

Death and Retribution: Medieval Visions of the End of Judas the Traitor

by Otfried Lieberknecht

Invited lecture, **Saint John's University (Collegeville, MN), 13 May 1997**, sponsored by the Department of Modern and Classical Languages, The CSB/SJU Honors Program, the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, and the SJU School of Theology. All copyrights reserved by the author (1997).

1

Although being described in the *Book of Job* as "the land of gloom and chaos" ("terra ubi umbra mortis et nullus ordo" *Iob* 10:22), Hell for Christian tradition was not a region of disorder and chaos, but a realm of well ordered justice. Beginning with the Apocalypse of St. Peter in the second century, and the closely related and highly influential Vision of St. Paul, Christian visions of the Other World developed a topography of Hell where the damned are grouped according to their sins, "bound in bundles" to be burnt (*Mt* 13:30), and assigned punishments which correspond to their specific sins. In this tradition, Hell makes no exception, but is an essential part of a cosmos on which the words of Wisdom state: "thou hast arranged all things by measure and number and weight" (*Sap* 11:20). Yet gloom and disorder do reign in Hell, but only, as Gregory the Great explains, in the hearts of the damned, because these don't recognise the order and suffer eternally the 'confusio mentis' which already in their lives had led them to sin and now makes them forever blind for the beatific vision of the Divine ([CCSL](#) t.163, p.526s.).

Apart from the diversity of punishments which results from the diversity of sins, it is mainly the specific relation between punishment and sin that constitutes the order of justice in medieval Christian Hell. We are familiar with this principle under the names "lex talionis", "retaliation", or "retribution" (cf. [Günther 1889](#), [Herdlitzka 1932](#)); and thanks to Dante it is also still widely known under the name "contrap(p)asso" (cf. [D'Ovidio 1923](#)), 'counterpass' or rather 'counter-suffering', which Dante adopted from the Latin terminology of scholastic translations of Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* V, 5, 1132b). It describes a form of punishment corresponding to the crime not only in its abstract quantitative degree, but also in its concrete quality, in terms of scholastic philosophy: "equal passion repaid for previous action" (*S. th.* IIa-IIae, 61, 4, resp.). In its simplest form, the perpetrator has to suffer the same loss or damage which he himself has caused to another, as it used to be illustrated by the biblical formula "an eye for an eye". Yet criminal praxis as well as Christian visions of the Other World included also a greater variety of forms of retribution, which can be termed 'talio analogica', where the punishment reproduces or reflects other characteristics of the crime: like punishing a part of the body which had been used to commit the deed (example: cutting off a thief's hand); or punishing the perpetrator with the same instrument which he had used to commit his deed (example: boiling the false coiner in his crucible); or punishing the criminal by the

good on which he had directed his criminal impulse (example: punishing venality by molten gold). Particularly important for Christian descriptions of the Other World were also those variants where the material form of the punishment is only metaphorically related to the internal state of mind which had led to the sin: as, for instance, in punishing by fire those who had been inflamed by sinful lust.

The New Testament prohibits retaliation as a form of human interaction (cf. *Mt* 5:38, *Rm* 12:17, *1 Th* 5:15) and assigns it exclusively to God himself or to the authorities of the State acting as 'God's minister' (*Rm* 13:4). But there was no doubt that divine justice herself -- or at least the commutative part of this justice, which apportioned rewards and punishments to merits and sins -- conforms with the 'lex talionis', in its stricter sense and in the wider sense of 'talio analogica' as well. This belief was based on explicit statements in the Bible, and also on concrete examples in biblical history where divine justice could be seen at work. The only detailed biblical description of retribution in Hell is the tale about the beggar Lazarus and the rich man in Hell (*Lc* 16:19-31): the rich man, who had "feasted sumptuously every day" but had denied even the crumbs under his table to the starving beggar at his door, after his death is punished by the fire of Hell and now begs himself for a drop of water to cool his tongue. Christian exegesis relished to elaborate on the correspondances between his earlier state of abundance and his posterious state of indigence, between the crumbs of bread which he had denied to the beggar and the drop of water which he himself will now be denied forever. And the prominent sufferings of his tongue -- from the thirst caused by the fire of hell -- were explained as a retribution not only for his wasteful abuse of food, but also for his abuse of speech, because, according to the Christian fathers, sumptuous feasting necessarily goes along with idle talk (cf. [Gnilka 1963](#), p.63). Apart from this direct representation of divine justice in Hell, there were also numerous biblical examples of malfactors which illustrated already in This World by the form of their death or punishment the logic of divine retribution: as, for instance, Haman hanged on the same cross which he had erected to hang Mordachai (*Est* 7:10), or the false accusers of Daniel who had to die in the same lions' den where they had been planning to kill Daniel (*Dn* 6:24). Another example of this kind, less obvious as a case of divine retribution, yet particularly important in this sense for medieval tradition, was the death of Judas traitor of Christ. In the following I want to introduce first the medieval understanding of this death as a punishment, and will then demonstrate how, in some cases, it has informed medieval representations of the punishments in Hell.

