FROM BIBLICAL PERSONAGE TO DEMON: 
JUDAS IN OLD RUSSIAN ICONOGRAPHY

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Traitor, Arch Sinner and Demon

Of all the Biblical characters, Judas Iscariot, the traitor apostle, is the most demonized. In Mediaeval culture his role was that of an anti-model, epitomizing various sins and evil doings: Judas was “the greediest of merchants,” “the earthbound priest,” and “the avaricious Jew.” He is the embodiment of covetousness, treachery and despair.2

In Mediaeval apocryphal writings and legends, Judas turns into the ultimate wrongdoer or simply into a demon. His very name and genealogy stress this: Judas comes from the line of Dan, as will the Antichrist; his alias Iscariot (as Saint Jerome wrote in the 4th century) meant “money” and “price,” symbolizing his dreadful fortune3 (Figure 1).

In the widely known 12th century Tale of Judas the Betrayer4 Judas repeats the fate of Oedipus, killing his father and committing incest. Having learned the truth, he repents and becomes Christ’s disciple, but soon betrays the Savior himself. The apocryphal Vision of Pseudo-Daniel thus describes the coming of the Antichrist: he rises from the abyss of Hell in the shape of a fish, which is consequently caught by a man called Judas

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2 See Baum 1916; Antonov and Mayzuls 2013.
4 The Russian text can be found in: Porfiryev 1890, pp. 231-235. On the legend, see Baum 1916; Sullivan 1998, p. 96; on its representation in Slavic folklore, see Belova 2000, p. 346; Narodnya Bibliya 2004, p. 337-338.
and sold for 30 pieces of silver. The demonic fish is then eaten by a maiden who is, in this way, impregnated with the Antichrist.\(^5\)

In numerous Mediaeval legends, the life and death of the Traitor are embroidered with copious details (Figure 2). A good example is the 13th century *Golden Legend* of Jakobus de Voragine. While the New Testament states shortly that Judas “burst asunder at the midst and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18), the mediaeval story explains the “mechanics” of the event: as the former apostle died, his soul was unable to leave his body through his lips, as usually happens when someone is giving up the ghost, because his throat was constricted by the noose and his lips were “sealed” by the traitorous kiss. As a result, his soul had to escape through his stomach, tearing right through it. European art has many depictions of this scene, as different from Russian.\(^6\)

Many popular beliefs about Judas are also to be found in the folk culture of Europe, Byzantium and Russia. Terrifying details fill the stories of his life, death and posthumous fate. He was born with bad, “evil” physiological traits: red hair, a squint or a lisp. After his betrayal, according to Slavic beliefs, Judas hanged himself from an aspen, so its leaves tremble to this day; or he wanted to hang himself from a birch, so it blanched with terror; or, he hanged himself from an alder tree, so its wood turned red. Many legends say that his speedy suicide was not the result of his grief but rather part of an intricate design: he wanted to reach the underworld before Jesus, so that he would be removed from there with all the other sinners as the Savior descended into Hell. But the traitor was too late: he did not manage to get there until after Christ’s Resurrection, and so became the first prisoner of the now depopulated Hell. He sits there together with Satan, holding his money bag, while on earth, tobacco, the damned plant, grows out from his body.\(^7\)

To avoid the misfortune, people in some areas of the Slavic world do not sit down at a table if there are to be thirteen persons at it, or do not pass the salt at table as the Traitor took some salt at the Last Supper. Judas is feared as an evil spirit or an unquiet dead man. Many believe that his soul still wanders the earth, causing disease. Thus he becomes almost a demon himself—actually, in some of the Slavic cultures, forms of his name (such as Juda and Judasz) are used to denote a demon or the Devil, with original folklore characters emerging on this basis as well, such as *triyuda* (lit. “three = many” + “Judas”), *arkhiyuda* (“arch-Judas”) and even *priyudnik* (“Judas’ assistant”, a demon). In Bulgaria,

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5 Kniga ob Antikhriste 2007, p. 473–474. Many apocrypha of Byzantine provenance were commonly attributed to the Prophet Daniel.
6 Sullivan 1998, p. 96-97; Depold 2009. Fig. 1, p. 53.
7 For more on these legends and the area they are found in, see Slavyanskie drevnosti 2, p. 430; Belova 2000, p. 344-353; Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 149-150.
Yuda is the name of a demoness; in Macedonia, a spirit of wind and gale is called yuda. In numerous Slavic folk magic incantations, Judas is presented as a werewolf, a water demon, a demon of the air, and a “lawless devil.” During the Maslenitsa, the carnival preceding Lent, masks of Judas are often used, and mummers dressed as Judas go around villages before Easter. Czechs and Moravians bake special biscuits, shaped as a human figure or a noose, which are supposed to help against snake bites. These are called judaš. Even though, as some linguists believe, many of these words are actually derived from *juda, a Slavic stem of Indo-European origin, during the Middle Ages, characters with a name like this would inevitably be associated with the Biblical evildoer demonized in folk culture.

