucifixion. She responded that many scholars argue that "Mark created the story of Judas and betrayal to put the blame for the death of Jesus on Jews, and not Rome. Mark had to distinguish his "Jews" (Jewish believers in Jesus) from that of the Jews involved in the Revolt against Rome" and by doing so Judas is more symbolic than he is real (Denova, Rebecca. "Re: Question about biblical canon." Received by Derek Graf, April 12th, 2024.). This mixture of reality and symbolism prompted me to mix in Dante's "Inferno."

Dante's "Inferno" from *The Divine Comedy*, tells the story of Dante and Virgil traveling through the nine layers of hell. At the bottom layer of hell is Judas, headfirst in one of three mouths of Lucifer with his back being skinned by the Devil's claws (Inferno, 34.58-63). The layer that Judas, Brutus and Cassius are in is called Giudecca, in reference to Judas (Inferno, 34.117). Dante's "Inferno" is historically one of the most popular pieces of literature when it comes to depicting hell. "Inferno" continues to make its mark even on modern popular culture from films to music. Dante takes the biblical story of Judas' betrayal and

builds upon it; Judas would not be a character in his hell if it was not for the bible. While it is not biblical canon, Dante's "Inferno" is certainly literary canon.

Time is a frequent point of contention throughout the story. The story takes place in a supernatural setting, where eternity moves at a pace that is not natural or even linear. Making it seem as if Judas is in the mouth of Lucifer, sitting next to Brutus and Cassius, and sitting alone all at the same time. This cross-section of timelines made for interesting character work in terms of what Judas knows and what he does not. Readers may notice that Judas has knowledge of things to come into the story but is also unaware of others, asking questions the entire time as he begins to realize who he was and why he should not be there. The end of the story is what I believe to be most fitting for Judas, which is rest and release from symbolic blame and punishment.

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The cold ground below me sticks to my skin. I am, I was, I am going to sit, sitting with my knees pulled to my chest. Waiting. I waited my entire life, just to wait some more on this frozen lake. Sometime far from now, I will hear Dante call it “Cocytus.” I do not have a name for this place, nor do I want to give it a title other than my deserved punishment. Lucifer’s wings push freezing air towards me at a slow, mocking, mechanical pace. I can’t stop sweating. My back and face call for a sponge, a veil, a shroud, something to ease it against the elements. I can feel how skin parts from the muscle like tearing a wet leaf. Time has become something of dreams, a fantasy, a whistle you hear in the wind, not a whistle that comes from a human or bird, but a sound that reminds you of trees that have been there long before and after you. Time passes like seeing multiple thin linen sheets at once, at times one is clearer than the others if you focus enough. All sheets of time are a form of punishment, one where I am in the mouth of lucifer, one where I am alone, and one where I first arrived. All the threads intertwine and become each other at a point. The gap of transition, however, is eternal. Right now, I am alone. I cannot speak anymore. Though there is not, was not, is not going to be, much to converse about. When I first arrived, I sat next to Cassius and Brutus. I didn’t feel their presence, we were all somewhere else.

I cannot and can still see them next to me, a continuous playout of that first meeting. The two men sit next to me. One is sprawled out on the ice, staring into the abyss above us, the other next to him picking at his shins. Both of their feet are mangled masses of gore, blue and throbbing like fresh wounds.

“Who are you,” I say to them.

“Traitors,” the one picking at his shins says.

“Of whom?”

“The Leader of Rome, Ceseas.”

“Augustus?”

“No.” He paused for a while, as if the syllables would tear through his throat, “Julius.” I waited for him to ask me why I was there. Thinking about what I would tell him. A confession. A shred of evidence for my penitence. I would express my deepest regret, how I cast the silver down and threw the noose over the branches spotted with pink flowers. How the beauty of the flowers did not stop me from keeping my knees bent so the rope would kill me. How I was a coward and regretted even living a second life in this frozen wasteland. How I am deserving of any punishment coming to me. An eternity passed. The man, who I now knew as Brutus, never asked why I was there.

“Do you regret it?” I asked him.

“I regret that it was a friend.” He looked through me with his square, expressionless face, “But if I had to make the decision a hundred more times, knowing the punishment that awaited me. I would always choose to crush that serpent spawn before he hatched from the egg.” He turned back to his shins. What kind of godless cynic was this man to not feel a shred of remorse for killing a friend? How could he sit here unbothered by his actions in his previous life? I, for one, know I am wrong, I will not hide behind some self-gratifying high horse. I would change my actions if I was even given a single chance for redemption. I have tried to play that day back in my head and I can’t. I can’t see me accepting the Roman silver, feeling the weight of it in my hands. If I could, I would let the coins slip away. I can’t see me leading

the Romans to Him, marking Him with a kiss. The warm feeling of flesh on my lips. I did it and yet I can't seem to place myself in the events. Was I there? Was I in the garden of Gethsemane when they took Him away? I do not smell the flowers of that place. I only smell the flowers blooming above me during my final breath.

