

**The Hanging of Judas:  
Medieval Iconography and the German Peasants' War**

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[Figure 1](#) is a reproduction of a painted glass panel depicting the hanging of Judas, currently found in the Art Institute of Chicago. In the panel we are shown the loosely robed, muscular corpse of Judas, hanging by a rope from a tree. His belly has been ruptured, and a bat-winged, speckled demon is extracting Judas's soul, in the form of an infant, from amongst his entrails. In the background is a deserted landscape of rolling hills and sparse trees.

The panel is a specimen of a type of glass painting developed around 1500 in Switzerland, along the Rhine, and in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Glass painters used black, brown, and yellow stains to paint their subject matter on white glass. The outlines of the design were done in black enamel, and yellow stain in varying shades, derived from sulphide of silver, was used for the coloring. In the only other published article devoted to the panel Oswald Goetz suggests that it was created in Alsace or southern Germany between 1520 and 1530.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we have no information on the purpose or original context for which the panel was intended. We know neither who commissioned it nor who created it. Goetz notes that an independent representation of the hanging Judas was uncommon in the Middle Ages; usually the scene appeared as a subordinate episode in a Passion narrative.<sup>3</sup> While it is possible that the Chicago panel was only one of a series of images (perhaps depicting the Passion), Goetz speculates that the panel, alone or with an accompanying inscription warning against despair, might have been intended for a church or a private chapel in the residence of a wealthy *bürger* or noble.<sup>4</sup>

The figure of Judas held an intense fascination for medieval Christian theologians, writers, artists, and lay people. In the Middle Ages this lively interest in the life, death, and punishment of the betrayer of Jesus produced a vast body of literature, legend, drama, painting, and sculpture. A cluster of themes related to the nature of vice and fate can be traced through a study of developments in the depiction of Judas in legend and art. These themes undeniably informed the

Chicago panel. However, although medieval iconography of Judas must be considered in relation to the panel, such consideration reveals that the panel deviates strikingly from those traditions. In order to account for these deviations, it is necessary to move beyond a straightforward iconographical study and examine the religious and political conditions of the early sixteenth century, the time of the panel's creation. This study, then, aims both to consider the established medieval traditions for representations of Judas (more particularly, of his death) and to suggest a hypothesis to explain the significance of the startling deviations from these norms found in the panel, based upon the religious and political climate of the 1520s. It is my contention that the Chicago panel reflects in specific ways the effects of the Reformation, the social upheaval preceding and attendant upon the Peasants' War of 1524-25, and the overwhelming atmosphere of apocalyptic expectation in Germany at the time of the panel's creation.

In order to elucidate the wide variety of themes and images that were available to a sixteenth-century artist who wished to depict the death of Judas, it is necessary to begin with a brief survey of the biblical, legendary, and dramatic accounts of Judas's life and death, which were well-known in the later Middle Ages. In general, the Gospels offer very little biographical information about Judas. Even speculation about Judas's motives for the betrayal of Jesus is surprisingly brief. The Gospels of Luke and John both ascribe the betrayal to diabolic intervention, but John also underscores Judas's role as the keeper of the communal purse, suggesting avarice as the motive for Judas's act of betrayal. Taken together, the Gospel accounts of Judas's actions and motives in betraying Christ suggest an intimate relationship between avarice and the action of the devil. We shall see these themes intertwined in the later legends and in the iconography of Judas in crucial ways.

There are two conflicting accounts of the death of Judas in the New Testament sources. Of the four Gospels, only Matthew contains the story of Judas's repentance and suicide:

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.<sup>5</sup>

Matthew's story continues, recounting that the priests, upon conferring, decided they could not put the tainted money back into the treasury, and so bought Potter's Field as a place to bury foreigners, which then became known as the Field of Blood.

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**Figure 1.** Alsatian, Panel: Hanging of Judas, glass, c. 1520-25, 57.s x 44.7 cm, Buckingham Fund, 1949.494 (photograph copyright 1998, The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved).

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The other account of Judas's death is from Acts 1:18:

Now this man [Judas] acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.

