"Saving Judas"—A Social Scientific Approach to Judas's Suicide in Matthew 27:3–10

David A. Reed

Abstract

This article examines Judas's suicide, reported in Matthew 27:3–10. Through the use of cross-cultural analysis with the Gainj of New Zealand, it argues that Judas's suicide is not a shameful act, but is an honorable one that atones for Judas's "sin" of betraying Jesus's innocent blood.

> "That soul up there who suffers most of all," my guide explained, "is Judas Iscariot: the one with head inside [Satan's mouth] and legs out kicking."
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> —Dante, THE DIVINE COMEDY: Inferno

Throughout the annals of history Judas fares poorly. In the early second century CE, Papias of Hierapolis claimed that Judas never believed in Jesus, and that he "walked about in this world as a great example of impiety," with bloated flesh, a massive head, and shameful genitals (Grant: 25). No kinder than Papias, the modern Austrian scholar, Paul Gaechter, refers to Judas numerous times as a *traitor* in his commentary on Matthew (Gaechter: 898–902). These accusations stem not only from Judas's alleged betrayal of Jesus, but also his suicide.

In order to "save" Judas, this article begins with the descriptive task of assessing Judas's reputation among biblical scholars. Second, it examines briefly suicide in the first century Mediterranean world, and argues that many scholars who comment on Judas's suicide do so by projecting their largely modern, North Atlantic prejudices back into the first-century CE world, which had no knowledge of this modern concept of suicide. Third, this article engages in a cross-disciplinary study of Judas's suicide in light of Emile Durkheim's theories of suicide and social integration in an effort to show how Judas's suicide must be understood in terms of first-century cultural values such as honor and shame. Fourth, this article works cross-culturally to examine the way Judas opted to kill himself as reported in Matthew 27:3–10. In this section, we examine the act of hanging in light of another honor–shame culture where hanging is a predominant method of suicide. Finally, this article, which focuses solely on Matthew 27:3–10, shows that when it comes to first-century cultural norms, Judas's death was a noble one in which he atoned for his sin of betraying "innocent blood" (Matt 27:4) by killing himself, while the real culprits were in fact the Jewish leaders. We begin, then, with a survey of Judas's reputation among modern biblical scholars.

Judas Among Modern Biblical Scholars

There is a consensus among modern scholars that Matthew's story of Judas's death is a midrashic exposition that combines Zechariah 11:11–12 with Jeremiah 18:2–3 and 32:6–9. These texts function as part of Matthew's fulfillment quotations (Gundry: 557–58; Hagner: 813–15; Meier: 338–39; Senior: 352–69; Menken; Bonnard: 394; Davies & Allison: 568–71; Conrad; Harrington 1991: 385–86). Peter Wick is one of the most recent scholars to propose that Judas's death is part of Matthew's midrashic imagination. In his 2001 article he concludes that Matthew's use of the Zechariah and Jeremiah texts is calculated to show how the handing over of Jesus as "innocent blood" is part of God's will. If Judas did not hand Jesus over to the authorities, then the Jewish people would have been prevented from participating in Jesus's death and resurrection (Wick: 35). The implicit point made by Wick and other NT scholars is that Matthew takes the basic story of Judas's death and expands it utilizing Zechariah 11:11–12 and Jeremiah 18:2–3 and 32:6–9. What this means is that Matthew adds his own twist to the story of Judas's death to bring about prophetic fulfillment in his Passion narrative utilizing

David A. Reed, Ph.D. Candidate (University of St. Michael's College, Toronto), is currently serving as Adjunct Lecturer at the Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio and pursuing research on Criae in the Synoptic Conflict Stories and Q. His address is University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, Ontario M4N 1S1, Canada; e-mail: davidareed@earthlink.net)

texts from the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, this means that Matthew adds imaginative details such as the thirty pieces of silver (Matt 27:3, 9) and the fact that Judas hangs himself (Matt 27:5) to an earlier tradition about Judas's death. These same scholars also note Judas's guilt in this pericope and assume, with little to no comment, that Judas never repents but only "regrets" his actions. An exception to this is Caroline Whelan, who, after surveying over 900 suicides in the ancient world, concludes that suicide is not understood as a negative phenomenon in the first century CE.

