



Религиоведение. 2025. № 1. С. 128–133.
Religiovedenie [Study of Religion], 2025. No. 1. P. 128–133.

DOI: 10.22250/20728662-2025-1-128-133

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The Image of Judas Iscariot Interpreted by Armenian and Russian Writers (S. Aghajanyan, P. Zeytuntsyan, and L. Andreev)

Abstract. The aim of this article is to examine the well-known Biblical image of Judas Iscariot, depicted in the works of Armenian and Russian writers, who consider him not a betrayer but God's tool. This approach is based on a new literary concept known as "Jesus novels", which is widely accepted in modern European literature.

The Gnostic Gospels are also touched upon here, on the basis of which scholars put forward this approach. While examining the problem of betrayal familiar to everyone from the Bible, these authors have tried to present Judas' consequent feelings as a human being, explain the motives for his actions as much as possible, and depict his mental sufferings followed this act.

Key words: Judas Iscariot, Gnostic Gospels, betrayer, suicide, Jesus, evil, image

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Образ Иуды Искарюта в интерпретации армянских и русских писателей (С. Агаджанян, П. Зейтунцян, Л. Андреев)

Аннотация. Целью данной статьи является анализ образа известного библейского персонажа Иуды Искарюта в произведениях армянских и русских писателей, рассматривающих его не как предателя, а как орудие Бога. В основе такого подхода лежит новая литературная концепция, принятая в современной европейской литературе, известная как «Иисусовы романы». Автором также рассматриваются гностические евангелия, на основе которых и выдвинут подобный подход. Анализируя известную из Библии проблему предательства, исследуемые авторы попытались в своих произведениях представить дальнейшие переживания Иуды – человека о содеянном и по возможности объяснить причины, толкнувшие его на такой шаг, а также запечатлеть душевные страдания, последовавшие за этим поступком.

Ключевые слова: Иуда Искарюта, Гностическое Евангелие, предатель, самоубийство, Иисус, зло, образ

Introduction

The mystery of the existence of the Son of God and the search for his image have always deeply moved mankind. And next to this figure, of course, the betrayer Judas always appears, who in a way seems to be the opposite face of the universal love preached by Christ: his name has been associated with the concept of evil for centuries.

However, as in case of any problem, here too humanity is divided into two parts: one part continues to consider Judas as the embodiment of evil, while the other claims that he was the most beloved and trusted disciple of Jesus. And, as such, he simply helped Jesus to reach his predestined end.

Thus, literature, which, as is well known, is a mirror of human thoughts, emotions, joys and sorrows, could not naturally stand aside and reflected the divine and human synthesized image of Christ and created an equally humanized image of Judas as

a betrayer. By the way, this rather remarkable and new type of works that are universally accepted in modern world literature are called Jesus novels [Sharuryan, 2021].

From the scientific point of view such reference was quite extensive, in a certain sense comprehensive: it included the views of writers of myriad nations and has reached to our days. Today, the world literature considers Christ not only as the Son of God, but also as the child of Godmother, that is, a person to whom all human weaknesses are specific and as such, he is certainly, closer to the humans and more understandable for them. And, of course, next to this figure, Judas Iscariot is always visible, whose character of the betrayer, accepted for centuries, also has received a new interpretation.

Currently, according to the apocryphal Bible that appeared in the field of post-ecclesiastical science, scholars put forward a hypothesis according to which this disciple of Christ was just God's tool, and he was unable not to fulfill what was planned from above. The term "apocryphal" was first used by the Greek Christian writer and the greatest theologian of the 2nd century Bishop Irenios of Lugdon (about 140–202). This word is of Greek origin and means "secret, hidden". These are the writings which, while preserving the principles of Christianity, represented a mixture of Jewish messianism, particularly Egyptian occultism and Greco-Roman philosophy.

"The Gospel of Judas" was accidentally discovered in 1978 by a farmer in the desert near the Egyptian city of Minya. It was written in AD 300–400 in ancient Egyptian language, i.e., Coptic, and has recently been translated into a number of languages. In 2000 this Gospel passed to Swiss scholar Frida Nussberger Chakus, thanks to which the scientists of the National Geographic Society of the USA were able to decipher it through a combined examination.