2

The New Testament gives two different accounts of Judas' death (cf. [Knox 1924](#), [Leclercq 1928](#), [Haugg 1930](#), [Halas 1946](#), [Benoit 1953](#)). According to the *Gospel of Matthew*, Judas, when he saw that Jesus would be condemned, repented his betrayal and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. When he was rejected by them, he threw the money down in the temple, went away and hanged himself with a noose, "recessit et abiens laqueo se suspendit" (*Mt* 27:5). A second account is given by Petrus in the *Acts of the Apostles*, when the remaining apostles and disciples gather to elect a successor for Judas, and when Petrus refers to the way in which Judas had died (*Act* 1:18). The Vulgate translates his words: "suspensus crepuit medius / et diffusa sunt omnia viscera eius", 'being hanged, he burst open in the middle and all his viscera were spilled', or according to the Douai Version: 'being hanged, he burst asunder in the midst: and

all his bowels gushed out'. According to these translations, Petrus' account conforms with Matthew's and only adds two details, the bursting of the body and the gushing of the inner organs. But as philologists in post-medieval times have pointed out, the Greek word ("PRHNS GENO/MENOS") which the Vulgate translates with "suspensus", "hanged", is not very clear in the original. It seems not to refer to a hanging, but rather means 'falling headlong', as the Revised Standard Version translates. Nevertheless, for patristic and medieval tradition the two biblical accounts did not contradict each other, but completed each other, and for this tradition Judas died hanging from a rope, with his body bursting open and his inner organs gushing out. Apart from these biblical accounts, there is also the apocryphal account of Papias of Hierapolis, allegedly a disciple of St. John. His account (*PG* t.5, col.1259-1262, critical ed. *DAV* I (1970), p.134s.) is transmitted only as a Greek fragment and was strongly expanded in the course of transmission. The earliest and briefest form tells: "Judas walked about in this world a sad example of impiety; for his body having swollen to such an extent that he could not pass where a chariot could pass easily; he was crushed by the chariot, so that his bowels gushed out". Given that the account of Papias seems to have had no impact on Latin tradition, I will spare you the details which Greek tradition added by describing the swelling of the various parts of this body and the stench which it is said to have produced.

As for the Latin exegetical tradition (on Latin and medieval Judas traditions in general see [Creizenach 1876](#), [Porte 1883](#), [Bergamaschi 1909](#), [Baum 1916](#), [Lehmann 1929](#), [Breitenbucher 1934](#), [Goetz 1950](#), [Dinzelsbacher 1977](#), [Birbaumer 1980](#), [Wolf 1989](#), [Monstadt 1995](#), [Westerhoff-Sebald 1996](#)), a useful summary is given by Bede the Venerable (before 709/16), who takes up current patristic interpretations of the mode of Judas' death and whose own gloss then came to be a standard during the following centuries (*PL* t.92, col.944s.):

"And hanging he burst open in the middle": the demented traitor found himself a fitting punishment, because the knot of the noose brought death to the throat from which the treacherous voice had come. He also found a fitting place for his death, for he who had delivered the master of men and angels to death and therefore was hateful both to the heavens and the earth, died in the middle of the air, to be associated with the spirits of the air, following the example of Achitophel and Absalom who had persecuted David. Fitting was also the way in which his death arrived, because the viscera which had conceived the crime of treachery burst and fell down to fly in the empty air. It was a punishment very similar to the death to which also Arius is said to have been condemned: Judas had conspired against the human nature of Christ, whereas Arius had tried to extinguish His divine nature, and so both who had lived void of sense also died with an empty belly.

[*"Et suspensus crepuit medius"* (*Act* 1:18). Dignam sibi poenam traditor amens invenit, ut videlicet guttur quo vox prodicionis exierat laquei nodus necaret. Dignum etiam locum interitus quaesivit, ut qui hominum angelorumque Dominum morti tradiderat coelo terraeque perosus, quasi aeris tantummodo spiritibus sociandus (cf. *Eph* 2:2), juxta exemplum Achitophel et Absalon qui regem David persecuti sunt, aeris medio periret (cf. *II Rg* 17:23, 18:9). Cui utique satis digno exitu mors ipsa successit, ut viscera quae dolum prodicionis conceperant rupta caderent, et vacuas evolverentur in auras. Cujus simillima poenae mors Arium haeresiarcham damnasse refertur, ut quia ille humanitatem Christi, iste divinitatem extinguere moliebatur, ambo sicut sensu inanes vixerant, sic quoque ventre vacui perirent.]

Let me comment on these explanations point per point, including also traditional views not or not yet present in Bede's gloss.

The *throat* strangled by the noose is interpreted by Bede as the organ of the treacherous *voice*, which had betrayed his master. A more metaphoric understanding associated it with the malfactor's *avarice*, with his greed for money. This latter idea is indicated in numerous medieval depictions which represent Judas strangled by the strap of his purse, or show him in episodes of his earlier life as carrying the purse hanging casually from his neck, thus indicating that he had already 'fallen into the noose of avarice'. But we may ask: what has avarice to do with the throat? The idea is based on the notion of avarice being 'insatiable' and 'swallowing riches', as expressed, for instance, in the *Book of Job*: "He swallows down riches and vomits them up again; God casts them out of his belly" (*Iob* 20,15). A vivid depiction of this 'insatiable avarice' can be found in the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, an allegorical poem of the late fourth or early fifth century, where personifications of virtues and vices fight against each other over the soul of man, and where each vice, when defeated by its contrasting virtue, suffers an appropriate death. In this poem 'Avaritia' (vv.454ss., cf. [Gnilka 1963](#), p.67ss.) is depicted as girded with a huge bag or with several baskets tied to her belly, where she collects with her greedy claws the gold and other objects of value which her fellow vice *Luxus* had lost on the battlefield. Now to indicate her 'insatiable' nature, Avaritia is presented as staring with a gaping mouth, "ore inhians", at all the riches left on the field. And when she is later defeated by 'Operatio', the virtue of operative Charity, this virtue slings the 'forceful knots of her fingers' ('duros unlnarum nodos') around Avaritia's throat and strangles her to death. The model for this punishment and death "obliso... gutture" (v.590) is, of course, Judas. For in the beginning of this episode Avaritia boasts of her victories in biblical history, and the first example which she adduces is her triumph over Christ's own apostle, who, as she triumphantly states, had paid for succumbing to her by dying with a strangled throat, "obliso... collo" (v.535).