Clearly, harmonizing these two contradictory accounts poses a significant problem, one that occupied early commentators to no small extent. As J. R. Harris notes, one method was simply to copy the word 'hanged' from Matthew into Acts, as in the Vulgate, in which the Acts text reads "*Suspensus crepuit*." Generally, the commentary on this text would propose that the rope broke or was cut, and when the body fell to the ground it burst open. Other possibilities included the suggestion that Judas's attempt to kill himself by hanging was unsuccessful, perhaps because the limb of the tree bent under his weight (in accordance with God's will), and after this he fell and burst open.<sup>6</sup>

The variations on the legend of Judas that were popular throughout the Middle Ages are important for understanding the iconography that was employed in visual and dramatic representations of his death. There was an intense curiosity about Judas's background and motives that the biblical sources could not satisfy, and legends supplied the details for which medieval Christians clamored. In *The Golden Legend* Jacobus de Voragine draws on an earlier twelfth-century Latin version, in which Judas's early biography is essentially identical with that of Oedipus, but replaces the echoes of Oedipus with parallels to the story of Moses. In addition, the *Golden Legend* relates that after his death by hanging Judas's evil soul could not depart through his mouth, which had been purified by kissing Christ, so his belly burst and his soul departed from his bowels.<sup>7</sup> Thus, de Voragine reconciled the conflicting accounts of Judas's death in the New Testament sources, and provided the startling imagery that would be so widely adopted in visual representations of Judas's suicide throughout the Middle Ages. Over the next century, variations on these stories began to appear in vernacular languages throughout Europe. Frequently, the legend of Judas circulated together with apocryphal accounts of Pilate or Herod.

While the overarching concern all these narratives seem to share is anxiety about the role of Satan and/or destiny and the possibility of free will for Judas, subsidiary themes attribute to Judas the vices of avarice, wrath, lust, and despair. Similarly, the theme of incest is always included in the variations on the legend of Judas. In fact, the figure of Judas was at the center of a cluster of vices and came to serve as a personification of each of them in medieval art. An exploration of these themes and traditions about Judas and the devices medieval artists employed to portray them visually will lay further groundwork for the examination of the Chicago panel.

Perhaps the most common iconographic trope used to identify Judas was to represent his sin of avarice. Depictions of Judas clutching the money-bag or the thirty coins are common in scenes of the Last Supper. Interestingly, this device was also employed in scenes representing Judas's death, although the biblical accounts of his death clearly indicate that

he had returned or spent the coins before committing suicide. The presence of the coins in these representations, therefore, must have functioned as a device to underscore Judas's avarice.

As the ultimate type of the avaricious man, the image of Judas also served as a symbol of all Jews for medieval Christian artists and their audience. Lester Little considers this association to be related to the rise of the profit economy in

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medieval Europe and the ambivalent attitude toward money that accompanied it. He maintains that Jews were not noticeably distinguished from Christians in art until the twelfth century, simultaneous with the increasing concern among Christian leaders over Jewish money-lending.<sup>8</sup> As Ruth Mellinkoff has shown, later medieval portrayals of Judas became paradigms of Jewish caricature in many respects: Judas was shown with a hooked nose, thick lips, dark or ruddy skin, and red hair.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, in portraying Judas, the prototypical avaricious man, as exaggeratedly Jewish, a powerful polemical statement about Jews and usury was being made. However, Little notes two other interesting polemical uses to which the theme of Judas's avarice was put. First, Judas was identified as "that most vile of merchants" in the Good Friday tenebrae service.<sup>10</sup> Little again considers this as a result of the ambivalence of churchmen toward monetary practices, in this case those of the new merchant class. Second, Judas was identified, especially by members of the mendicant orders, with the worldly priest and the evil of simony.<sup>11</sup> While the practice of characterizing Judas as stereotypically Jewish was by far the most widespread, these other two uses of his image point to the flexibility of Judas's image and its ready availability for vilifying any perceived enemy of Christianity.

The history of Judas as the personification of despair is somewhat more complicated. There is a long tradition in western art of representing the vices and their opposite virtues. In the thirteenth century this iconography underwent an interesting change, traced by Emile Mâle in *Religious Art in France*. The image of suicide among the vices was originally occupied by Wrath, who stabbed herself with a sword. In this representation Wrath would be paired with Patience. In the middle stage of the transition Despair replaced Wrath, with Despair committing suicide while Patience looks on. In the final stage Despair was opposed to Hope: fourteenth-century breviaries and the immensely popular fifteenth-century *Ars Moriendi* included images of a dying man, sometimes identified as Job, receiving a vision of Despair (personified by Judas, hanging himself), and Hope began to be popular.<sup>12</sup> These images served a moralizing function, reminding Christians to maintain hope, especially at the hour of their death. The image in the *Ars Moriendi* includes the inscription: "Do not despair ... The sinner has only to moan in order to be saved, for the mercy of God is greater than the greatest crimes. There is only one grave sin and that is despair. Judas was more guilty for despairing than were the Jews who crucified Christ."<sup>13</sup>