There are also Gnostic Gospels that define the life of Christ and his disciplines. The word "gnostic" is also of Greek origin and means "knowledge". The Gnostics created a secret society that had its own unique understanding of biblical phenomena.

According to this Gospel Judas is Christ's beloved disciple. Jesus mocks his other disciples, laughs at them, and makes Judas a communicator of the mysteries of the universe. Here Judas is rather a hero whom Christ himself drives into betrayal than a vile creature who treats the Savior like a rat. So according to the Gnostic Gospel betrayal is the very heroic act to which only the unique ones are called. An interpretation of this Gospel can be found for example, in Almut Ranger's "The Ambiguity of Judas: On the Mythicity of a New Testament Figure" [Ranger, 2012], and in a number of alike works. Consequently, this study isn't by all means the only one devoted to the examination of Juda Iscariot's image [Ehrman, 2006].

Bart D. Ehrman (1955) is an American New Testament scholar focusing on textual criticism of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, and the origins and development of early Christianity. In his work entitled "The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed" Ehrman initially observed the image of Judas according to Bible. He studies the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and states that there are two approaches – historical and literal. According to historical approach "we have different accounts from different authors writing at different times to different audiences for different reasons. Given the differences of the accounts, we will eventually want to reexamine them to see if it is possible to draw some kind of historical conclusions about what really happened. In some cases, the differences between the accounts turn out to be irreconcilable" [Ehrman, 2006, 44]. He also states that "the literary conclusion is that as is the case with Jesus himself, so too with Judas. Every portrayal of him is different, and we do a disservice to the author of each account if we pretend that he is saying exactly what some other author is saying [Ehrman, 2006, 44]. It is noteworthy that while concluding his massive investigation Ehrman declares: "His betrayal was not the act of a traitor to the cause. It was a kind deed performed for the sake of his Lord. He turned Jesus over to the authorities so that Jesus could be killed and escape the confines of his body. In so doing, Judas is the greatest of all the apostles" [Ehrman, 2006, 191]. As we have already mentioned, the studies devoted to the image of Judas Iscariot are quite numerous and comprehensive, but the purpose of this article is to present the exclusively literary image of Judas according to the works of Armenian and Russian writers, which, indeed, bear the unique stamp of the culture of these nations. For carrying out such research, we have used

the method of text analysis during which the contents of the original texts were thoroughly studied. Then, descriptive and comparative methods were implemented: they enabled to carry out a full study of the investigated literary works.

The Image of Judas Iscariot in Armenian Literature

Armenian literature has centuries-old history and has always been in touch with the cultural values of other nations. So naturally it couldn't remain indifferent to modern approaches: this very fact, certainly, contributes to the more completeness of national culture. Therefore, the "Jesus novels" that appeared long ago in the field of world literature did not escape from the attention of Armenian writers either, two of whom we have chosen here for private examination.

Thus, in the novelette "**I am Judas**" authored by Professor of Art Theory and Cultural Studies and contemporary writer **Sergey Aghajanyan** (1956) and published in 2002, the thoughts and mental sufferings that besieged Judas after his own betrayal are presented in detail. On the one hand, he avoids a meeting with the apostles because he is afraid of their righteous anger, while on the other hand, he tries to escape from reality, to justify himself. Self-reproach brings him to the venue of the sin. The fact that Judas only implemented God's plan is expressed by the following words of Jesus: "... everything happened according to what was said, so that the writings of the prophets would be fulfilled" [Aghajanyan, 2002, 88]. These words are uttered by the resurrected Jesus, and thus he puts an end to Judas's life: Judas thought that by betraying the Teacher he confirmed his own identity, but it turns out that this act was also predicted from Heaven. Suicide therefore becomes an imperative, and Judas hangs himself.