The oldest Russian incantation to include Judas’ name is a 12th century inscription from the church of Saint Sophia in Novgorod. According to A. Zaliznyak’s reconstruction, it includes the following address: “the devil Satan, the thieving publican, the lawless Judas… .” There are other examples of the macabre figure of the demonized traitor appearing in various magical texts; for instance, a Siberian book of fortune-telling includes the following passage: “The damned Judas did go forth to the sea and he cast down his hook and he did catch himself a fish called scorpion… .”

The image of Judas as the embodiment of treachery, greed and despair was also used in Russian Baroque culture, serving as a tool of political and social satire. In 1709, after the unexpected betrayal of Mazepa, the Ukrainian Hetman, Peter I ordered a medal to be made depicting the hanged Judas and the thirty pieces of silver, and bearing an inscription: “Thrice damned is Judas, son of perdition, who hangeth himself for greed of money.” This “Order of Judas” was a symbolic replacement for Mazepa’s Order of Saint Andrew, which had been recalled from him. This was not the only time this medal was used: historians say that it was put to further use in the diplomacy and carnivals of Peter’s court. The image of the traitor was even used in the post-1917 period, in spite of the Soviet state’s pronounced anti-religiousness: Leon Trotsky, Boris Pasternak and others were likened to Judas in official propaganda.

Judas’ Signs: Halo, Money Bag and Forelock

The Judas of mediaeval legends and folk beliefs is an ugly creature, a sinner who married his own mother, a son of the Devil, a demon. In the visual arts, the treatment of this character is no less vibrant. He was not painted merely as one of the disciples, in various illustrations of the Gospel. Judas is the protagonist of many other compositions, his figure becoming the center of many new iconographic patterns.

9 Slavyanskie drevnosti 2, p. 430; Belova 2000, p. 354-360.
10 Khobzey 2002, p. 75.
11 Asked to denote Judas, some people say that he is the Biblical traitor, an evil spirit and an evil man. See, for example, Moroz 2002, p. 253-257, on the basis of studies carried out in Northern Russia.
12 Zaliznyak 2005; Zaliznyak 2006; Agapkina 2010, p. 219-221.
15 For more on the demonization of Judas, see Antonov, Mayzuls 2013, p. 191-213.
Very early depictions of the Traitor are known. His suicide is carved on an Italian bone tablet dated 420-430 AD—the figure of the hanged traitor opposes the figure of the crucified Christ creating the visual opposition of good and bad death. Judas would sometimes be depicted as different from the other apostles, endowed with tokens of sin, such as red hair, or hair standing on end demonically, with a black halo or without one at all. In many compositions, the Devil stands next to him. The torn stomach and the fallen entrails mark both the dreadful death and the dreadful sins of the traitor.

In Russian icons and frescoes, Judas is found fairly often, in the familiar scene of the Last Supper and other scenes from the Gospel: for example, Christ washing the disciples’ feet, Judas’ kiss and Judas hanged on the tree (sometimes with a demon nearby but never with a torn stomach). As in European art, his figure often looks the same as those of the other apostles, but he can be identified through his gesture: he reaches out to the cup on the table. Sometimes he is fitted out with the various tokens of sin. For instance, following the lead of European art, in some compositions of the Last Supper in 18th century Russian iconography all apostles except Judas have haloes. An earlier and more frequent sign is a money bag that the traitor holds in his hand at the Last Supper (though perhaps he had not yet received his payment—from the chief priests by the time of the Last Supper and definitely did not bring the money to the table). In mediaeval iconography, this money bag becomes a marker of the Iscariot and appears in various contexts: lying at the feet of the hanged Judas (although, according to the Bible, he returned the money to the chief priests before killing himself), or even accompanying him eternally in Hell as a sign of the un-redeemed sin.

In Russian miniatures that do not directly illustrate the Gospels, Judas often turns into a sort of demon. One of the most impressive examples is found in the miniatures of the 1780s Old Believers manuscript, discovered in the region of the Northern Dvina. There Judas is portrayed twice. On the reverse side of page 447, the reader sees a huge, terrible face, filling up the whole space of the miniature, staring right at him (Figure 3). The skin

Figure 3. The terrifying face of Judas, suffering in Hell. 18th century miniature.
is brown, the face is contorted, the hair stands on end—these are the recurrent markers of the demonic in Russian iconography, making up a horrifying visage. In the next miniature, “Judas the Betrayer” is seen in the arms of his “father,” the Devil.