Interpretations tend to focus on Judas' throat, but also the *bursting of his belly* and *effusion of his inner organs* were often regarded as meaningful. To Bede, the effusion of the inner organs offers an opportunity to point out a typological parallel with the heretic Arius in the early history of the Church. In the tradition of Eusebius, Arius, too, was said to have died from a sudden effusion of his inner organs, an effusion which according to this tradition occurred when Arius relieved nature (cf. [Hill 1981](#), p.441). This mode of death lent itself to moral interpretations, as they can already be found in Sedulius' *Carmen paschale* (I, vv.299ss., [CSEL](#) t.10, p.38s.), according to whom the heretic's death with an emptied belly was a fit punishment for his life void of sense ("Tam uacuu sensu, iustae quam tempore poenae / Visceribus fuis uacuu quoque uentre remansit"). Bede takes up not only this moral interpretation, transferring it also to Judas himself, but also explains the similarity of their deaths with regard to a more specific similarity of their crimes: In both cases he interpretes the viscera as the organs which had bred the sinful conspiracy, in the case of Judas a conspiracy against the human person of Christ, and in the case of Arius a conspiracy against the divine person, because Arius in his teachings had denied the divinity of Christ. This understanding of the effusion of Judas' viscera, too, came to be a standard for medieval tradition, but it was not the only possible one. A different interpretation can be found in Bernard of Clairvaux who, playing with the possible sense of 'viscera' as meaning 'vital substance' in the sense of 'monetary fortune', associates the viscera of Judas with the money to which the avaricious gives vital importance but which nevertheless is lost and dispersed at his death ([PL](#) t.184, col.753):

He threw down the money in the temple, departed and hanged himself with a noose. He had

already earlier departed himself from Christ, and had hanged himself with the noose of avarice. But what earlier he had done only in secret, his death now notified publicly to the world. The quality of the exterior punishment disclosed the nature of his sin, for man shall be punished by the same by which he had sinned. Being hanged, he burst open in the middle: the belly was full, and the inflated person burst; it burst in the middle, where the seat of Satan is. [...] And all his viscera were dispersed: the viscera of the avaricious are his money, they are dispersed and lost, but those of the charitable man are collected.

[Projecit eos in templo, et abiens laqueo se suspendit. Jam quidem diu quod a Christo abierat, et avaritiae laqueo se suspenderat: sed quod fecerat in occulto, palam omnibus innotuit. Exterioris poenae qualitas supplicii modum aperuit; quia per quae peccaverit homo, per haec et punietur. "Suspendus crepuit medius" (*Act* 1:18): plenus erat venter, et ruptus est uter; crepuit medius, ubi sedes erat satanae. Crepuit ergo vas contumeliae, quia non erat de vasis figuli, in sepultura peregrinorum sortem non habuit, sed velut testa crepitans per inane dissiliit. "Et diffusa sunt omnia viscera ejus" (*Act* 1:18). Pecunia viscera sunt avari; illa diffunduntur et perduntur, sed viri misericordiae colliguntur.]

The imagery of this explanation comes close, again, to the representation of Avaritia in the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, where the virtue Operatio, after her victory, tears open the sack on the belly of the vice, takes out the now dirty and rusty money and happily distributes it to the poor.

Still another, quasi-realistic explanation for the bursting of the Judas body came up in the 12th century, where it seems to make its first appearance in the *Glossa ordinaria* ([PL](#) t.114, col. 429) and in Petrus Comestor's *Historia scholastica* ([PL](#) t.198, col.1649-1650), to be then popularized further by Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* (cap. 45, ed. [Graesse 1890](#), p.186). According to this tradition, the traitor's body had to burst, because the soul could not take its usual exit through the mouth, given that it would have soiled the mouth which, in its treacherous kiss, had touched Christ's own lips. Medieval passion plays expanded this idea and by introducing the personification of Despair and some assisting devils who discuss the problem at length and then help with their knives to open the body and tear out the poor soul, usually a doll or for better effect a living animal like a chicken, which they then jubilantly usher to Hell.

The bursting of the body precisely "*in the middle*" is left unexplained in Bede's gloss, whereas Bernard explains this 'middle' as the seat of the devil, referring probably either to the heart where Satan had inspired the treason, or to the belly as the seat of greed. The term is interpreted at some length also in a metrical poem on the life of Judas, where we read:

Thus he bursts in the middle, and death strikes his entrails, since he had despised the one who was standing in the middle and mediating [i.e. between God and mankind]; he who despised the middle bursts open in the middle; death destroyed him, abducting him from the middle of his life, since he was not very apt for the middle, whereas the saints without fear of death kept the middle [i.e. the golden measure, the middle between extremes]. Unlucky Judas fell, felled by the sin of the odious throat; may all traitors perish like him.