Judas's mental anguish reaches its peak at the moment of Christ's crucifixion when he was anticipating to witness a miracle and thus be convinced of the Savior's being God's son. However, both Christ's silence in response to the accusation against him and the absence of miracles cause Judas to be more entangled in the web of his own doubts.

Another rather original point of view is put forward in the novel, too: the author considers the apostle Peter to be no less a betrayer: Judas betrayed Jesus, while Peter apostatized Him. Thus, during the meeting with Judas Simon-Peter bitterly declares: "Go away, apostate dog, be happy, I became equal to you in order to save my skin" [Aghajanyan, 2002, 31].

But Judas rejects this equation accusing Simon of believing in the Teacher and suffering for his act. "You believe in him and suffer because of what you did. Go, preach his ideas, and if he really is God, the son of God, he will forgive your sin" [Aghajanyan, 2002, 32].

The words uttered by S. Aghajanyan's Judas, who acts as the spokesman of humanity, reveal the mystery of the unattainable that terrifies earthly creatures, a fear that often leads to dark paths and brings to impasse. In response to the accusations of Jesus's beloved disciple John, Judas says: "– I didn't want his death, – Judas confessed his sincere pain. – And I apostatized him because I didn't believe his half-hearted, ambiguous words, because I wanted to know him..." [Aghajanyan, 2002, 73].

However, it is impossible to get even a little closer to the divine mind the partial revelation of which the Lord of Heaven makes known to earthly sinners through his own Son. Such an attempt is doomed to inevitable failure. Therefore, the logical conclusion of the meeting between Judas and Jesus at the end of the novel becomes quite understandable. Judas turns to Jesus with an outburst of sincere repentance. "Whether you are God or the Son of God, I beg you, give me back my sin, tell me that I have made my will, I have lived my life, even if it is sinful" [Aghajanyan, 2002, 90]. But Jesus's rejection and affirmation of the inevitable leaves only one path- the destruction of his own self by his own hands. And Judas directs his steps to the valley of Yenomi, "where the ancient Jews sacrificed their first-born sons to their almighty God" [Aghajanyan, 2002, 93]. Thus, Judas also appears on the altar to prove to mankind the inevitability of the will of the Almighty.

We encounter the literary character of Judas in the famous Armenian playwright **Perch Zeytuntsyan's** (1938–2017) drama "**Jesus of Nazareth and His Second Disciple**" [Zeytuntsyan, 2001] too. The second disciple of Jesus is Judas Iscariot himself, who, by his own confession, came to Christ's side so that the latter would forgive his sin. And Judas's sin is the heaviest one. Judas himself tells the story of his origin to the prostitute and

declares that “the secret must go down with you to the grave, it must have been dead since its birth” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 12]. And that secret makes Judas similar to the famous king Oedipus from Greek mythology. Judas also without knowing the truth killed his father and married his own mother. All this was done with the light hand of Pilate under whom Judas had served, but not deliberately. Therefore, Pilate is also unintentionally guilty of Judas’s tragedy. Ironically, the same Pilate again unintentionally condemns the Savior to death. And his involuntary sin against Judas creates an unconscious criminal. The revelation of that terrible secret forces Judas to run away and lead a persecuted life, and the hope of forgiveness brings him to Jesus. Judas turns into an eternal fugitive with a bitter soul, who adopts the behavior of seeming arrogance in order to survive. He is eternally ravaging himself internally and signaling to those around him. “I don’t like being loved too much. I need to be loved little, or not loved at all, or even hated, so that I don’t get weak, don’t lose my vigilance” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 13]. He is the unwitting victim of his sinful birth and betrays the Savior not with any specific expectations, but simply with a mindless urge to break the Teacher’s commandments. However, according to the principles of the paranormal Gospel, Judas accomplishes the inevitable. And what refers to Judas’s suicide Armenian theatrical critic Levon Mutafyan (1954–2015) in his work “The Time of Perch Zeytuntsyan” published in 2014 rightly noted: “It is not so much the murder of a physical being, but of fate, of what is formed by nature” [Mutafyan, 2014, 234].

