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Judas Iscariot - Juda the deliver

Joseph Wallfield

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The name of the faithless disciple of Jesus, Judas Iscariot, has conventionally been interpreted on the basis of the form which Westcott and Hort and Nestle-Aland read in Mark 3:19: 'Ισκαριώτης, as if < Hebrew 'יִשְׁתַּרְפָּה = "man of Qerioth", and this explanation is repeated in nearly all the psittacine commentaries on the Gospels. Yet it is remarkable how the Vetus Latina and the Vetus Syra fail to support the form with initial iota. Not one manuscript of the Old Latin translation has initial i- in this passage, and the Syriac form škřnν departs completely from the transcription that should have been expected.

I therefore follow the suggestion made early in this century by William Benjamin Smith that the first syllable of the name is Aramaic skar- in the meaning "to deliver", but I interpret -iotes as a suffix of agent, so that the primary form is Greek Σκαριώτης, whence Latin Scariota and Syriac škřnν, which in turn became Arabic ʿṣrṇn and Persian škřnν. The ʾ of the Arabic and Persian reflects the Syriac pronunciation of k as kh, while the emphatic š shows that the Greek original had ʔ and not Θ. The form Σκαριώτης is a pseudo-Hebrew variant that cannot be analyzed, although the onomastica sacra of late antiquity were at no loss to derive it from the root zkr and the word yāh, explaining Scarioth as memoriāle Domini.

In Biblical Hebrew the usual form of the root in question is sgr in the hiphil, but sikkər is attested at Isaiah 19:4, וֶ-סִּיקָאְרִי, which the LXX translates καὶ παραδότω "and I shall deliver". In all probability this is an Aramaism intended to mimic the wording of a treaty or decree. The root is further attested in Mandaic, the Eastern Aramaic dialect of the Mandaeans, a Semitic Gnostic sect that regards John the Baptist as the Messiah.

That an inkling of this interpretation circulated in the first half of the third century is shown by the passage in Origen's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew which reads:

...Cuius mysterium fuit ludas Scariota, qui abit ad sacerdotes, et de tradiione Christi pactus est pretium. Audivi aliquem exponentem patriam proditoris ludae secundum interpretationem hebraicam exsuffocatum vocari; quod si ita est, magna convenientia inventur nominis patriae eius cum exitu mortis ipsius, quoniam et ipse laqueo se suspendens prophetiam nominis patriae sua ex suffocatus impellet.

This passage indicates that Origen, reading Σκαριώτης in his Greek text, explained the name as the paša of Jewish Aramaic skr = "to strangle, choke" + the gentile suffix -iotes, so that Judas was a native of the country whose name meant "strangled", a prophecy of his later suicide by hanging. Hence the formal if not the semantic analysis that I here propose had by the middle of the third Christian century dawned on interpreters of the mysterious epithet.

The significance of the name Judas (I)scariot had been surmised earlier by Gustav Volkmar in his commentary on Mark when he wrote: "Der Ἰουδαῖος ἀνήρ τῶν ἱππών ist für Mk. das Abbild des Christum in den Tod bringenden Judenthums, das in der alten Jüngerschaft mit ihm bis zuletzt auts engste vereinigt war" = "The Judas one of the twelve is for Mk. the symbol of the Jewry that sent Christ to his death, which in the old group of disciples was most intimately associated with him to the very end".
William Benjamin Smith further saw that Judas is the symbol of the Jewish people in the Gospel narrative, although he missed the fairly obvious explanation of the name Ἰουδας as the LXX form of Judah (Genesis 29:35 and passim), the eponymous ancestor of the nation, so that Ἰουδας Σκαριώτης = Judah the Deliverer. That Judas stands for Jewry collectively, for the Jewish people, "seems to become a necessary hypothesis as soon as we perceive the impossibility of understanding Judas as a man.... I suspect that the oldest thought was of the surrender of the great idea of the Jesus, of the Jesus-cult, by the Jews to the heathen. This, in fact, was the supreme, the astounding, fact of early Christian history, and engaged intensely the minds of men. It is not strange that it should find manifold expression by parable and by symbol in the Gospels."7

More recently Smith's explanation has been revived by J.-Alfred Morin, who points out the the words ὑς καὶ παρέδωκεν αὐτόν which follow the name Σκαριώθ in Mark 3:19 are an interpretation of the epithet: "which is to say, the one who delivered him."8 The name is similarly glossed in Matthew 10:4 and Luke 6:16.