Therefore, we must ask the following questions: (1) Why does Matthew have Judas commit suicide? Is this for the purpose of making him noble or ignoble? (2) Can we base the entire tradition of Judas's suicide on one piece of evidence, namely, Matthew 27:3–10? (3) Does the act of hanging oneself even constitute suicide, especially in the ancient world? (4) Does suicide as we in the twenty-first century understand it even exist in the first century world? (5) If the answer to our fourth question is, "no," then what did suicide mean to those who first heard Matthew's story? It is in search of answers that we now turn to each of these questions and continue with our descriptive task.

Suicide in the First Century CE Mediterranean World

In this section we offer a working definition of suicide, followed by an analysis of suicide in light of the first-century Mediterranean world. Social psychologists typically define suicide as "self murder" that is strictly voluntary (Young & Arrigo). It can involve direct actions such as hanging or shooting oneself, or it can be indirect, involving such things as going on a hunger strike or refusing to take life-preserving medication (Diekstra: 856). Furthermore, subcategories of suicide exist, such as "mercy killing" (Maguire: 261). In short, suicide—self-killing outside of a medical context—is "the interruption of a health *process*" (ibid.). Therefore, we should distinguish it from death by choice in cases where there is a terminal illness, for this is "the interruption or acceleration of a dying process" (ibid.).

The history of attitudes toward suicide is somewhat complex. According to Fedden, the idea that suicide is both a sin and a crime appears late in the ancient world, taking its impetus from Augustine's polemics against the "suicidal mania" of the Donatists in the late fourth and fifth centuries CE (Fedden: 133–34). It acquires the status of canon law in a series of three church councils in the sixth and seventh centuries. Daube suggests that the term *suicide* is itself a novelty (Daube: 418–29). It first occurs in Sir Thomas Browne's RELIGIO MEDICI—written in 1635 and published in 1642 (Alvarez: 50; Droge: 225). In 1755 this phrase is still enough of a neologism that it does not appear in some of the leading English lexicons of the day, such as Dr. Johnson's DICTIONARY. Instead, circumlocutions such as "self-murder," "self-killing," and "self-slaughter" take its place (Droge: 225). Here we must note that the modern, North Atlantic concept of suicide is a relatively late invention, and that the evidence therefore forces us to ask how suicide was understood in the first century, particularly if we want to understand why Matthew has Judas commit suicide. We must also ask this question to avoid the error of anachronism (or "presentism" as some historians call it).

Suicide in the ancient world finds its epicenter in Plato's PHAEDO, in which the condemned Socrates argues that the philosopher should welcome death since he may expect to attain "the greatest blessings in that other land" (64a). Though much can be gleaned from a study of the PHAEDO, especially with regard to Jesus's death in the Synoptics, space limitations and the purpose of this essay do not allow for further investigation of Plato's work. We must, on the other hand, give extensive consideration to Seneca, for he writes about suicide at a time contemporaneous with the author of Matthew.

In the first century CE, Seneca espouses the "apotheosis" of suicide. Instead of invoking the Socratic and earlier Stoic view that the wise man will not take his own life until god gives the signal to do so, Seneca emphasizes the right to die in general. In other words, for Seneca, the right to die in general is the act *par excellence* of the free person, the path to liberty, and proof that an individual cannot be held against her will. Seneca expresses this attitude best in his work ON ANGER III. xiv. 3–4, where he singles out death by hanging as an appropriate and noble way to die. He writes:

> Such restraint of distress is necessary, particularly for those whose lot is cast in this sort of life and who are invited to the board of kings. So must they eat in that company, so must they drink, so must they answer, so must they mock at the death of their dear ones. Whether the life is worth the price we shall see; that is another question. We shall not console with such a chain-gang of prisoners so wretched, we shall not urge them to submit to the commands of their butchers; we shall show that in any kind of servitude the way lies open to liberty. If the soul is sick and because of its own imperfection unhappy, *a man may end its sorrows and at the same time himself*. To him to whom chance has given a king that aims his shafts at the breasts of his friends, to him who has a master that gorges fathers with the flesh of their children, I would say: "Madman, why do you moan? Why do you wait for some enemy to avenge you by the destruction of your nation, or for a mighty king from afar to fly to your rescue? *In whatever direction you may turn your eyes, there lies the means to end your woes*. See you that precipice? Down that is the way to liberty. See you that sea, that river, that well? There sits liberty—at the bottom. *See you that tree, stunted, blighted, and barren? Yet from its branches hangs liberty*. See you that throat of yours, your gullet, your heart? They are ways of escape from servitude. Are

> the ways of egress I show you too toilsome, do they require too much courage and strength? Do you ask what is the highway to liberty? Any vein in your body [emphasis added]!

