
Reading the Death of Judas (Matthew 27:3-10) with Hauntology

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Judas is a haunting disciple. Facing his fate, some would think he got what he deserved; others might wonder if there was any other—better—scenario for him. Perhaps, not a few Christians have uncertain or mixed feelings toward him. But, how do we understand Judas's fate? How is his death told in the Bible? Only the gospel of Matthew (27:3-10) and the Acts of the Apostles (1:17-20) have the account of Judas's death. While Acts depicts the death of Judas as a result of divine punishment, conveying the negative evaluation, Matthew's account is somewhat ambivalent. Some scholars interpret Judas's death in Matthew positively (i.e., as a noble death), while others regard it negatively (i.e., as a sign of desperation).¹ Because of the ambivalence, I see Judas as a haunting figure, evoking conflicting reactions of sympathy, antipathy, and empathy among audience. This essay aims to invite readers to be haunted by Judas, not by telling of his "tragic suicide" but by unfolding the complexity of the larger context, background/history, and the power structure surrounding him.

Among the scholars who paid attention to Matthew 27:3-10, many judged Judas's death negatively due to today's view on suicide (rooted in Augustine's idea²) and treated it as an individual issue rather than a symptom of larger issues. Thus, the foci have often been if Judas's repentance (v. 3) was a "real" one, if his sin is more about his desperation rather than the betrayal (compared to another betrayal/denial of Peter in 26:69-75), and so on.³ Catherine Hamilton, on the other hand, focuses more on the larger history of Israel to make sense of the story of Judas's death.⁴ Since she not only offers a unique and compelling reading of the account in the context/history of the innocent blood and the defiled land that led to the exile of people (i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem) but also senses the haunting/specter of the innocent blood and the

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defilement, I engage with Hamilton as my companion toward the journey to be haunted by Judas (and other specters behind him). Below, I first summarize Hamilton's argument and then engage in her reading from a perspective of/for the issues of haunting.

The innocent blood, the defiled land, and the death of Judas

Hamilton argues that Matthew 27:3-10 is a story about the fate not only of Judas as an individual but also of a city/land of Jerusalem and its people. The key is to read the story within its prophetic background, which includes not only Jeremiah, to whom Matthew attributes the cited prophecy (27:9-10), but also Zechariah, for it is actually an intertwined text, referencing both Jeremiah 19:1-13 and Zechariah 11:7-14.⁵ In Jeremiah, we find the theme of innocent blood, a potter, and burial, and in Zechariah, the theme of thirty pieces of silver and casting them into the treasury. While a number of scholars feel that Matthew

5. "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent" (Jer 19:3b-4). Also, the theme of the potter and burial in Jeremiah 19:10-12. From Zechariah, "I then said to them, 'If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them.' So they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. Then the Lord said to me, 'Throw it into the treasury'—this lordly price at which I was valued by them. So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them into the treasury in the house of the Lord" (Zech 11:12-13). See also the table comparing the texts in Whelan, "Suicide in the Ancient World," 510.

1. Those who interpret Judas's death as a noble death include Paul Middleton, "The 'Noble Death' of Judas Iscariot: A Reconsideration of Suicide in the Bible and Early Christianity," in *Journal of Religion and Violence* 6, no. 2 (2018): 245–266; Caroline F. Whelan, "Suicide in the Ancient World: A Re-Examination of Matthew 27:3-10," in *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 49, no. 3 (1993): 505–522.

2. Whelan, "Suicide," 507-508.

3. William David Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 561.

4. Catherine Sider Hamilton, "The Death of Judas in Matthew: Matthew 27:9 Reconsidered," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018): 419–437.