[... inde crepat medius, mors viscera concutit eius / qui medium stantem contempserat et mediantem; / qui medium sprexit medius crepat. Hunc abolevit / de medio raptum fera mors medio minus aptum; / absque metu fati medium tenere beati / infelix cecidit Judas quem

culpa cecidit gutturis exosi; pereant sic quique dolosi] (ed. [Lehmann 1929](#), p.334)

Of special importance was also the hanging '*in the air*', 'between heaven and earth', separated from the realms of men and angels, but associated with the demons and with Satan, the 'prince of the air' (*Eph 2:2*). For this point Bede adopts another, very widespread typological parallel in the Old Testaments, by paralleling the death of Judas with the death of Achitophel and Absalom (cf. [Fechter 1961](#), p.313s.). Achitophel was the former counsellor of David, who supported David's son Absalom in his rebellion against David. When he realized that the rebellion would fail, he returned to the house of his fathers and hanged himself. Whereas Absalom, trying to flee on his mule from the battlefield in the wood of Ephraim, got his head caught in the branches of a great oak and helplessly 'hanging between heaven and earth' was killed by David's soldiers. The counsellor conspiring against his king, and the son conspiring against his father, were both regarded as prefigurations of Judas the traitor of Christ, of the new David, in a long exegetical tradition which explored the similarities of their sins and of their deaths. Even authors who did not mention the names of Achitophel and Absalom adopted this tradition or were influenced by it, when they transferred to Judas the words 'hanging between heaven and earth', which in the Bible do not occur in the the accounts of Judas, but in the account of the Absalom's death ("suspensio inter caelum et terram").

The Bible does not specify whether Judas hanged himself on a tree or in a building, but figurative arts most often represented him as hanging from a tree, and popular traditions identified this tree with various families of trees. Although usually not being discussed in exegetical writings, the Judas tree nevertheless had a certain importance for the understanding of his death as a retribution. We find this expressed in figural arts, where Judas hanging from his tree is paralleled or contrasted to Christ hanging on the Cross, as on an Italian ivory table dating from the early 5th century and preserved in the British Museum ([Schiller 1968](#), p.87 and tab. 323), where Judas on the left side is hanging from his tree, his purse lying below his feet on the ground, whereas Christ is represented on the right side, hanging on his Cross and surrounded by his mother Mary, by St. John and by Longinus. The sense of this parallel arrangement of the traitor and of his victim is obvious: because Judas was guilty that Christ had to die hanging on the 'wood', the Rood of the Cross ("quem vos interemistis suspendentes in ligno" Act 5,30), the malfactor too had to die in a similar way, hanging from the wood of a tree.

We have so far surveyed some points of a tradition where the circumstances of his death -- the head in the noose, the strangling of the throat, the opening of the body 'in the middle', the gushing of the inner organs, the hanging 'between heaven and earth' and occasionally also the tree from which he was hanging -- were related back to circumstances of his deed, in order to interpret this death as punishment for his crime. Both the crime and the punishment took place in This World, and it was Judas himself who chose the mode of his death, but in doing so he nevertheless fulfilled a providential plan, and chose a punishment which had been foreseen by divine justice with regard to the nature of his crime.

3

As we have already seen in the case of the personification of avarice in the *Psychomachia*, the

death of Judas could serve as model from which an appropriate punishment for the avaricious in general was derived. For the same reason, in medieval representations of Hell we often find nameless persons and in Dante's *Inferno* occasionally also historical persons who suffer a punishment similar to the death of Judas, because of a similarity of their sin. A late, but impressive example can be found on the frescoes in the Cathedral of San Gimignano, in the *Inferno* painted by Taddeo di Bartolo in 1398. Here, in the section labelled L'AVARITIA, we find four sinners tortured by ten demons. One of these sinners, almost reduced to a skeleton, is hanging from a rope and carries a huge sack with goods on his shoulders which adds to the weight of his body and by consequence increases the pain which he suffers from the noose around his throat. Two demons at his sides are mockingly holding huge ladles in front of his face, filled with a glowing (?) substance which I cannot identify, but which seems to raise the appetite of the hanged. Below him on the right a sinner is bound to a post, and in addition to the omnipresent fire of Hell which tortures him and his companions, he is also stabbed by a demon into his heart. On the left side a third sinner labelled "AVARO" is strangled by two demons who are pulling the two ends of a rope slung around his neck, a rope which seems connected with the strap of a purse held by one of these demons in his hand. And below them a fourth sinner labelled as an usurer ("USURAIIO") is lying on his back, with a demon sitting on his breast who is defaecating coins of money into his mouth, punishing, as we may infer, the usurer's insatiable greed of money. In other Visions of Hell there sometimes occurs the motif that the avaricious have to eat coins which have been made red-hot in the fire of Hell (cf. Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale*, XXVII, 84s.), but in Taddeo's fresco it seems that the source from which these coins issue is already enough to spoil the usurer's appetite. With the exception of the person stabbed into the heart, all the avaricious in this section suffer variations of a punishment which affects their throat or mouth, and which especially in the case of hanging and strangling is or comes close to being reminiscent of the Judas death. It should be noted that Judas himself is not present in this subsection of Taddeo's *Inferno*, because Judas, as we shall see later, is punished in the central section by Satan himself.

