

Judas Armed and Dangerous

Keith L Yoder

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

GPG (8 Apr 2010)

The portrayal of Judas in the arrest scene in the Gospel of John (Jn 18:3) is surprisingly different from that in the Synoptics. One difference turns on the Greek word λαβών. I find that John presents a negatively enhanced version of that in Luke, which already moves away from Mark and Matthew.

John 18:3. Here is the RSV translation, with my parenthesized annotations:

So Judas, procuring (λαβών “having taken”) a band of soldiers (σπεῖραν “cohort”) and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went (ἔρχεται “he comes”) there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

And here is the parallel passage in Mark 14:43:

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the Twelve, and with him (μετ’ αὐτοῦ) a crowd with sword and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders.

Matthew 26:47 has only minor changes from Mark 14:43. But Luke 22:47 begins to move away from his predecessors, in the direction that John took in Jn 18:3:

While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading (προήρχετο “going before”) them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him.

Note the progression from accompanying (Mk) to leading (Lk) the arrest band.

Beyond the Synoptics. I observe the following three features in John 18:3:

1. Judas procured or “took” the arrest band, rather than coming “with” them or “leading” them. What does “take” (dictionary form λαμβάνω) mean? Commentators harmonize it with the Synoptics in two ways: (a) Carson, following Bruce, reads “guiding,”¹ which harmonizes John with Luke, but “guide” is not listed for λαμβάνω in Danker, nor does Carson cite Greek parallels, so the case seems weak. (b) Others read λαβών as “with” in the sense of accompanying, thus harmonizing John with Mark. Danker 583b: “The ptc can here be rendered by the prep ‘with’ . . . ‘he came with a detachment.’” Danker cites five passages in support of this reading:

- Sophocles Trachiniae line 259. “When he [Heracles] had been purified, he gathered λαβών a mercenary army and went ἔρχεται against the city of Eurytus.” This is the closest parallel to Jn 18:3. It uses the same verbs in the same order, but it does not support Danker’s reading of λαβών as “with” or “accompanying” this army: rather, Heracles procured it and is in charge of it.

¹Carson **John** 577: “It is mere pedantry that understands the participle labōn to mean that Judas was ‘taking’ the troops to Jesus, as if he had the authority to command them.”

- Greek Apocalypse of Ezra 6:17. “For the Lord, having taken λαβών a numerous army of many angels, said λέγει to the prophet . . .” Same verb, and once again the Lord “takes” and is obviously in charge of this angelic army; he is not simply “with” them.²

- Hebrews 9:19. “He took λαβών the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled ἐρράντισε both the book itself and all the people.” Danker translates “with the blood he sprinkled the people.” But this is “with” in an instrumental sense, not as simple accompaniment. So far, reading λαβών in Jn 18:3 as “taking and being in charge of” is preferable.

(Danker’s last two references have the same instrumental sense as Hb 9:19, and thus also fail to establish the simple accompaniment meaning).

Danker’s suggestion of λαβών as “with” may hold for *instrumental* “with,” but not if we take “with” as meaning simple accompaniment. Danker does not make that distinction explicit, and so encourages a Mk-harmonistic interpretation of the passage. Interpretation (a), λαβών as “guiding,” is more nearly in the right direction, but that specific sense seems not to be attested. Danker’s citations actually support the stronger sense “take, procure,” as in Sophocles.

2. A Roman “cohort” σπεῖρα was part of the group, and the group is an organized arrest force of soldiers and temple police, not a simple “crowd.” Many take from the word “cohort” the inference that John was not pro-Roman (or anti-Semitic) after all; John implicates the Romans from the start in the death of Jesus. Whether “cohort” here indicates a full 600 men or something less, I suggest John may have a different motive: rather than saying something about the Romans, “cohort” is really saying something about Judas. Judas is so important (and evil) that he was in charge not only of the Jewish officers sent to arrest Jesus, he was even in charge of a Roman cohort.

Possibly John simply transposed the σπεῖρα from the mocking scene at Mk 15:16, which scene John completely omits, to Jesus’ arrest here in Jn 18:3. As to John’s intent to magnify the role of Judas, consider the next paragraph.

3. Judas himself, and not the band/crowd, “comes (singular verb ἔρχεται) with torches and lamps and weapons.” Mark’s word order (in Mk 14:43) is “. . . Judas approaches, one of the Twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs from the high priests and the scribes and the elders . . .” John 18:3 transposes the word order, so that not only does Judas “take” the arrest band in his charge, but it is now Judas, not the crowd, who “comes with” the torches and weapons.

So John paints Judas with his arms full of torches and weapons. Even if we envision them as carried by the soldiers and officers, the writers’s word order suggests that Judas is in charge of the weapons, no matter who is carrying them. Luke took the weapons out of his description to concentrate on Judas, but John brings them back, putting them in Judas’ possession and/or control. Luke moves away from Mk/Mt with a negatively enhanced picture of Judas advancing *at the head* of the arresting band; John goes further in putting him *in charge* of the band and their weapons.

²Charlesworth 1/578; Greek text from Tischendorf **Apocalypses** 31.