Furthermore, Seneca's famous *70th Epistle*, which for all intents and purposes is a panegyric to suicide (or freedom), begins with the maxim that "the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can," and continues by proclaiming that the wise man will consider the possibility of death long before he is under extreme *necessitas* (70.4). Seneca also opposes philosophers who condemn suicide as those who "shut off the path to freedom" (70.14–15). Thus, for Seneca it is the deity who arranges things so that an individual can never be kept in this life against her will. As he writes in ON PROVIDENCE VI.7:

> Above all, I [god] have taken pains that nothing should keep you here against your will; the way out lies open. If you do not choose to fight, you may run away. Therefore of all things that I have deemed necessary for you, *I have made nothing easier than dying*. I have set life on a downward slope: *if it is prolonged, only observe and you will see what a short and easy path leads to liberty*. I have not imposed upon you at your exit wearisome delay you had at entrance. Otherwise, if death came to a man as slowly as his birth, Fortune would have kept her great Dominion over you [*emphasis* added].

Droge analyzes Seneca's statement on suicide in the *70th Epistle* and suggests that "it is by no means contrary to the will of god if an individual chooses to end his life at any time; it is precisely because of the divine order of things that one is at all times free to die" (Droge: 227). Furthermore, J. M. Rist, in his book STOIC PHILOSOPHY notes that in the ancient world the choice of suicide is open to everyone and is in fact an ennobling act, for even the "fool" can be transformed into a sage by a well-judged and opportune death (Rist: 249).

The texts of Jewish literature pertaining to suicide strike us all the more. Of great interest is the fact that in none of the six cases of suicide recorded in the Hebrew Bible do we find that a condemnation of suicide; nor is there a general prohibition against the act of suicide in the law codes of the Torah. All six suicides in the Hebrew Bible are based on principles of honor and shame. In two of these cases, someone already mortally wounded prefers to die by his own hand or that of an armor-bearer. When, for instance, a woman wounds Abimelech by dropping a millstone on his head—an act which shamed Abimelech—he "immediately cried out to his attendant, his armor-bearer, 'Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, "A woman killed him!"!'" So his attendant stabbed him and he died" (Judg 9:54; Boling: 182–85). In this story a woman shames Abimelech. This was unacceptable by ancient standards, since Abimelech was a man. The only way for Abimelech to regain his honor was to commit suicide. Similarly, when the Philistines delivered a mortal blow to King Saul on Mt. Gilboa, Saul petitioned his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, so that the uncircumcised may not run me through and make sport of me." Saul's armor-bearer refused, so Saul grabbed the sword himself and voluntarily fell upon it. The armor-bearer, seeing that Saul is dead, fell on his own sword and died (1 Sam 31:4–5; cf. 1 Chr 10:4–5; McCarter 1980: 439–44). Again the principle of honor–shame is at work in this story: it was preferable for Saul to save face by killing himself, rather than be delivered into the hands of his enemies, the Philistines.

A fourth case, which many scholars compare with Judas in Matthew 27:3–10, but perhaps erroneously so, involves Ahithophel. Ahithophel, once an adviser to King David, deserted him and went off to serve David's rebellious son Absalom. When Absalom decided not to take Ahithophel's advice, Ahithophel hanged himself (2 Sam 17:23; McCarter 1984: 378–90). Though such an act seems disgraceful, it is important to recall that Seneca saw liberty as acquired by hanging oneself from the branches of a tree. It is not surprising, then, that Ahithophel atoned for his desertion and regained his honor by taking his own life instead of continuing to serve David's son, the usurper, Absalom.

A fifth example is that of Zimri, an officer who treasonously murdered King Elah and proclaimed himself king of all Israel. When the army refused to follow him and instead laid siege to the capital, Zimri closed himself in the royal citadel and set it on fire (1 Kgs 16:18; Fritz: 175–77). Again, no comment is made positively or negatively by the writer of 1 Kings regarding Zimri's act. Here we have another instance in which a biblical figure atoned for some nefarious deed by taking his own life.