Allusive variations of the mode of his death as a punishment are frequent in medieval representations of Hell and occur also in Dante's *Inferno*. I will chose only two examples here. In Dante's *Inferno*, usury is punished together with blasphemy and with sodomy in the third ring of the seventh circle, where a rain of flakes of fire, hot vapours and the heat of the soil punish the souls. Dante meets the usurers as a group apart (*Inf.* XVII, 28ss.), sitting at the very margins of this zone, and trying with hectic movements of their hands to protect themselves against the heat of their surroundings. Their faces, burnt by the fire, are unrecognizable for Dante-pilgrim, but each one of them has a purse hanging on his neck on which the heraldic symbol of his family is represented and on which the eyes of the usurer are greedily fixed. The purse at their neck is not part of their punishment in a direct and material way, it does not strangle them, rather to the contrary it seems to give them a certain pleasure, because, as the text phrases it, the souls 'eat it with their eyes' (v.57). But it characterizes them as Judas-like sinners and illustrates how their sinful preoccupations persist in Hell. Yet a more elaborate parallel with the death of Judas occurs in the next circle, the circle of simple fraud as opposed to treachery (*Inf.* XXVIII). In the ninth ditch of this circle Dante-pilgrim encounters the "seminator di scandalo e di scisma" (v.35), sowers of discord, who are 'split' or wounded by a devil's sword, for having 'split' the body of religious, political or familial community. The first of the six damned which are presented in this place with their individual mutilations is Mohammed, the founder of Islam, compared in his outward appearance with a damaged cask, and described as split or 'burst' from his chin down to his anus, "rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla" (v.24), with the inner organs emerging from this wound. These

inner organs are more specifically the bowels ("le minugia" v.25), hanging down between the legs, furthermore the inner organs of the thorax which are summed up as "la corata" (v.26), and finally the stomach, circumscribed and highlighted in its digestive function as "il tristo sacco / che merda fa di quel che si trangugia" (v.26s.), 'the dire sack which makes shit of what one swallows'. It is strange that apart from Giulio Marzot ([Marzot 1956](#), p.26) and more recently Thomas D. Hill ([Hill 1981](#), p.442), no commentator seems to have noticed the similarity of Mohammed's punishment to the death of Judas, a very striking similarity, although Mohammed is punished by a sword, not by a rope, and although he is walking on the ground of Hell. To understand why the death of Judas is particularly apt as a model or allusive point of reference for Mohammed's punishment in Hell, we have to remember the typological understanding of Judas. For Christian typological exegesis, Judas was a representant of the unbelieving Jews, on the one hand, and a prefiguration of future Christian heretics like Arius, on the other. And the mode of his death was seen as an appropriate punishment also for doctrinal sins, as we have seen in Bede the Venerable's gloss linking the deaths of Judas and Arius. Mohammed, too, was seen by medieal Christians as a heretic, a continuator both of Jewish and of Christian heresies, who had adopted and further distorted from his Jewish and heretical teachers elements of biblical doctrine. Heresy is not the only crime punished in Mohammed, because otherwise Dante would have given him more favourable treatment and would have presented him in the sixth circle together with the heretics in their red-hot coffins, not in the deeper circle of fraud together with sowers of political and domestic discord. Yet Mohammed's crime is also less grave than the crime of Judas, because otherwise he would be in the ninth and last circle together with the traitors in the ice of Cocytus. But the biblical model serves Dante to indicate by the similarity of punishments an analogy, not identity, of sins, and it also serves him to indicate a typological understanding of Mohammed's role in history, characterizing him as a successor of Judas and Arius, if we may adopt here the gloss of Bede. While Judas had sinned against the human person of Christ, Mohammed, like Arius, had denied the divinity of Christ and had sinned also against the mystical body of Christ, the Church. As for the precise details of his punishment, we may recur to Dante's early commentators in the 14th century, who do not mention and probably don't notice the parallel with Judas, but nevertheless in their interpretation of Mohammed's punishment come close to those explanations which Bede and other exegetes had found for the death of Judas. Particularly rich is the commentary of Benvenuto da Imola (ed. [Lacaita 1887](#), II, p.353), written in the last quarter of the 14th century. Benvenuto points out that the cleaving of Mohammed's body from the chin ("dal mento") downwards necessarily splits *the throat*, organ of the *voice* which had diffused Mohammed's doctrine and had committed the religious schism. Benvenuto also points out that the initial comparison of Mohammed's body with a cask highlights the body as a *vessel* and thus characterizes the person morally as a 'vessel of great capacity, but full of wickedness and malice, which he effused through his full and open mouth' ("vas magnae capacitatis, plenum nequitia et malitia, quam pleno ore et aperto effudit" p.353s.). Although Benvenuto cites a parallel in Horace, the comparison of man to a vessel is rather biblical than classical imagery, and in the context of Judas' death it reminds us of explanations as given by Bernard of Clairvaux. Because Bernard had compared the dying Judas to a bursting "uter", a skin for wine or oil, and metaphorically an inflated person full of nothing. And he had described him as a "vas contumeliae", a 'vessel of sin' which had to be broken and scattered in the wind ([PL](#) t.184, col.753B). As to Mohammed's inner organs, Benvenuto explains that the circumscription of his *stomach* albeit its vulgar phrasing can be understood in a less crudely material sense as referring metaphorically to the 'food of doctrine', swallowed by Mohammed but turned by him into repulsive faeces, an explanation which seems to be given with specific regard to the parts of biblical doctrine which Mohammed had incorporated into his Koran. For a more thorough

interpretation of Mohammed's punishment and its subtext in the death of Judas, it would be necessary to include also the final episode of this canto, because in this final episode the deaths of Achitophel and Absalom, the two Old Testament prefigurations of the death of Judas, serve Dante in a similar way as a point of reference for his description of the punishment of Bertran de Born, sower of familial discord (cf. [Cassell 1984](#), p.114, n.27; p.138, n.37). But instead of analysing this highly complex composition where Old and New Testament are related with each other in the opening and the closing episode of this canto, I will rather proceed with my survey by addressing now the question of how the death of Judas did inform medieval representations of his own punishment in Hell.