My head is crushed by Lucifer's teeth, I choke on blood and the wicked smell of the world. Burning hair and flesh, blood, war. My back searing under his claws, a small price to pay for the one who sold God's only son for thirty silver coins. There is never a time when I am not in the jaws of Lucifer, but there is always a time when I am alone, healing from my wounds, sitting with my jaw hanging from my face and my knees tucked into my chest. I am also with Brutus and Cassius, though it is not now, it is now, and we are sitting in silence, all just as alone as the other. All of us experiencing overlapping visions of torture, isolation, and dull conversation.

I try to think of my life, it is just as muddy and as changing as my current reality, and at times, even more elusive. It seems as if my life, is a piece of glass dashed upon the floor of my brain. Each shattered piece has a small glimpse into who or what I was. When I reach for the fragments to get a better look, the sharp edges cut my hands. Red and brown fog up the windows into my past. I cannot place myself in the garden kissing him, I cannot *feel* it. I hear the voices saying that I did. It does not sound like my voice. Are they within me? Where do they come from? I can feel a kiss, but not a kiss of betrayal. I feel a fleeting warmth of laughter, of sweat, of an embrace between kin. I feel the traces of life I do not remember. I was greedy and selfish. Betrayed Him for thirty silver coins. Lead the Romans to Him in the garden and placed a kiss to mark Him. After hearing of his crucifixion, I cast the coins away and hung myself from a love tree. I cannot *see* or *feel* any of that... Do I know that it happened? It must have. Why else would I be punished? No just God would punish an innocent man. Though what men are innocent?

I can *feel* the dankness of a Roman cell, calling for my mother, my father, for Yahweh to end my suffering. I can place myself in that cell, but for my life I cannot remember what led to it. Damn me. Why was I in a cell? The Romans did not arrest and torture *me*, they arrested and tortured Him. Was me being in a cell even related to Him? My brain screams that it is not real, even though I can feel the hard ground on my feet and the caked crust of sweat and dirt on my forehead. What voices call this experience to me? I hear no voices. I have only a feeling in my stomach that what I picture is truer than these voices say.

I can feel myself in my youth. The smell of the synagogue, a community of friends and family gathered to pray, to learn, to love. I hear the story of Ahithophel, a trusted advisor to King David. Ahithophel betrayed him, siding with David's usurper son. Traitor to *the* prophesied king.

The lively spirit of my community seems one of fantasy now. I look down to my left and can make out a distorted image of a man's pale face below the surface of the ice. He looks dead. His eyes red with blood, white pools with red branches reaching out to his iris. The eyes focus on me and shortly after he presses his hand against the ice. I can't imagine which punishment is worse, being above the ice or below it. I stare at the face in the ice for a long time. It is a face full of agony and sorrow. I wish I could ask him who he betrayed and if it was because of survival or a lapse in judgement. Maybe he did it because of greed. Surely, whoever he did it to, for any reason, it was not worth the punishment. I am curious if his life was more than his betrayal. If he did spend his time plotting to stab a friend in the back, was he happy after? Perhaps he killed a rich man. Afterward he jumped for joy, clapped, cheered at his accomplishment.

I can imagine it now, a rich fool, throwing his old friend's fortune high in the air above him before that friend was cold in the ground.

"Who are the people under the ice?" I asked Brutus.

"Traitors."

"To whom."

"Does it matter?" We sit in the usual distant silence. It is broken by two faint voices.

"Carefully, Dante, we descend to the last layer of the ninth circle. This place is reserved for history's worst traitors." A man with a stoic face and white robes leads another with red robes. They follow a jagged stone staircase that descends to the ice floor.

"Yes, I can see the different regions on the ice from here," says the man in red, who I assume is known as Dante, "This place shall be called Cocytus, for the river of wailing. The four regions shall be Caina, Antenora, Tolomea, and finally Giudecca."

"I am unfamiliar with what you allude to with some of those names."

"I will explain as we go."

"Of course. I do not doubt that they are fitting names for a place of such wickedness." Just then, Dante slipped on the stone stairs knocking a piece of rock down to the ice next to Brutus, Cassius, and I, "Watch your step, you do not want to be stuck here with Satan as your keeper."