To these examples we might add the story of Samson, who deliberately brought the Philistine temple at Gaza down on his head after being blinded (Judg 16:29–30; Boling: 245–53). In fact, as Droge notes, "Later, Christian exegetes would interpret Samson's death as a symbolic foreshadowing of Christ's self-sacrifice" (Droge: 228). Comparing Samson's death to Christ's sacrifice hardly seems like a negative portrayal of a deliberate suicide. Yet we can look even further than the stories of the ancient Israelites in order to see that even in post-biblical Judaism, suicide was deemed positive rather than negative.

Beyond the Hebrew Bible, we can find further sketches of suicide in non-biblical Jewish writings composed during the Second-Temple period. Here we find a number of stories in which Jews take their lives voluntarily rather than betray their religious beliefs. For example, Philo in his work GAIUS (236) tells the story of Jews who reacted to the emperor Gaius in 39 or 40 CE, when he announced plans to have a statue of himself erected in the Jerusalem temple. In response, the Jews solemnly swore to the Roman governor Petronius that if this action was

carried out, they would first slaughter their women and children and then kill themselves "in contempt of a life which is no life." We should note that Philo makes no negative comment on this potential response of the Jews to Gaius.

Perhaps of similar interest is the treatment of voluntary death in the writings of Josephus. Though Josephus tends to have a mixed perspective on suicide (e.g., in his lengthy speech on its iniquity in JEWISH WAR III.362–82), he does end up praising the heroism of the Jews at Masada who slaughtered one another rather than fall into the hands of the Romans (JEWISH WAR VII.320–88). Josephus also writes, however: "And God—think you not that He is indignant when man treats His gift with scorn? For it is from Him that we have received our being, and it is to Him that we should leave the decision to take it away" (JEWISH WAR III.371). Even though Josephus's opinion regarding suicide is a mixed one, it is worth noting that he did speak approvingly of the Jews at Masada who slaughtered one another.

The most famous Second-Temple suicide of all is that of Razis, which 2 Maccabees 14:37–46 records in rather grotesque detail (see Goldstein: 471–503). It reads thus:

> A certain Razis, one of the elders of Jerusalem, was denounced to Nicanor as a man who loved his compatriots and was very well thought of and for his goodwill was called father of the Jews. In former times, when there was no mingling with the Gentiles, he had been accused of Judaism, and he had most zealously risked body and life for Judaism. Nicanor, wishing to exhibit the enmity that he had for the Jews, sent more than five hundred soldiers to arrest him; for he thought that by arresting him he would do them an injury. When the troops were about to capture the tower and were forcing the door of the courtyard, they ordered that fire be brought and the doors burned. Being surrounded, Razis fell upon his own sword, *preferring to die nobly* rather than to fall into the hands of sinners and suffer outrages *unworthy of his noble birth*. But in the heat of the struggle he did not hit exactly, and the crowd was now rushing in through the doors. He courageously ran up on the wall, and bravely threw himself down into the crowd. But as they quickly drew back, a space opened and he fell in the middle of the empty space. Still alive and aflame with anger, he rose, and though his blood gushed forth and his wounds were severe he ran through the crowd; and standing upon a steep rock, with his blood now completely drained from him, he tore out his entrails, took them in both hands and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again. This was the manner of his death.

Harrington notes that Razis's suicide was "based on the firm conviction that God would restore his body in the resurrection" (cf. 2 Macc 7:11, 22–23; Harrington 1993: 1720). Thus Razis's act of political rebellion was carried out with the full assurance that he would pass over to a higher plane of existence. Here in 2 Maccabees, then, we find another example of a Second-Temple Jewish writer who does not condemn suicide.

Beyond the Second-Temple period, but certainly influenced by it, the later rabbinic writings found in the Mishnah and the two Talmuds also provide positive examples of suicide, including rules and regulations for how to carry it out. This is, of course, contrary to the standard opinion that the rabbis oppose suicide. *B. Ketub*. 103b, for example, relates that when rabbi Judah the Prince died a "voice from heaven" proclaimed that all those present at his death would enjoy the life of the world to come. When a fuller who had the misfortune of not calling on the rabbi that day learned of this, he took his own life. The "voice from heaven" immediately announced that he too would live in the world to come.