After this brief survey of the iconographical traditions of medieval representation of Judas, it would be helpful to re-examine the Chicago panel. We have seen that the most immediately striking feature of this representation, that is, the departure of Judas's soul from his ruptured body, appeared fairly frequently in scenes of Judas's suicide. It can be traced to certain specific legendary traditions about Judas's death. Similarly, the presence of the demonic figure is not unexpected; such a figure appears as often as it is absent from these representations and is also associated with other specific moments in Judas's career (i.e., receiving the sop). The departures from medieval traditions that the Chicago panel represents can be found largely in what it fails to include. Just as the legends

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about Judas tended to circulate with apocryphal stories of Pilate and Herod, so too representations of Judas's suicide were almost always found as elements in a larger whole: as one of a number of representations of the enemies of Christ, as part of a scene representing the Passion of Jesus, or as an image of despair, contrasted with one of hope. An independent representation of the death of Judas is extremely uncommon. Another striking feature of the panel is the lack of any attempt to suggest avarice in this depiction of Judas. Finally, we have noted the very strong tradition, especially in later medieval German art, to portray Judas as a Jewish caricature. Stereotypically Jewish features are noticeably absent in this depiction of Judas. It is possible that these last two issues are related to one another; that is, since the artist did not wish to suggest avarice, he neither included the purse nor caricatured Jewish features in his Judas. However, while Jews and avarice were strongly correlated in medieval art and literature, the other sins with which Judas was associated (despair, pride, treachery) were also said to characterize the Jews. Therefore, representations of Judas as a Jewish caricature without any suggestion or marker of avarice in the scene were not

unusual.

Thus, while the Chicago panel follows some well-established medieval traditions in the depictions of Judas, it disregards or violates others. If this Judas is not intended to represent the Jews, merchants, worldly priests, or another group open to the accusation of avarice, whom could he represent? Is this panel, as Goetz suggests, simply a moralizing image warning against despair? Why has someone created an independent image of Judas's suicide at all? Assuming that these deviations from long-standing patterns have been chosen for a reason, it would seem that some insight into the purpose and intention of the panel can be gained from examining aspects of the religious and political climate of Alsace in the 1520s.

In the 1520s, largely as a result of the Reformation, a wave of iconoclasm swept through Germany and was particularly intense at times in the region of Alsace.<sup>18</sup> While early Lutheran piety tended to feature a move away from the use of religious images, Anabaptists and urban radical reformers went beyond theory and practiced widespread destruction of religious images.<sup>19</sup> Michael Baxandall remarks that unlike in previous generations, where sculptors had been employed by church administrations to produce architectural sculptures on a large scale, in the sixteenth century sculptors were more likely to be employed by individuals or associations of citizens to produce "sculpture that would probably stand in a church, on an altar or in a tabernacle, but as an object with a certain independence."<sup>14</sup> Only one genre of religious image maintained some semblance of continuity in the face of this widespread destruction of large-scale images in churches: the small domestic devotional image. Further, according to Baxandall, of the groups of artists producing religious images in the early sixteenth century, glass painters were most dependent on the trade in religious images and were thus most hurt by the iconoclasm of the 1520s.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it may be possible to explain the anomalous production of an independent painted glass representation of Judas's suicide by the economic and political conditions that resulted from the intense iconoclasm of radical reformers during the 1520s. However, as a domes-

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tic devotional image, the Chicago panel remains rather unusual in its choice of subject matter.

Another circumstance attendant upon the Reformation in Germany was a heightened concern about and expectation of the end of time, which frequently centered upon the person of the Antichrist. A brief examination of some of the elements of this preoccupation will show several points of intersection with the themes present in the Chicago panel, and help to explain the artist's choice of subject matter for this image. As the image of Judas was frequently used to stand for the enemies of Christendom, it should hardly be surprising to find that his image and that of the Antichrist have striking parallels. These similarities will prove suggestive of a richer interpretation of the Chicago panel than is possible from a merely iconographic consideration of that work.