4

In Christian descriptions of the Other World, the souls or their resurrected bodies normally exhibit no marks of physical defects as caused by accident or by age. It was also not usual to draw a relation between the mode of one's death and the specific mode of punishment or reward which the same person had to expect in the Other World. But Judas is an exception from this rule. There are several works in figural arts which represent him hanging in, or at the margins of, sceneries of Hell and Last Judgement, sometimes in a prominent position which makes it clear that this association of the mode of his death with the Other World was not an occasional lapsus on the part of the artist. One example is the tympanum of the central West porch of the cathedral of Freiburg ([Schiller 1968](#), p.87s. and tab. 15), a sculptural relief where the hanging of Judas is linked with the representation of Hell at the Descent of Christ. The tree from which Judas is hanging extends its branches over the whole scenery of Hell and seems to be an infernal counterpart to the tree of life or to the cross, that is, a tree of eternal death. A similar relief at the cathedral of Freiburg links the death of Judas with the scenery of the Last Judgement ([Schiller 1968](#), p.88 and tab. 280), presenting him as being hanged by devils, with his bowels gushing from his split belly, and with the thirty pieces of silver still falling down from his right hand. Another example can be found on the mosaics of the cupola of the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence ([Cassell 1984](#), tab. 39), where Judas is represented as a richly clothed man hanging in the Inferno, without the opening of his body but identified by an inscription exhibiting his name. These Florentine mosaics from the late 13th century were most influential for the representations of Hell and Last Judgement by other Tuscan artists and are supposed to have influenced also Dante. And an equally famous example is the frescoes of the Last Judgement painted by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua. Here Judas is represented hanging and with the bowels gushing out from his split body, a small figure but in an eye-catching central position between Satan to his left and the empty Cross of Christ to his right, which itself forms the center of this lower part of the entire Fresco. The Scrovegni Chapel was dedicated in 1305 by Enrico Scrovegni to the Virgin Mary, according to local tradition as an atonement for the usury of his father Reginaldo through which the Scrovegni family had become one of the richest in Padua, and the depiction of Judas Iscariot in Giotto's fresco in fact might be seen as an essential element of the critical self-representation of the Scrovegni family in this Chapel. It is not sure whether Dante was familiar with Giotto's Last Judgement, which seems to have been completed or in the process of being completed at the time of the dedication, but if Dante was familiar with it, he seems to have been unconvinced as to its efficacy as an atonement, because in his own Inferno one of the usurers mentioned above exhibits on the purse at his neck the heraldic sign of the Scrovegni family and is probably no other than Enrico's father Reginaldo (*Inf.* XVII, 64ss.).

These works of art associate the mode of Judas' death with the punishments in Hell, or even transfer it into Hell, thus preserving in the Other World exactly the same mode of punishment which Judas had already suffered in This World. But I want to present also two literary works where an apparently entirely different punishment Hell is described, which nevertheless shares certain features with his death on earth and seems to presuppose the mode of this death as a biblical subtext. The first of these works is the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of St. Brendan*, composed by an otherwise unknown poet Benedeit, who dedicated his work to the first or to the second wife of Henry II. of England (1068-1135). In this poem, Brendan and his monks on their miraculous voyage encounter Judas standing on a rock amidst the sea where he is allowed each Sunday to enjoy a rest from his infernal pains (ed. [Short/Merrilees 1979](#), vv.1211ss.). As Judas explains to Brendan, on the remaining six days of the week he has to suffer six different punishments in various places in upper and lower Hell. The punishments which are of special interest for us are those suffered by him on Friday and Saturday, also the days of Christ's crucifixion and descent to hell. On Friday, Judas is skinned by devils and then rolled by them with a red-hot pole in a mixture of soot and salt. Since his skin always recomposes itself, the whole procedure is repeated ten times and in the end Judas is forced to drink a beverage of molten lead and copper. On the next day he is thrown into Lower Hell, into the worst prison of all Hell, and he is thrown there literally, "sanz corde", without a rope, as he explains. He spends the day in this prison suffering intolerable stench and feeling the urge to vomit, but the molten metal which he had drunken the day before has hardened in the meantime and prevents him from vomiting, so that his body swells and Judas is anguished by fear that he might burst. All these punishments are described in the text, but not explained, and it is not very clear to which specific sins or aspects of his sin they relate. The drinking of molten metal and also the skinning suffered on Friday might be related specifically to avarice, the drinking because it tortures his nutritive and digestive organs and can be associated with his insatiable avarice, and the skinning because in other medieval texts the skinning of one's next occurs as a metaphor for avarice. Helinand de Froidmont (*Vers de la mort* XL, 1-12), for instance, complains that the rich sharpen their fingernails, skin the poor and strike their teeth into their bodies to feed their own insatiable avarice with their substance. By consequence, in the case of Benedeit's the punishment of being skinned and prepared like food might well be an appropriate counterpass for avarice. In any case the drinking of molten metal presents a precise equivalent for the strangling of Judas' throat as suffered in his death, and the following fall 'without a rope' and the swelling of his body and fear of 'bursting' add to the impression that the author has conceived these infernal punishments not without regard to how Judas had been punished on earth.