A similar story is found in a mishnah that the Talmud expands. *Abod. Zar.* 18a concerns the martyrdom of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion during the emperor Hadrian's reign. In the story the Romans wrapped the rabbi in a Torah scroll and set it on fire; but to ensure that Hanina would suffer to the fullest extent, the Romans placed tufts of wool—soaked with water—over his heart. His disciples begged him to breathe in the noxious fumes of the fire so that he might hasten his otherwise grueling death. Rabbi Hanina refused, however, and instead proclaimed, "Let him who gave [my soul] take it away, but no one should destroy himself." Upon hearing these words Rabbi Hanina's executioner then asked whether he would enter into the world to come, especially if he helped the rabbi die sooner rather than later. Receiving an affirmative response from Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, he proceeded to remove the tufts of wool. Once the executioner removed the tufts of wool, the rabbi died. The executioner then threw himself upon the flames, and at that moment a "voice from heaven" proclaimed that both the rabbi and the executioner had been admitted into the world to come. The story concludes with the gnomic, "One may acquire life in a single hour, another after many years."

In both rabbinic accounts, suicide is given a positive evaluation. Furthermore, suicide is understood in these examples, not as an escape from worldly affairs and troubles, but as an act of sincere contrition, which transforms the individual so that she may atone for her sins and attain eternal life. Thus, we conclude that in the rabbinic literature, evidence exists for the act of suicide being a largely ennobling act and certainly not a disgraceful one.

It is into the context of these brief sketches of the literary and cultural settings of the first century Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds that we must place Matthew's story of Judas's suicide. These sketches reveal that in an ancient Mediterranean setting little to no evidence exists for suicide being considered ignominious. In fact, from Seneca we see that "hanging oneself from a tree" is a source of liberty or freedom. Therefore, this brief historical sketch challenges many of our North Atlantic cultural assumptions regarding suicide. We now turn to a cross-

cultural examination of Judas's suicide in Matthew 27:3–10, which we begin by utilizing Emile Durkheim's theories of suicide and social integration, as well as the data of suicide patterns found among the Gainj people of New Zealand.

Judas and the Durkheim Principle: Suicide and Social Integration

In his book SUICIDE, Emile Durkheim shows how social forces affect people's behavior. In his rigorous research he compares the suicide rates of several European countries and finds that each country's suicide rate is different and that each remains remarkably stable year after year (Henslin: 11). He also discovers that different groups within a country have varying suicide rates, and that these also remain stable from year to year. For example, part of his research focuses on religious groups such as Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. He finds that Protestants, males, and the unmarried kill themselves at a higher rate than do Catholics, Jews, females, and the married. From this research, he concludes that suicide is not simply a matter of individuals here and there deciding to take their lives for personal reasons. Instead, he suggests that *social factors underlie suicide*, and these factors keep suicide rates fairly constant year after year.

Durkheim calls attention to what he calls a measure of *social integration*, defined as the degree to which people are tied to their social group. Social integration acts, so Durkheim argues, as a key factor in suicide. He concludes that people with weaker social ties are more likely to commit suicide than people with stronger social ties. In the case of Protestants, males, and the unmarried, social integration is less effective than in the other groups. Durkheim claims that Protestantism encourages greater freedom of thought and action; males are more independent than females; and the unmarried lack the ties and responsibilities of marriage. Therefore, because the social integration of Protestants, males, and the unmarried is weaker, members of these groups have fewer of the social ties that help to prevent them from committing suicide.

Durkheim also notes that the obverse is true: strong social bonds can, at least in some cases, encourage suicide. His example includes people who are torn apart by grief and kill themselves after the death of their spouse. These people integrate their feelings so closely with those of their spouse that they prefer death rather than life without the one who gives meaning to that life. But there exists a subsequent concern in Durkheim's research. He worries that there is too much individualism in modern culture. Though he concludes that the new individualism is not pathological, but a healthy expression of a changing society, he believes that individualism can go too far. When this happens, individualism poses a danger which Durkheim calls *anomie*, a breakdown of the controlling influences of society. To counter *anomie* Durkheim opines that new social groups need to be created and that it is these social groups that create a new sense of belonging.

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We can sum up Durkheim's thesis in SUICIDE with what we shall call the "Durkheim Principle." We define it as follows: People who are less socially integrated have higher rates of suicide (cf. Henslin: 12). But what does the Durkheim Principle have to do with Judas's suicide in Matthew 27:3–10?