Judas surely plays the wicked role in defiling the land by selling the innocent blood and in the purchase of the burial ground, but “this burial ground, this innocent blood, points forward, beyond Judas’s repentance and his death, beyond the field of blood, toward another burial ground where, in the death of Jesus, death yields unexpectedly to life.” Judas is, therefore, not a villain.

misattributed the quote, Hamilton does not consider the (mis) attribution as a simple error. Rather, the citation is a co-text consisting of Jeremiah and Zechariah that shows shared interests on which Matthew builds his narrative of the ends/deaths of Judas and Jesus as well as the anticipated end of the city/land:

Matthew finds in Jeremiah and Zechariah together a shared logic and a particular history, a logic that informs the story of Judas and a history within which Judas’s story unfolds. The logic, I will argue, is that of innocent blood and the problem of pollution. The history is that of a city and people in which the blood of the innocent and the threat of defilement loom large.⁶

Hamilton explicates the shared logic and history by reviewing the parallels between Jeremiah and Matthew, between Jeremiah and Zechariah, and between Zechariah and Matthew. In her view, all of these three texts tell stories that can be summarized as follows: innocent blood is shed as a result of sins of corrupt leaders and corrupt people (i.e., idolatry in Jeremiah, greed in Zechariah, and the rejection of Jesus in Matthew), and it causes the defilement of the land, on which God and its people can no longer live. The stories are about sins and their consequences, bloody and doomed. In Matthew’s case, however, Hamilton finds a few twists that destabilize the traditional narrative of doom told by the prophets. The most significant twist is the opening of graves after the cross, which symbolizes the reversal of death and life. As such, Hamilton sees hope for the future in the destabilization of the prophetic narrative despite the doomed fate of the city/land.

Reading the fate of Judas in the larger picture of Israel’s history imbued with the issues of innocent blood and the defiled land, Hamilton regards Judas as neither a hero nor a villain. Judas surely

plays the wicked role in defiling the land by selling the innocent blood and in the purchase of the burial ground, but “this burial ground, this innocent blood, points forward, beyond Judas’s repentance and his death, beyond the field of blood, toward another burial ground where, in the death of Jesus, death yields unexpectedly to life.”⁷ Judas is, therefore, not a villain. Also, the repentance, another element we do not find in the texts of Jeremiah and Zechariah, implies a disruption of the traditional narrative of doom. “Insofar as Judas’s story points deliberately forward, linked in the image of innocent blood to the death of Jesus and the opening of the graves, it speaks not only doom but also hope.”⁸ In that sense, Judas also plays a part in the “saving” narrative, even though he is not so heroic as some would argue.

Judas’s guilt and repentance: A desire for justice

Hamilton evaluates Judas as an ambivalent figure as long as he takes part in shedding Jesus’ innocent blood but “unexpectedly” paves a way toward hope with his repentance. This repentance, for Hamilton, is crucial since it is a diverging point from the doomed narrative of Zechariah 11. In reading Judas’s repentance and his following acts (i.e., trying to return the money to the chief priests and elders, confessing his sin to them, being rejected, and then hanging himself), I would like to turn our attention to power dynamics demonstrated in the interaction between Judas and the elites in Jerusalem, for it would play a part in Judas’s haunting. Below, I first review Hamilton’s reading to clarify my argument.

Hamilton analyzes the scene and emphasizes three things in the interaction between Judas and the chief priest: That is, Judas felt guilty (*μεταμέλεται*), confessed his sin (Matt 27:4), and returned the money (v. 5). These actions suggest that he made reparation for what he had done (cf., Num 5:6b-7).⁹ Yet, “[Judas’s] repentance does not stop the chain of destruction he has set in motion,”¹⁰ argues Hamilton, because the chief priests did not accept Judas’s confession properly, and the story goes on to the shedding of the innocent blood and the defilement.

Putting the issue of innocent blood at the center, the following point becomes clear: The chief priests’ reaction to Judas functions to reveal that the former party, as well as the latter, acknowledges Jesus’ innocence by calling the thirty silver coins “blood-money” (v. 6). And, Hamilton equates both parties in terms of the guilt of slaying innocent blood.¹¹ In short, this scene is to highlight Jesus’ innocence and the guilt of Judas, the chief priests, and the elders in shedding the innocent blood. There are, however, other functions to this scene when we take the nuance between Judas and the Jewish elites into consideration.