Judas, created by the Armenian dramatist, has the greatest problem of self-affirmation, and for that reason, he initially enters into a vicious relationship with a prostitute in order to violate the message of Jesus and perceive the assurance of such an act as his own victory. He even resorts to the act of betrayal driven by the same urge to assert himself. In the words addressed to the high priest Caiaphas the reader sees the real Judas. “And I know the way to remain human. I know the art of crossing the forbidden line of sin. I will pluck the fruit from the tree, and no one, unlike weak Adam, has urged me to do so. The other me, me, only with my will, only with my mind. I’m checking myself, Caiaphas. Will I finally know who I am?” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 24].

Perch Zeytuntsyan’s drama is also noticeable for its description of an appealing episode – Judas’s meeting with the devil. It happens after the betrayal of Jesus, when the devil visits Judas on his own. In response to the question of his late visit, Judas announces: “There are many Judases, but you are one soul. Maybe you are unable to make it” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 41]. However, even the ruler of Hell accepts the victory of the Only Begotten Son of God and answers the betrayer: “But Jesus is unique to me, and so are you” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 41]. *In other words, it is not the betrayers who are unique, but the proof of infinite love through betrayal is extraordinary.* And Judas is stung by such a comparison, because he tries to dispel his independence. Satan visits him as the judge of his conscience, and being the embodiment of evil, condemns his petty betrayal, because such a step is unacceptable even for the greatest of evils. Satan’s words sound both an accusation and a belief in the weakness of human nature. He declares: “I am disgusted with human beings... How do you endure these efforts... How do you not go mad... And you are my subjects, so merciful, so weak?” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 45]. It is human weakness that makes them crucify their Savior, because his greatest message is the most difficult to fulfill. Christ himself declares: “I came to world for love. I have to teach people to love. This is my greatest commandment” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 20]. And people accepted that greatest gift with bare swords and sentenced to death the very messenger of love.

It is noteworthy that the characteristic of Judas as a betrayer is given by Satan himself. “A toy, Judas... a toy... And you thought you were superhuman... Your Lord was right, you have nothing more to do...” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 45]. Therefore, the only remained choice is physical destruction that Judas implements.

On the way to suicide venue Judas talks to himself, sums up his ruined life, thinks about the possibility of having a different destiny, then declares that the makers of history had decided everything in advance and states: “You were a weakling, surrendered to the current” [Zeytuntsyan, 2001, 52].

Thus, it becomes obvious to the reader that for Armenian writers Judas is a unique means of revealing the image of Christ, whose betrayal is somehow explained and justified from the point of view of inevitability.

The Image of Judas in Leonid Andreev's Novelette "Judas Iscariot"

The famous Russian writer Leonid Andreev in his novelette "Judas Iscariot" has also referred to the character of Judas: it was published long before the similar works authored by Armenian writers, in 1907.

Leonid Andreev is considered a representative of the silver age of Russian literature. Chronologically, that era named after the Russian exiles, corresponds to the end of the 20th century and coincides with the emergence of modernism. Andreev is also considered as the founder of Russian expressionism. After the death of his wife, Alexandra Mikhailovna Andreeva, in 1906 the writer went to Capri, where he met the outstanding Russian writer Maxim Gorky and told him about his intention of writing a work about betrayal.

Later M. Gorky highly appreciated that work and noted that it was "something that few people will understand, and it will make a big commotion" [Gorky, 1966, 23].

Leonid Andreev wrote his novel after initially reading "The Life of Jesus" by French orientalist and Semitic scholar Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and works of German theologian and writer David Strauss (1808–1874). The peculiarity of this work is the reflection of the "psychology of betrayal". Unlike the biblical character Judas betrays the Savior not for money, but out of wounded love.

Judas takes this vile step to prove the power of Jesus's teaching, the cowardice of his disciples and the insignificance of the inspired crowd that followed the Savior: they forsake their Master and are condemned to death. This duality causes Judas to commit suicide because he is unable to live without the love he has for the Savior. According to Andreev suicide is a logical way out, because Judas is trying to be equal to the Savior, but Jesus is the Son of God, and no mortal can stand on the same level with him.