My second and last example is, of course, Dante's depiction of Judas in the final episode of his *Inferno* (*Inf.* XXXIV). 'Giudecca' is the name of the fourth and last zone of the ninth and lowest circle of Hell, of the circle where treason is punished. At the center of this circle, which is also the center of the globe of earth, Satan is frozen to his middle in the ice of Cocytus, with three faces on his head and with two times three bat-like wings the continuous movement of which raises the icy winds of hell and keeps the Cocytus frozen. Each of his three weeping and blood-dripping faces is coloured in a different colour: his face in the middle is red, his right face exhibits a colour between yellow and white, and his left face is black. And with each of his three mouths he gnaws on a traitor: the one in the middle, who is said to suffer greater pains than his two companions, is Judas Iscariot. Judas sticks with his head in Satan's mouth and sticks out the rest of his body, whereas his two companions stick with their legs in the two other mouths. In the case of Judas Satan not only gnaws the traitor with his teeth, but also scratches and skins the traitor's back with his claws, inflicting with his claws an additional pain which is said to be even worse than the pain caused by

his teeth. The two other arch-traitors are Brutus in the left, black face, and Cassius in the right, yellow-white face, both traitors of Caesar and of the Empire and regarded as minor traitors than Judas the traitor of Christ and of the Church. The general model for Dante's depiction of Satan is assumed to be the figure of Satan on the aforementioned mosaics of the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, where the sinners gnawed and clawed by the Prince of Hell are nameless, and where Judas himself is represented hanging at a distant point at the margins of the zone of Hell. It was only under the influence of Dante's *Inferno* that later imitators of this mosaic, like Bartolo di Taddeo in San Gimignano, adjusted their depiction to Dante's description and placed Judas in Satan's central mouth. Dante's commentators, when explaining the punishment of Judas, usually interpret it as a counterpass and ironic reversal of the way in which Satan entered into Judas at the Last Supper, when Judas accepted the morsel ("et post bucellam tunc introivit in illum Satanas" *Io* 23:27). Less convincingly, his punishment has also been associated with his treacherous kiss ([Cervigni 1989](#), p.71 n.26). But I think that his biblical death in its understanding as a punishment can supply us with new insights to Dante's description. On first sight, there is no similarity to be noted between this description and the mode of his death in the Bible. but if seen in the traditional exegetic and iconografic understanding, some very precise analogies come clear. Judas' head is snatched by Satan's mouth, not by a noose, but nevertheless Judas is '*hanging*' (a word used in the text for one of his companions), hanging '*in the air*', and associated in the most obvious way with Satan as the '*Prince of the Air*', if we consider how Satan's wings keep the infernal winds going. Given that only his head is in Satan's mouth, whereas the rest of his body is hanging outside and tortured by Satan's claws, we can infer that the part of the body tortured by Satan's teeth is precisely the same part of the body which had been punished by the noose: the *throat* (and neck) of the traitor. In Dante's *Inferno* Judas' body does not 'burst open in the middle' and does not effuse his viscera, as far as we can tell, viewing him through Dante's description only from his backside. But Satan's claws scratch his skin and remove "talvolta", from time to time, the whole skin from the back, and this may present a certain similarity with the bursting of his body. In any case, being skinned by Satan's claws presents an appropriate punishment for the avaricious, as in the case of the skinning of Benedict's Judas. Also his hanging specifically from the *central* mouth of Satan seems significant, if seen in the context of the tradition which interpreted the 'hanging' of Judas as a counterpass for the 'hanging' of Christ on the Cross. Some commentators like Singleton have pointed out that Satan with his three heads presents a certain analogy to the form of a cross, an analogy which is highlighted already in the first verse of this canto, where the description of the sight of Satan is opened by an ironic citation of the hymn "Vexilla regis", one of the most famous Christian hymns on the Cross. And John Freccero ([Freccero 1965](#)) has confirmed this interpretation by demonstrating that the three colours of Satan's three faces are the three colours of the mulberry which exegetic tradition had interpreted as a figure of the Cross, of the "tricoloratum vexillum" (Ubertino da Casale). The implications of this arrangement with regard to Judas are clear: hanging on a "vexillum tricoloratum" he suffers an appropriate punishment for the crucifixion of Christ, according to the same logic which we had found expressed on the Italian ivory of the 5th century contrasting Christ on his cross and Judas hanging from his tree. And I would extend this observation one step further: hanging between Brutus *on the left* and Cassius *on the right*, Judas hangs in a similar position as Christ crucified in the middle between the two thieves, "unus a dextris et unus a sinistris" (*Mt* 27:38), "medium autem [crucifixerunt] Iesum" (*Io* 19:18). Thus we find at the center of Hell an infernal refiguration of the crucifixion of Christ between the two thieves, where Judas takes the central position, the place of his victim and master. And we find this refiguration precisely at the cosmic center of the globe, in the middle between Golgatha at the East pole on one hand, where the Cross of Christ had been erected, and Mount of Purgatory at the West

pole, on the other, where on the top of this mountain the tree of life had been planted in the Earthly Paradise. Seen like this, Hell in fact is not a land of gloom and disorder, but an essential part of a cosmos where divine justice -- or at least Dante's auctorial providence -- has arranged all things by measure and number and weight.