Stegemann & Stegemann argue that the followers of Jesus compose a rural movement that lives at an extremely low level of existence. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus's disciples abandon their socio-economic ties means that they participate in and identify with the fate of the poorest in Jewish society, and are thus uniquely dependent on one another and upon external sources (Stegemann & Stegemann: 203). Filling out this picture, Malina opines that the Jesus movement is composed of individuals who understand that they are "group oriented selves" (Malina: 45). This means that instead of being individualists, the disciples of Jesus, including Judas, know that they are "dyadics" or "doublists" in the sense that they always think of themselves in terms of the opinion of at least one other person (ibid.). The opinion that counts most is that of the group's head or central person. This also means that instead of seeing them as "individualists," we need to understand the disciples of Jesus as "collectivists" (Malina: 44–49; Elliott: 130). Individualists experience themselves as a unique and totally independent "I," whereas collectivists feel themselves as an "I" that has nearly everything in common with the kinship group and its spin-offs (Malina: 45). Also, "In collectivist cultures most people's social behavior is largely determined by group goals that require the pursuit of achievements that improve the position of the group" (Malina: 47). The defining attributes of collectivistic cultures include family integrity, solidarity, and keeping the primary in-group in "good health." In all likelihood, Judas saw himself as a dyadic person who is less an individual than an integral part of a larger kinship group. Specifically, Judas saw himself as part of a fictive kinship group (i.e., the Jesus movement). We need to understand Judas's suicide and his actions in Matthew 27:3–10 against this social backdrop.

If we apply the "Durkheim Principle" to Judas, utilizing the reconstruction of his personality and social level as defined by both Stegemann & Stegemann and Malina, the following picture emerges:

(1) On sociological grounds, Judas had no choice but to commit suicide, for his actions indicated that he broke his bonds

with his larger social unit, the Jesus movement, by handing its leader, Jesus, over to the Jewish authorities (Matt 27:3–4). In light of the Durkheim Principle, Judas participated in an action that left him less socially integrated (i.e., he no longer belonged to the larger group of disciples, a fact clearly evidenced by his no longer being counted among the Eleven at the end of Matthew's Gospel—28:16).

(2) Durkheim's observation on the obverse of his principle applies equally in Judas's case. If strong social bonds can encourage suicide, the deep integration of Judas into a fictive kingship group like the Jesus movement led him to commit suicide—especially once Judas became cognizant of the fact that by handing Jesus over to the authorities he had ruptured his collectivist and dyadic personage by acting as an individual.

(3) The principle of *anomie* applies in Judas's case. For example, Judas does not act as a collectivist in Matthew's Gospel: instead, he acts as an individual by going to the Jewish leaders and striking a deal to hand Jesus over to them. This means that Judas acted contrary to what was best for his social group. We should categorize his actions as a form of deviant behavior, far from the norm typical of the first-century Mediterranean world. But because Judas chose to act in an individualistic manner, he experienced *anomie*, the breakdown of the controlling influences of society in which people become detached from society or their social group as a whole and are left with too little moral guidance. Judas sought Durkheim's remedy for *anomie* in Matthew 27:3 when he tried to return the thirty pieces of silver to the Jewish leaders. Alas, the Jewish leaders refused to help Judas reestablish himself socially either within his own group, the people of Israel, or within his fictive kinship group, the Jesus movement. In fact, the Jewish leaders did not accept his repentance, responding that "this is not our problem; it's yours!" (Matt 27:4).

In sum, this explains on sociological grounds why Judas had no choice but to commit suicide. What it does not explain is why Matthew depicts Judas's death as a suicide. He could have chosen any other form; so why this one? To answer this question we need to look cross-culturally for an anthropological model in which not only suicide in general is prominent, but specifically suicide by the act of hanging oneself. Furthermore, this cross-cultural model must stem from a society in which honor–shame values prevail. Therefore, we shall briefly examine Patricia Lyons Johnson's study of the Gainj of Papua New Guinea.

Judas, Hanging, and the Gainj of Papua New Guinea: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

In her article *When Dying is Better Than Living: Female Suicide Among the Gainj of Papua New Guinea*, Patricia Lyons Johnson argues that suicide among the Gainj of Papua New Guinea is a product of gender ideology (Johnson: 325). She suggests that Gainj suicide is a logical reaction to a traditional system of beliefs about males and females. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that only Gainj women kill themselves (Johnson: 326). Like Judas, the socially inferior Gainj women belong to a collectivist group, which makes them dyadic personages. We can find further parallels between the Gainj and the first-century world by comparing the living patterns of the two cultures, which are virtually the same. For instance, just like the division of the house in first-century Palestine into male-only and female-only sectors, the Gainj follow a similar practice: Bachelors live in separate communal houses while married couples cohabit but live in separate halves of the same house. Passing from one side to the other is forbidden. Furthermore, Gainj society is a society that practices magic and esteems public honor. It is also a "limited goods" society—one in which all goods and resources are in scarce supply, so that one party's gain can occur only at another's loss. The result is ongoing competition and conflict and the valorization of generosity and condemnation of miserliness and envy.