The initial iota of Ἰσκαριώτης can best be ascribed to Phrygian influence, as inscriptions from Phrygia present examples of words with prothetic ϊ- (Schwyzer, Griechische Grammatik, I 123). Since Antioch was the focal point of primitive Christianity in the Hellenistic world, the initial vowel can be explained merely as a dialectal innovation within Greek, not as part of the Semitic etymon of the name.

It is regrettable that even the latest (1983) edition of Nestle-Aland consistently downplays or ignores the evidence for Σκαριώτης. For example, at Mark 3:19 the editors cite the Itala, the Vetus Syra and the Persian Diatessaron as support for the reading Σκαριώθε, when in fact Latin Scariotes and Scariotes, Syriac σκυγή and Persian σκυγ can be joint witnesses for Σκαριώτης. In John 12:4 all the readings are mustered under various permutations with Ἰσκαριώτης, as if no evidence for Σκαριώτης could be found, even though not one Old Latin manuscript writes the name with initial I-.

Highly instructive are the readings of the Codex Bezae:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Matthew 10:4</th>
<th>ὁ Σκαριώτης</th>
<th>Scariotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 26:14</td>
<td>Σκαριώτης</td>
<td>Scariotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 3:19</td>
<td>Σκαριώθε</td>
<td>Scarioth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 14:10</td>
<td>Σκαριώτης</td>
<td>Scariotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 6:16</td>
<td>Σκαριώθε</td>
<td>in Scarioth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 22:3</td>
<td>τὸν καλούμενον Ἰσκαριώθ</td>
<td>qui vocatur Iscarioth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 6:7:1</td>
<td>Σκαριώθε</td>
<td>Scarioth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 12:4</td>
<td>ἀπὸ Καριώτου</td>
<td>a Caryote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 13:2</td>
<td>ἀπὸ Καριώτου</td>
<td>a Caryote</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In the last of these passages there has been a contamination of the peculiar Greek reading and the Latin one; the scribe wrote *non qui a* and then followed these words with *Scaryotes < Σκαριώτης* of the original.

Not usually cited in the discussion, but of relevance are the forms of the name in the manuscripts of the Toledoth Jeshu, the Jewish anti-Gospel that circulated in Aramaic, Hebrew and other languages during the Middle Ages and early modern times. Most significant of these is the form *škrtv* in a recently discovered Aramaic text of the Toledoth that perfectly matches the one in Syriac sources\(^9\). This and later forms such as *škrtv* and *škrtv* in the manuscripts collated by Krauss\(^9\) give no support to the interpretation "man of Qerioth", and all rather point toward an original Σκαριώτης, under the influence of the Syriac and later of Old Italian Scariotto (Dante, *Inferno*, XXXIV, 62), itself a secondary witness for the tradition of the Vetus Latina and of Saint Jerome, a reading that survived into Caxton's version of the *Legenda Aurea*. The same is true of the reading *yškryv* at Matthew 10\(^6\) in the Hebrew translation made in the late medieval period and published by Christian scholars of the sixteenth century.\(^1\) Hence the testimony of the Greek papyri and manuscripts written later than the middle of the third century can be deemed outweighed by the agreement of the Vetus Syra with the Aramaic Toledoth Jeshu and the Vetus Latina, supported by the daughter versions of these early translations.

In conclusion, it may be affirmed that against the confused and contradictory evidence of the Greek witnesses, the testimony of the Vetus Latina, the Vetus Syra, the Arabic and Persian texts of the Diatessaron, and the Toledoth Jeshu establishes the name of the faithless disciple of Jesus as *Ἰούδας Σκαριώτης* = Judah the Deliverer, in the Gospel drama the symbolic persona of the Jewish people who delivered the Nazarene to arrest, trial and crucifixion.

**NOTES**

1. First appeared in *Comments on Etymology*, vol. 17, no. 7-8, January 1988, pp. 2-5.