First, the series of Judas’s acts points to the corrupt judicial system. According to Paul Middleton, the penalty for shedding

7. Hamilton, “The Death of Judas,” 436-437.

8. Hamilton, “The Death of Judas,” 437

9. Hamilton, “The Death of Judas,” 433.

10. Hamilton, “The Death of Judas,” 433.

11. Hamilton, “The Death of Judas,” 431.

6. Hamilton, “The Death of Judas,” 421.

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the innocent blood was death (cf., Lev 24:17; Num 35:31; Deut 21:8-9; 27:25), and Judas was supposed to be executed accordingly. "However, since the chief priests refused to pronounce the sentence, Judas had to carry it out himself."¹² In such a case, "Judas' [s] actions heighten the culpability of the chief priests and elders,"¹³ and the narrative functions to accuse the corruption which failed to bring justice to both the repentant traitor and the innocent man. If (and I recognize that it is a big if) the system was working appropriately (i.e., the chief priests re-inspected Jesus in the trail based on Judas's confession), Jesus could have been found innocent; then, Judas's betrayal would not have ended in shedding the innocent blood. In a sense, the chief priests are no less guilty of robbing a chance to make things right from Judas than crucifying Jesus.

Second, when Judas returned the blood-money, the symbol of the guilt, the blame for Jesus' death was also transferred from Judas to the chief priests and the elders. Indeed, those who regard Judas's death as noble consider that it is the main concern or motive of this Matthean account to transfer the guilt in recording Judas's suicide.¹⁴ With his self-execution, Judas completed the atonement, restored his honor, and is no longer guilty of Jesus' death. The scene, therefore, unfolds power dynamics between the unjust authorities and a helpless but honorable individual who tried to redeem time only to fail.

In such a reading, the narrative presents Judas as ambivalent in terms not of the part he played in Jesus' death but of *how* he did and how he tried to *resist* it. Surely Judas is not a hero. For the only thing, if any, he has saved by his death was his honor, not Jesus as he or the audience might have wanted him to. Judas is, nevertheless, certainly not as guilty as the chief priests are. There is room for sympathy toward Judas if we read the account with a critical lens against the corrupt judicial system, which is the stage for unequal power dynamics and the violence of the elites to play out. Judas might even appear as another victim of the unjust system. Just as Hamilton considers that the larger context (i.e., the history and the issues of innocent blood and the defilement) is crucial to appropriately grasp what the story tells, so do I regard power dynamics as a key to the depth of the story of Judas, the haunting specter.

12. Middleton, "The 'Noble Death,'" 262.

13. Middleton, "The 'Noble Death,'" 262.

14. Middleton, "The 'Noble Death,'" 245; Whelan, "Suicide," 521.

The issue of haunting

Haunting, or the issue of and around haunting, is not just a matter of some frightening experiences but rather an academic concept developed to deal with those who were erased, the suppressed but persistent (often violent and inconvenient) pasts, what ordinary memories (or human psyche) are not capable of, and so forth. It has been applied to the biblical studies with the term hauntology, coined by Jacques Derrida,¹⁵ a French philosopher, often in search of doing justice to the minoritized voices in the scholarly readings of the biblical texts.

Hamilton, too, employs the hauntological terms such as "specter" and "haunt," although probably with no intention to join the specific field of hauntology. In her article on Judas's death, Hamilton writes about "the specter of defilement"¹⁶ and "a defilement that haunts the land."¹⁷ In other studies on the innocent blood in Matthew's gospel, especially the passion narrative, Hamilton also asserts that "[i]nnocent blood haunts the passion narrative in the Gospel of Matthew"¹⁸ as well as "the generations"¹⁹ to come. Moreover, "[i]n calling up Jeremiah in 27:3–10, Matthew [...] evokes the spectre of exile in connection in particular with defilement."²⁰

Here, various things are felt and seen as haunting; the defilement, innocent blood, and exile (or those who were in exile) due to the defiled land. Also various are the haunted things: the land, narrative, and generations. And all of those are closely related to one another. How would Judas join in this haunting?