The basic duty of men among the Gainj is to take care of their women (Johnson: 331). As Johnson relates, "First, a man should protect his wife from physical assaults by others and, to some degree, by himself." (ibid.) "Wife-beating" is, however, acceptable in Gainj society. The logic is simple: If a woman performs as she ought to, she expects not to be beaten by her husband. However, if she behaves improperly (i.e., if she fails as a wife and a mother), she can expect to be beaten or even speared by her husband. Sometimes, however, husbands act outside of these societal conventions and inappropriately beat their wives. When this happens a wife may retaliate publicly, to shame her husband. The ultimate act a Gainj woman may perform in order to shame her husband publicly is to kill herself. According to Johnson, "the husband of a suicide loses assets—his wife, the brideprice he paid for her and the compensation he now must pay, and status" (Johnson 1981 332).

When Gainj women commit suicide they do not do it discreetly. They do it at a time that will preclude their being rescued. This usually means committing suicide just before dawn. Furthermore, they perform the act in a way that leaves no question as to their intent—typically, by hanging themselves (Johnson: 332). When a Gainj woman chooses to kill herself by hanging, she does so in a public location, such as a well-travelled pathway, precisely so as to create a well-calculated, public spectacle and thereby shame her husband. For the husband, suicide means a public declaration that he could not control his wife. Also since his wife acts publicly, the entire community now knows not only that the husband has acted inappropriately with his wife, but that he was a weak man to begin with, for Gainj men prize strength—in the sense of control—above all other social values (Johnson: 329). If a Gainj female commits suicide, it means that the Gainj man could not *control* his wife.

Upon further analysis of Gainj suicides, Johnson argues that they fit into Durkheim's typology of "anomic suicides." Though no major social or economic changes provoke it, Johnson argues that "failure of expectation" does provoke it, which would fit under Durkheim's typology (Johnson: 331). Furthermore, she cites M. D. W. Jeffreys' 1952 work, SAMSONIC SUICIDE OR SUICIDE OF REVENGE AMONG AFRICANS. *Samsonic suicide* is a term Jeffreys uses to identify certain types of African suicides, which seem strikingly similar to those of the Gainj. He defines it as "suicide as an act of revenge . . . based on knowledge of the social structure or else the laws of the society in which one lives" (Jeffreys: 119). Johnson not only considers the Gainj suicides to be "anomic" but also "samsonic" because of the outcome of a Gainj suicide for the surviving husband. In a Gainj suicide, the woman who kills herself knows that she will be able after death to intervene in her husband's life, to make him as unhappy as he has made her in her previous life. Thus, the Gainj suicide is an act of revenge with the intent of making the husband an object of ridicule among the Gainj people.

A number of parallels exist between Gainj suicides, both anomic and samsonic, and Judas's suicide as reported in Matthew 27:3–10. First, Gainj women typically kill themselves by hanging and do so in a public locale. Though it is unclear from Matthew's Gospel whether or not Judas hanged himself in a public vista, it is clear that he did hang himself in the early morning—just before dawn—especially if we take Matthew 27:1–2 and 27:11ff seriously. In other words, the events before and after Judas's suicide occurred in the early daylight hours. They did not take place under the cover of darkness, so we can surmise that Judas hanged himself during the early daylight hours for all to see, just as the Gainj women do. Second, the Gainj women commit suicide in order to shame their husbands, who have authority over them. Though numerous biblical commentators suggest that the pericope in Matthew 27:3–10 is meant to shift the blame for Jesus's death onto the chief priests, almost no commentator points to Judas's act of hanging himself as the vehicle which places this blame on the Jewish leaders. Instead, most commentators focus their attention on Judas's return of the blood money to the Jewish leaders and his act of throwing the money into the Temple. We do not dispute that these actions place blame upon the Jewish leaders, but contrary to much of the modern scholarly consensus, we do suggest that Judas's suicide is part of a well calculated process intended to publicly humiliate the authority figures. Put differently, Judas's suicide is not meant to shame Judas but to shame the Jewish leaders, just as the suicides of Gainj women are meant to shame their husbands and not themselves. Finally, like the Gainj suicides, Judas's suicide is both anomic and samsonic. If Judas's suicide is meant to shame the Jewish leaders, who would not accept his repentant plea nor the return of the thirty pieces of silver, then it is samsonic, because Judas kills himself as a way of getting his revenge against the Jewish authority figures. We must remember that the Jewish leaders would not allow Judas to atone for his sin. Judas's suicide is also anomic, for the moment Judas acts as an individual, he breaks his ties with his larger social unit, which forces him to commit suicide. So, if not in life, then in death, shall Judas have his day!