For suicide Judas chooses the highest tree that looked all over Jerusalem. In other words, the betrayer hangs himself in front of everyone to remind them of a simple fact: the survivors are worse than Judas, as he sacrifices his life trying to be equal to the Teacher, while the living ones abandoned the Savior, crucified and forget him, trampled his messages and denied the spiritual purity they had received from him. Before committing suicide, Judas turns to the Savior. "Do you hear me, Jesus? Will you believe me now? I'm coming to you. Accept me with tenderness, I'm tired. I am very tired. Afterwards we will embrace each other like brothers and return to earth. OK?" [Andreev, 1990, 263]. By creating this character, the author emphasizes a unique idea: true love must be selfless and free from jealousy.

Andreev's Judas differs even in its external description. He pretends to be weak and sick, and even his voice is sometimes masculine and sometimes raspy. He creates a strange desire in people: you want "to pull him out of your ear like a festering gross splinter" [Andreev, 1990, 213] that keeps hindering.

The description of Peter given to Judas is especially noticeable: it seems to fully characterize this extremely contradictory and two-faced character both externally and internally. "And you, Judas, are like an octopus, only with one part" [Andreev, 1990, 213].

Judas betrays Jesus, and when he returns, he shows insufficient care for him, wraps him with concern like a merciful mother. After Jesus's arrest he watches from the window the sufferings of the Savior and seems to be happy to witness them, but shortly after he is tormented by this very sight and goes to the high priest to certify Jesus's innocence and throws the price he had received for betrayal into his face.

Thus, Judas created by Andreev is a psychologically complex character who, on the one hand, loves the Teacher, wants to be his only support and valued disciple, and on the other hand, betrays him in order finally to become spiritually close to him. It is noteworthy that Judas warns Christ that he is going to betray him, and the latter is silent, because what was planned from above had to come true. This episode, as well as Christ smiling and even laughing out loud in response to the jokes of his disciples, is constructed according to the principles of the gnostic Gospel.

The entire ideology of "Judas Iscariot" is summed up in the very scene of betrayal, when Judas betrays the Savior with a kiss. In response to Jesus's question that whether he betrays him with a kiss, Judas responds: "Yes. We betrayed you with a kiss of love. With a kiss of love, we deliver you to disgrace, torture, death. With the voice of love, we call

the executioners from their dark dens and with love we place a cross on the dark earth and we nail to cross the crucified love". However, none of the heroes of the novelette is completely fair, and the author creates a kind of dichotomy and clearly depicts the dishonest attitude of humanity. Everyone is guilty of the Savior's death, both the disciples who abandoned him, who fled to save their lives and the condemning crowd, who did not even try to save Jesus.

Thus, to sum up we can state that if the Armenian writer's (S. Aghajanyan) Judas betrays Jesus because he wants to confirm his rightness, then the motivation of the betrayal for Russian writer's Judas is his unique love for the Teacher.

Conclusion

After examining the literary character of Judas Iscariot in the works of Armenian and Russian writers, we can conclude that this character, that was always perceived as a pure betrayer and the embodiment of evil, has deep psychological traits and his own motivations for his despicable act, which are not so easy to accept at first glance.

Judas stands on the edge of a dark future, with an equally dark past as his legacy, a mental dichotomy born of betrayal and endless doubt about the rightness of his actions. If Judas created by Armenian writers betrays his Teacher because he believes in him and even realizes that he simply has no alternative, as his fate is decided from above, then Judas of the Russian writer receives a deeper psychological manifestation, as he is sure that betrayal is the result of infinite love for Jesus. But it is obvious that both Armenian and Russian writers are convinced that Judas Iscariot is not an ordinary betrayer, but a tool of God called to carry out the will of Providence: he is not the source of evil, but in a way the embodiment of sacrifice.

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Submitted for publication: July 25, 2024.

Accepted for publication: August 23, 2024.

Published: March 27, 2025.