With regard to the "defilement that haunts the land," Judas played a role in the defilement by literally selling Jesus out. Still, as I argued above, Judas tried to change the course he set in motion, and his guilt was transferred to the elites with the blood money. Thus, if we see Judas's shadow in the haunted, defiled land, it might not be only because of his evil-doing but also his regret, his powerlessness, and his failed desire to make things right. Moreover, Judas is directly part of the haunting defilement itself since anyone who is hanged is a curse and defiles the land (Deut 21:23). This also applies to Jesus, the hanged man on the cross. The defilement is, therefore, not only caused by the slayed innocent blood but also the hangings. It is noteworthy that both hangings, although they are different with regard to innocence of the hanged men, are the results of the corrupt judicial system. In this sense, both of the specters point to the injustice that produced those specters.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of The Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

16. Hamilton, "The Death of Judas," 421, 428.

17. Hamilton, "The Death of Judas," 427, 430-31.

18. Catherine Sider Hamilton, "'His Blood Be upon Us': Innocent Blood and the Death of Jesus In Matthew," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2008), 85.

19. Hamilton, "His Blood Be upon Us," 91.

20. Catherine Sider Hamilton, *The Death of Jesus in Matthew: Innocent Blood and the End of Exile* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 190.

Defilement, cleansing, and haunting

According to Hamilton's logic of the innocent blood, people were not able to live on the land because the land was defiled by the innocent blood (and the two hanged men, I would add). The land needed to be cleansed, and this was done by the destruction of the temple and the city in 70 CE. But, the desolation is not the end of the story since Jesus' blood, in line with the tradition of the innocent blood, not only defiles but also cleanses.²¹ In this understanding, there is hope in/against the catastrophe just as there is cleansing to the defilement, returning to the exile. Nevertheless, the issue of the haunting does not resolve in such a way.

From a hauntological point of view, there is a critical difference between the defiled land and the land that is haunted by the defilement. The defilement, on the one hand, can be purified even though the purification might require a renewal that is possible only *after* the destruction. The haunting, on the other, does not cease after the purification. Rather, a haunted person might not want (or believe) the ghosts to leave. Even after the renewal, the specters of the old hover around, crossing the boundary of time, manifesting the past violence in the present. Even if the catastrophe in 70 CE was both a judgment against and purgation of the corruption and sin against the innocent blood, the specter would haunt the desolated land—the specter of Judas, the traitor, the hanged man, and the victim of the corrupt judicial system. As such, the hope for the future will always be haunted by the despair that demanded the hope in the first place. When the cleansing of the defiled does not wipe away the ghosts, what do we see or hear through them?

Concluding remarks

When hope is haunted by the despair that demanded it in the first place, when the future vision is haunted by failed justice or a failed desire (to make things right, in Judas's case), the least we can do is, I believe, to embrace the hauntings. This essay attempted to invite the readers to be haunted by the specter of Judas through Matthew's storytelling and its interpretation by Hamilton. I hope I portrayed the ambivalence of Judas and the complexity of power dynamics around him beyond the simple dichotomy of good/hero vs. evil/villain. Just as Judas's willingness to make reparation for his errors was not enough to bring justice due to the corrupt system, we face similar built-in injustice in our political, economic, and socio-cultural structures. The helplessness of an individual is too familiar for those who care and fight for justice. Still, I would like to believe that the desire for justice, even when it is defeated, can spread through hauntings. Being haunted by the specter of Judas, we are called not to join in shedding innocent blood, but to accuse any corrupt judicial system, to remember the defilement/disaster even after it is cleansed, and to be empathetic with the desire for justice.

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21. Hamilton, *The Death of Jesus in Matthew*, 226.