But John is also concerned to magnify the power of Jesus. First, he gives Jesus foreknowledge of the arrest (Jn 18:4, Jesus “knew all that was coming on upon him”). Once contact is made, Jesus is in charge; Judas is merely one of the crowd (Jn 18:5, “Judas the betrayer was standing with them”). His identification of Jesus with a kiss (Mk 14:45, Mt 26:49, already resisted in Lk 22:47 “*drew near* to Jesus to kiss him”) is given instead to Jesus, who says “I am he” Ἐγώ εἰμι. At this, in acknowledgment of Jesus’ power, the soldiers and Judas “draw back and fall to the ground” (Jn 18:6).

Appendix: Formal Emphasis

Judas in John. In his passion narrative, John makes Judas the first in a list of the six parties responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. The literary device he uses for each of the six, plus one repeat for a total of seven, is ὁ “the” + οὖν “then” + [subject]:

Jn 18:3	ὁ οὖν Ἰούδας	“then [the] Judas
Jn 18:12	Ἡ οὖν σπεῖρα	“then the cohort”
Jn 18:19	ὁ οὖν ἀρχιερεύς	“then the high-priest”
Jn 19:13	ὁ οὖν Πιλάτος	“then [the] Pilate”
Jn 19:23	οἱ οὖν στρατιῶται	“then the soldiers”
Jn 19:24	οἱ μὲν οὖν στρατιῶται	“so then the soldiers”
Jn 19:31	οἱ οὖν Ἰουδαῖοι	“then the Jews”

This sequence is used only these seven times in John’s passion narrative, including all, and only, those responsible for Jesus’ death. There may be an intentional echo between the first and last, Judas, the first enemy, being connected by his name with the last enemy, the Jews: Ἰούδας ~ Ἰουδαῖοι.

Comment

E Bruce Brooks (GPG, 8 Apr 2010)

Keith has convincingly shown that the awfulness of Judas’s action is progressively emphasized in the sequence Mk/Mt > Lk > Jn. I suggest that similar heightening can be seen between Mark and Matthew. Here are some corresponding passages:

- Mk 14:10 . . . went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them
- Mt 26:14f . . . went to the chief priests and said, What will you give me if I deliver him to you? [Mt is more vivid, and emphasizes Judas’ initiative]
- Mk 14:11a. And when they heard it they were glad . . .
- Mt [No direct parallel in Mt; the initiative is more exclusively with Judas]
- Mk 14:11b . . . and promised to give him money
- Mt 26:15b. And they paid him thirty pieces of silver [Mt is again more vivid].
- Mk 14:17-21. [The disciples ask, one by one, if they are the betrayer; Jesus promises woe to the betrayer, whoever he is]
- Mt 26:24. [Essentially parallel; no significant changes]
- Mk [no parallel in Mk at this point]
- Mt 26:25. “Judas, who betrayed him, said, Is it I, Master? He said to him, You have said so” [The suspense is not dissipated, as in Mk, but is here brought to its climax in a direct identification]

And in the scene of the arrest, we have:

Mk 14:43 . . . and with him a crowd with swords and clubs . . .

Mt 26:47 . . . and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs . . . [the size of the arresting force has been increased]

Mk 14:45 . . . and said, "Master!" And he kissed him.

Mt 26:49 . . . and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him [Judas' greeting is more friendly, and thus more false, than the one in Mk]

Mk [no parallel text]

Mt 26:50. Jesus said to him, "Friend, why are you here?" [The irony of the salutation "Friend" continues the previous note; the betrayal is emphasized]

In this comparison, Matthew comes across as a consistent if subtle intensification of Mark's story: the greed of Judas, his leading role in the betrayal (gained by slightly muting the initiative of the chief priests), and the more vivid and sinister detail, from "thirty pieces of silver" (Zechariah 11:12-14; so like Matthew to let Scripture drive his story) to the treacherous salutation "Hail." In this way the initiative and the falseness of Judas are more apparent to the hearer than was the case in Mark. The writer of John was surely a dramatist, but Matthew, it seems to me, here operates in a dramatic way on his Markan source.

If so, then we have, through all four Gospels, a Judas Trajectory development, in which each stage in turn magnifies and intensifies the perfidy of Judas, in the order

Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn

The Trajectory is evidence for that order of the Gospels, or at any rate of their final compositional states. Similar trajectories can be demonstrated for the divinization of Jesus and the respect and sympathy shown to Mary, for the decreasing prominence of Jesus' baptism, and for the increasing prominence of Jerusalem in the story of Jesus.³ Except for the last, which is probably a reflection of the transfer of the center of the Jesus movement from Galilee to Jerusalem, and is thus merely circumstantial, none of these developments is very likely to have run in the opposite direction. Taken together, they would appear to put the priority of Mark beyond serious doubt.

Works Cited

E Bruce Brooks. *Four Gospel Trajectories*. Alpha v1 (2017) 15-16

F F Bruce. *The Gospel of John*. Eerdmans 1983

D A Carson. *The Gospel According to John*. Eerdmans 1991

James H Charlesworth. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2v Doubleday 1983, 1985

Frederick William Danker. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament [BDAG]*.

3ed Chicago 2000

Konstantin von Tischendorf (ed). *Apocalypses Apocryphae . . .* 1866; Olms 1966

³See Brooks **Four**. To the developmental sequences there mentioned, there may now be added a fifth: a Judas Trajectory.