In 1515 a German play called *Der Nollhart* treated a dialogue between a friar and a Jew concerning the Antichrist. In this play, the Jew questions the friar about the coming of the Antichrist, whom the Jews are awaiting as their Messiah. The friar tells him that the Antichrist will be born of the tribe of Dan, "as was Judas, who is eternally damned."<sup>16</sup> This was a common feature of legends about the birth of the Antichrist, which Trachtenberg relates to the Jewish legend that the Messiah would be derived from the tribe of Dan on the maternal side.<sup>17</sup> Thus, according to legend, the Antichrist would be a descendant of Judas. Obviously, the relationship is more than simply a question of common ancestry; it suggests a metaphorical identification of the character of Judas with that of the Antichrist. Both are treacherous, claiming to be followers of Christ but actually enemies of Christendom. And in this genealogy of the Antichrist, the Jews were clearly implicated as Christ's enemies. The Messiah whom they awaited with such anticipation was identified as the ultimate foe of Christianity.

While the iconoclasm of the 1520s may account for the production of a small, independent image such as the Chicago panel, the apocalyptic expectation of the period, with its focus on the Antichrist, may help to explain the selection of Judas's suicide for the panel's subject matter. However, the absence of any effort to caricature Jews in the features of this Judas remains puzzling. This is especially true in light of the collusion of the Jews with the Antichrist that was so central to many apocalyptic legends. As we have noted, close scrutiny of the features of Judas in the panel does not reveal any apparent attempt to provide him with stereotypically Jewish features. It is true that his beard and hair appear reddish, but the other hallmarks of the Jewish caricature--thick lips, hooked nose, bulging eyes--are remarkable for their absence. In fact, this stocky, muscular, rough-featured figure resembles nothing so much as



contemporary portraits of peasants.<sup>18</sup> While dramatic deformities and distortions were usually reserved for portrayals of enemies of Christianity, peasants were generally stereotyped as merely ugly--short, heavy, coarse-featured.<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen, the figure of Judas was uniquely suited to polemical use, a suitability that only increased as the intertwining of his story and the story of the Antichrist developed during the course of the Middle Ages. The social unrest that culminated in the Peasants' War of 1524-25, with its synthesis of class vio-

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lence and eschatological expectation, provided the perfect occasion for adapting the image of Judas to a new polemical end.

Protestant reformers developed a new apocalyptic understanding, focused on the historical interpretation of prophecy, which was inseparable from political events. Undoubtedly, the heightened eschatological expectation attendant upon the Reformation and the widespread influence of astrological prediction affected the events which led up to the Peasants' War. The preaching of Thomas Müntzer, a central figure in the radical reformation and in the peasants' revolt, provides a case in point. Like Martin Luther, Müntzer believed that the Last Judgment was imminent but did not expect the establishment of an earthly paradise.<sup>20</sup> A popular preacher and agitator, and a self-appointed leader in the peasants' revolt, Müntzer preached a sermon on July 13, 1524, at Allstedt, in which he asserted that the last days were at hand. In the beginnings of the Peasants' War he saw the first signs of God's final judgment; the rebellious peasants were God's elect, agents carrying out God's plan of apocalyptic judgment. However, at the end of the disastrous war, he blamed the failure on the peasants, who had pursued their own advantage rather than the good of Christendom.<sup>21</sup>

In the aftermath of the Peasants' War and the naked brutality with which the rulers suppressed it, additional impetus was given to the effort to reassert the validity of social hierarchy by shaken members of the nobility, reformers, and Catholics. An early sixteenth-century pamphlet of astrological predictions provides a glimpse at one such attempt. In 1508 a selection of Lichtenberger's astrological predictions in Latin was first published in the German *Speculum* of Joseph Grünpeck. This collection inspired a series of anonymous practica-pamphlets, published between 1515 and 1525, which predicted that in the years 1522 and 1524 there would be much discord and treason and the peasants would organize against the nobility. After this, a new reformation and a new law would be ushered in. In the 1525 issue of this pamphlet, the author claimed that the rebellious peasants had committed a great evil and that their defeat was certainly the punishment of God. However, the savagery of the rulers in putting down the peasants' revolt was sharply criticized. The pamphlet urged the immediate restoration of the old social order.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the years immediately preceding and following the Peasants' War were filled with a dramatically heightened anxiety about social hierarchy and the role of the peasants in God's plan of judgment and salvation. The peasants were roundly condemned for their rebellion, but the excessive violence of the nobility in suppressing that rebellion was also repudiated.