Works cited:

1. Paull Franklin Baum, The Mediaeval Legend of Judas Iscariot. In: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 31 [= N.S. 24] (1916), p.481-632
2. Pierre Benoit, La mort de Judas. In: AA.VV., Synoptische Studien. Alfred Wikenhauser zum siebzigsten Geburtstag am 22. Februar 1953 dargebracht von Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern, München: Zink, 1953, p.1-19
3. Domenico Bergamaschi, Giuda Iscariota nella leggenda, nella tradizione e nella Bibbia. In: Scuola cattolica, an. 37, ser. IV, vol. 15 (1909), p.292-303, p.423-435, p.574-580
4. Veronika Birbaumer, Studien zur Judasdarstellung in der italienischen Malerei des Tre- und Quattrocento. Diss. München, 1980 [not available to me]
5. Jacques Robert Breitenbucher, Die Judasgestalt in den Passionsspielen. Diss. Ohio State University, 1934 [not available to me]
6. Anthony K. Cassell, Dante's Fearful Art of Justice. Toronto / Buffalo / London: University of Toronto Press, 1984
7. [CCSL:] Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, Turnhout: Brepols, 1953ss.
8. Dino S. Cervigni, The Muted Self-Referentiality of Dante's Lucifer. In: Dante Studies 107 (1989), p.45-74
9. Wilhelm Creizenach, Judas Ischariot in legende und sage des mittellalters. In: Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur 2 (1876), p.12-207
10. [CSEL:] Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Wien et al., 1866ss.)
11. [DAV:] Die Apostolischen Väter. Neubearbeitung der Funkschen Ausgabe von Karl Bihlmeyer, 3. Auflage. Unveränderter Nachdruck der mit einem Nachtrag von Wilhelm Schneemelcher versehenen 2. Auflage, Erster Teil, Tübingen: Mohr, 1970
12. Francesco D'Ovidio, Sette chiose alla Commedia, V.: «Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso». In: Studi danteschi 7 (1923), p.27-44
13. Peter Dinzelbacher, Judastraditionen. Wien: Selbstverlag des Österreichischen Museums für

Volkskunde, 1977 (= Raabser Märchen-Reihe, 2)

14. Werner Fechter, Absalom als Vergleichs- und Beispielfigur im mittelhochdeutschen Schrifttum. In: Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur 83 (1961/62), p.302-316
15. John Freccero, The Sign of Satan. In: Modern Language Notes 80 (1965), p.11-26
16. Christian Gnllka, Das Vergeltungsprinzip. In: id., Studien zur Psychomachie des Prudentius, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963 (= Klassisch-Philologische Studien, 27), p.51-81
17. Oswald Goetz, "Hie hencktt Judas". In: AA.VV., Form und Inhalt. Kunstgeschichtliche Studien, Otto Schmitt zum 60. Geburtstag am 13. Dezember 1950 dargebracht von seinen Freunden, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1950, p.105-137
18. [Graesse 1890:] Jacobi a Voragine Legenda Aurea vulgo Historia Lombardica dicta, 3rd ed. Regensburg 1890, reprint Osnabrück: Zeller, 1969
19. Louis Günther, Die Idee der Wiedervergeltung in der Geschichte und Philosophie des Strafrechts, ein Beitrag zur universalhistorischen Entwicklung desselben, vol. I: Die Kulturvölker des Altertums und und das deutsche Recht bis zur Carolina, Erlangen: Bläsing / Altenburg: Pierer, 1889, repr. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1966
20. Roman Bernard Halas, Judas Iscariot, a Scriptural and Theological Study of his Person, his Deeds and his Eternal Lot, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1946 (= The Catholic University of America, Studies in Sacred Theology, 96) [not available to me]
21. Donatus Haugg, Judas Iskarioth in den neutestamentlichen Berichten. Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1930
22. Arnold Herdlitzka, art. «Talio», in: Pauly/Wissowa, Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, 2. Reihe, 8. Halbband (1932), 2069-2077
23. Thomas D. Hill, The Evisceration of Bróðir in 'Brennu-Njáls Saga'. In: Traditio 37 (1981), p.437-444
24. A. D. Knox, The Death of Judas. In: Journal of Theological Studies 25 (1924), p.289-290
25. [Lacaita 1887:] Benevenuti de Rambaldis de Imola comentum super Dantis Aldigherij comoediam, nunc primum integre in lucem editum, sumptibus Guilielmi Warren Vernon, curante Philippo Lacaita... Firenze: Barbèra, 1887, 6 vols.
26. Henri Leclercq, art. «Judas Iscariote». In: Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, VIII (Paris 1928), 255-279
27. Paul Lehmann, Judas Ischarioth in der lateinischen Legendenüberlieferung des Mittelalters.

In: Studi medievali N.S. 2 (1929), p.289-346

28. Giulio Marzot, Il linguaggio biblico nella Divina Commedia. Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1956
29. Brigitte Monstadt, Judas beim Abendmahl: Figurenkonstellation und Bedeutung in Darstellungen von Giotto bis Andrea del Sarto. München: Scaneg, 1995 (= Beiträge zur Kunstwissenschaft, 57)
30. [PG:] J. P. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca (Paris, 1857ss.)
31. [PL:] J. P. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina (Paris, 1844ss.)
32. Wilhelm Porte, Judas Ischarioth in der bildenden Kunst. Berlin: Draeger, 1883
33. Gertrud Schiller, Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, vol. II: Die Passion Jesu Christi, Gütersloh: Mohn, 1968
34. [Short/Merrilees 1979:] Benedeit, The Anglo-Norman voyage of St Brendan, edited by Ian Short and Brian Merrilees, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979
35. Ingrid Westerhoff-Sebald, Der moralisierte Judas: mittelalterliche Legende, Typologie, Allegorie im Bild. Diss. Zürich, 1996 [not available to me]
36. Kirsten Wolf, The Judas Legend in Scandinavia. In: Journal of English and Germanic Philology 88 (1989), p.463-476

Preliminary HTML version, 11 June 1997

Copyright 1997, Otfried Lieberknecht