"Thank you, Virgil, but I am okay. How do we leave this place?"

"There is a chasm below the beastly waist of Satan, there I will show you how to leave." I looked to Brutus and Cassius, neither of them looked up to acknowledge the voices. Virgil and Dante, two men that move freely about this place. More freely than Lucifer who is trapped in the center of the ice. What power do they have that lets them come to the realms of the undead, gawking and pointing at those who reside here? What power do they hold that lets them name this place? Dante. Dante. A name of importance. Perhaps he is a great explorer. He explored every inch of the earth, now he explores the underworld, and conquers it with confidence. Virgil, a teacher, knows this place well. I am pulled back to the gnashing of Lucifer's mouth. My head splits against his teeth, spits out a well of blood.

My body is a receptor for pain. It is not my own, yet I seem to be the sole inhabitant. If Lucifer is the king here, does that make me his subject or God's? Of course, a subject to God. God that I betrayed, God whose son I betrayed. God, the creator, and ultimate designer of everything. God even made this place. Perhaps he had me and my suffering in mind when he did it. Maybe he didn't. If God made this place with me in mind, then he would know I was destined to betray his only son, his only kin. That would mean that from birth I was marked to betray Him. Perhaps Brutus was marked to betray Ceseas from birth as well.

"How long have you been here?" I ask Brutus, who carries no sense of emotion on his face.

"A long time and no time at all," He wants to speak in riddles and poems.

"Have you been here since before me?"

"Yes... and no. I have been here as long as you have, yet much longer than you."

"You speak as if you know the answers to this place Brutus."

"I know this place is not a question to be answered, it's existence is the direct result of all that comes after us."

“What do you mean by this?”

“I mean that man that came through earlier-”

“The one in red?”

“Yes.”

“He is Dante.”

“He is a writer, a poet.”

“How do you know this?”

“He is the ruler of this place. The creator. I can tell by the way the ground shifts below his feet. The way this place bends to his names and rules he assigns.”

“What are you saying? That God is not the creator of this place?”

“Which god?”

“The Father, of Christ.”

“I know no Christ. But I do know a ruler when I see one. It is Dante that assigns us punishment.”

I do not know how Brutus knew of Dante’s power, but I believed him. The voices inside me beamed again of my sins, my betrayal. It could not be just Dante. Who are these voices that insist on my damnation? Are they friends of Dante? Followers of the same school or teacher?

I remember my life once more. A daughter, two. A son, a wife, a tree orchard behind our house. Beautiful rows of wildflowers, Jerusalem thorns, love trees. A warm breeze as I walk with weak knees and a sturdy back to lie below our oldest Jerusalem thorn. In the shade, I find shelter from the sun’s candle-like heat. I stare at a love tree across from me, it is young. The pink blooming flowers dance in my view as I drift into sleep for the last time.

I did not die a traitor’s death. I did not betray Him. Why am I punished as a traitor and not as a man. Dante. What does he know of betrayal? Has he felt the wind, the urge, the force that he is betraying himself? Has he felt the voices telling him that he has committed such a reprehensible sin when he knows in his heart of hearts he would never dare? Readily prancing around in his red robes with his ink and quill, robbing the final say from Yahweh. From my family. From me. If I need to face my day of judgement, it should be of *me*; not some caricature created by a poet telling *my* story... I am alone now. I cannot see the thin veils of my punishment in Lucifer’s mouth or Cassius and Brutus sitting next to me. The wind has stopped, Lucifer is no longer in his place at the center of the ice. I rise to my feet and start to walk towards the hole that once held Lucifer. My knees feel weak and crack with every step, the ice gripping my feet, trying to halt my progress. There is no more wind but the exposed flesh all over my body screams at the coldness of this place.

A chasm. A great big hole in the center of the ice. Jagged shards of frozen water lead into the abyss below. A geological prison that seems too big even to hold Lucifer for eternity. I look around the frozen lake. There is not a single sound to assure me that anyone else is there or that I even belong there. I turn back to the abyss. I could step off this ledge and just cease to be. Something that sounds quite nice. I no longer want to *be*. I already *was*. I lived my life, and I lived it well. Nobody can take that away from me. I take a step off the ledge.

I am falling now, the wind rushing past me as I approach the bottom of the bottom of this place. The wind is stopping, slowing down, as if I am slowing down. I now feel no wind on my face. I am not moving. I am feeling. I... am feeling... as if I... am finally. Done. Finally, nothing. Nothing. Finally.

References

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