What this cross-cultural examination tells us is that in a first century context, the main purpose of Judas's suicide is to shame the Jewish leaders and atone for Judas's own actions. In our opinion this is why Matthew has Judas kill himself. This is an anomic and samsonic, public act, meant to shame. We must, therefore, rethink the prominent North Atlantic belief that Judas's suicide is his ultimate demise.

Summary and Evaluation

This article began with a survey of modern biblical scholars' positions regarding the so-called suicide of Judas, described in Matthew 27:3–10. As we saw, those scholars for the most part, with the exception of Whelan, have argued that Judas's suicide is a shameful event in Matthew's Passion narrative, in which Judas plays the role of the hapless fiend who betrayed his Lord to death. In contrast to these prevailing views, we have argued that Judas's actions show that he tried to regain his honor not only by returning the thirty pieces of silver but also by hanging himself.

Next, we examined suicide as a phenomenon in the first-century Mediterranean world. From an analysis of Seneca's work as well as various passages from the Hebrew Bible and non-canonical Jewish literature, including some rabbinic material, it became clear that the first-century world did not view suicide negatively, as we do in the twenty-first century. Instead, it was often seen as a noble and positive act. We saw, for instance, that Seneca wrote of "hanging from a tree" as a source of liberty and freedom, certainly nothing ignoble. In light of this type of evidence, we have suggested that many North Atlantic readings of Judas's suicide are anachronistic because they base their judgments of that act on modern cultural values. For Judas's suicide to be properly understood, we argued, it must be placed against the cultural and literary backdrop of the first-century Mediterranean world—not that of the twenty-first century North Atlantic.

Third, examining Judas's suicide in light of the Durkheim Principle, we discovered that Matthew's account of Judas's suicide makes perfect sense on sociological grounds, because, after handing Jesus over to the authorities, Judas experienced a loss of social integration within the early Jesus movement. When this sort of thing happens, as Durkheim suggested, suicide is often seen as the only viable option. Judas's suicide became even more understandable when we took into account Judas's dyadic

nature and collectivist personality. Since Judas did not think as an independent "I," the worst thing that could have happened to him was either to act as an individual (i.e., act in such a way as to experience *anomie*), or to act in such a way that he ended up severing ties with his social group. Since Judas did act in a way that made him an individual and severed his ties with the early Jesus movement, we concluded that he was no longer socially integrated as a dyadic personality, and needed to atone for this loss of social integration by killing himself.

Finally, we undertook a cross-cultural analysis of Judas's suicide by comparing it with Gainj suicides. There we saw that Gainj women commit suicide by hanging themselves in public places in order to shame their husbands. This led us to the conclusion that Matthew had Judas hang himself in order to place blame upon the Jewish leaders and to shame them for their unwillingness to accept his offer of repentance.

Thus, every aspect of this study has shown that Judas's suicide needs to be rethought. Judas is not the malcontent of Dante's *Inferno*, "with head inside [Satan's mouth] and legs out kicking," nor is he history's archetypal Jew who turned his back on the messiah. Instead, Judas is a product of the first-century Mediterranean world. He is a dyadic person who shamed himself by betraying innocent blood, only to redeem himself by taking his own life. Against the backdrop of the first century world, Judas is not the enemy of Matthew's Passion narrative; instead, he is one its heroes. Like many figures in the Hebrew Bible, he has experienced atonement in the best sense of the word, though it shocks us that his atonement came about by suicide (Davies, et al.: 562–63). But this is how shamed people regained their honor in the first century and shamed those who have shamed them. It is our opinion, then, that it is no longer right to say, "Judas be damned!" Instead, through the use of the social sciences, we say, "Judas be saved!"

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