Thus, representations of the defeat of the peasants, a bloody victory of nobles over an inferior and unworthy enemy, posed a significant genre problem. This problem is discussed in a fascinating chapter in Steven Greenblatt's *Learning to Curse*. Greenblatt notes that Dürer addressed the issue in his *Painter's Manual*, in which he proposed a commemorative monument decorated with agricultural produce and topped with a seated peasant, a sword protruding from his back.<sup>23</sup>

Dürer's monument to the Peasants' War supplies a useful analogue to the Chicago panel. As we have seen, the figure of Judas had proved a flexible polemical tool throughout the Middle Ages and was used to condemn almost any per-

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ceived enemy of Christendom's unity. The image of Judas's suicide was rich with associations of despair, treachery, and pride. In addition, I argue that this image carried significant apocalyptic overtones. The artistic decision to conflate Judas with the peasantry emphasizes the treachery, deceit, and outright villainy of the rebellious peasants, and an independent representation of Judas's suicide, so uncommon in the late Middle Ages, makes a perfect statement about the inevitable result of such a transgression.

In this study, I have used an iconographical approach to highlight the questions raised by the painted glass panel of the Death of Judas. While some of the most immediately striking elements of this depiction can be understood in light

of medieval literary and iconographic traditions about Judas, a careful study of those traditions raises other interesting questions. Medieval traditions do not account for the anomalous production of an independent representation of this scene, and they lead us to expect a clearer moral message (perhaps against avarice or despair) than this panel alone provides. In addition, the absence of any attempt to caricature Jewish features in this image of Judas must be seen as a deliberate choice, given the typical use of Judas in condemnation of the Jews, especially prevalent in late medieval German art. In suggesting some answers to these puzzles, it has been crucial to look beyond medieval iconographic traditions and examine some of the major themes of post-Reformation religious and political thought. The Reformation heightened the already prevalent apocalyptic expectation of the late Middle Ages, ushered in a decade of intense iconoclasm, and influenced the course of events leading up to the Peasants' War. These events and attitudes impacted the Chicago panel in a number of ways. Iconoclasm pressed hard on the glass painters, and reduced the opportunities for large-scale works such as church windows. Fervent eschatological expectation led to an increased fascination with the Antichrist and, by extension, with his forerunner Judas. The artist who made this panel chose to deviate from the prevailing tradition of representing Judas as a Jewish caricature, and instead portrayed him as a peasant. I argue that this artistic choice can be understood as a monument or memorial made in the immediate wake of the peasant uprising, which left both reformers and members of the nobility shaken and vengeful.

Alexandria, Virginia

Notes

1. *Art Institute of Chicago Bulletin* 44, no. 4 (Nov. 1950).
2. Oswald Goetz, *Hie Hencktt Judas, Form und Inhalt, Kunstgeschichtliche Studien Otto Schmitt zum 60. Jeburtstag am 13. Dezember 1950 dangebracht von seinen Freunden*, ed. Hans Wentzel (Stuttgart, 1950), p. 106.
3. Goetz, *Hie Hencktt Judas*, p. 105; see also G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. ?? Greenwich, Conn., 1972, p. 78.
4. Goetz, *Hie Hencktt Judas*, p. 137.
5. Matthew 27:3-5.

6. J. R. Harris, "Did Judas really commit suicide?" *American Journal of Theology* (1900), 493-95.
7. Harris, "Did Judas," p. 494.
8. Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1978), p. 43.
9. Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 134-35.
10. Little, *Religious Poverty*, p. 53.
11. Little, *Religious Poverty*, p. 77.
12. Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 116 and 301.
13. Mâle, *Religious Art*, p. 351.
14. Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven and London, 1990), p. 12.
15. Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, p. 75.
16. A. C. Gow, *The Red Jews: Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age, 1200-1600* (Leiden and New York), 1995, p. 127.
17. J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven, 1943), p. 224, note 5.
18. Goetz notes this similarity in his article on the panel (p. 108). According to Mellinkoff, red hair was commonly used in depictions of peasants as well as of Jews (p. 149).
19. Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, p. 137.
20. R. B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, 1988), pp. 30-31 and 142.
21. W. Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham, Md, 1992), pp. 37-40. Müntzer shared this understanding of the peasants as God's elect with many contemporary reformers and preachers. Further study of the sermons of popular preachers and the upheaval of the Peasants' War would be helpful. I have chosen Müntzer purely as a useful example.
22. H. R. Hammerstein, "The Battle of the Booklets: Prognostic tradition and proclamation of the word in early sixteenth-century Germany," in *'Astrologi Hallucinati': Stars and the End of the World in Luther's Time*, ed. P. Zambelli (Berlin, 1986), pp. 133-38. Further investigation of astrological and biblical predictions as they related to the Peasants' War would perhaps help clarify this point.
23. Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York, 1990), pp. 99-130.