Some Old Believers manuscripts feature another scene including Judas, which sums up the cycle of infernal torture. These are illustrations to John’s Vision, part of the Velikoe Zercalo (Speculum maius). The visionary sees various torments of Hell, including the terrible torment of Judas Iscariot: in the deepest of abysses, a wheel rapidly turns, to which the ex-apostle is tied. It falls with a tremendous noise into the depths of Hell, and all the demons and sinners start beating the traitor. This scene comes originally from The Voyage of Saint Brendan, a cycle of legends composed, presumably, in the later 8th century. A similar tale, describing the traitor of Christ falling down into the depths of Hell on a fiery wheel, is found in a 12th century Cistercian manuscript, and was later reproduced in the 13th century Speculum maius, composed by the Dominican monk Vincent de Beauvais. This scene is found in many Old Believers manuscripts, which often depict, as a series of separate miniatures or as a long horizontal frieze, various sinners such as the hard-hearted warrior on a flaming steed, fornicators, a cruel king who is roasted on a spit, sinful monks and nuns being beaten by demons, and, finally, a fragment of the giant wheel where the ex-apostle is tortured (Figure 4).

One of the 18th century manuscripts has a long list of infernal scenes with demons inflicting torture on sinners; it ends in a retelling of the same fragment. The miniature shows two demons rolling a large wheel over the flames, a man affixed to it, with the caption: “Judas Iscariot to the wheel is chained and tortured in the bottomless pit, if not for you, the damned one, so would Hell be still.”

In the Devil’s Lap: Visual Model and its Variations

Outside the context of the Biblical scenes, Russian iconography usually portrays Judas sitting on the knee of the Devil (in sinu diaboli). This pattern was used on its own (as in the other miniature from the Northern Dvina collection, see Figure 5), or served as part of a larger composition, such as in The Last Judgment, Descent into Hell, and The Fruits of Christ’s Passion. The Last Judgment iconography must have been the original...

23 Antonov and Mayzuls 2011, p. 43-72.
25 See in Makhov 2006, p. 40; Makhov 2007, p. 30. The legend was definitely known in Russia: Cornelius, a 16th-century monk from Pskov, refers to it, saying that during his voyage, St. Brendan saw Satan at the bottom of the sea in the shape of a giant serpent (Serebryanskiy 1908, p. 528).
27 See in a published cycle of miniatures: Bagdasarov 2010, p. 43–48, ill. XIII. 29–36. In Old Believers manuscripts this image might have been used to polemical ends by the followers of the Filipovtsy denomination. Those who supported self-immolation would argue that people who refused to burn themselves would be thus tortured in Hell.
source for all the later visual models, since Judas can be found in it, together with the Devil, as early as the 11th century.

In both Greek and European iconography, there is a character sitting on the lap of the Devil. In some cases he is, presumably, not Judas but the Antichrist, which would tally with the epithet given to him by Apostle Paul,29 the son of perdition. A well-known example is a 12th century miniature depicting Lucifer which comes from Herrad of Landsberg’s Garden of Delights.30 The Devil has a naked human figure in his lap, with its arms pressed to its chest, demonstrating no demonic features whatsoever; the caption near its head says, “Antichrist.”31

The Gospels, however, do not use the epithet exclusively to describe the apocalyptical enemy of the Church; in John 17:12, it denotes Judas. That is why with similar pictorial compositions, when the figure is not marked by a caption or distinguishing features, some experts waiver between the two versions. A well-known late 11th century mosaic in the Santa Maria Assunta basilica (Torcello island) shows Hades, or Satan, holding a white-clad figure whose posture copies his own. Some art historians believe that it is the Antichrist, copying the Devil. They found their views in Herrad of Landsberg’s famous precedent. Others, taking into account a considerable number of other mediaeval sources, say that this figure is more likely to be Judas.32

In all the known Russian compositions, the figure in Satan’s lap is Judas (Figure 5). The sign that helps identify him is usually a small white money bag. It refers to the payment he received for his betrayal but also signifies his greed: he holds onto his silver even in Hell. (Such bags are also often carried by the demons of avarice in miniatures depicting the passing of a departed soul through the mytarstva—aerial trials of the soul after death.) Often, in both frescoes and miniatures, the figure is captioned.

Russian illuminators would leave the reader in no doubt as to who was suffering in Satan’s paws (“Satan, together with Judas the betrayer, in pain for all time”33). Describing the way Hell should be depicted in icons of the Last Judgment, Tolkovy Podlinniki, the manuals for icon-painters prescribed the Devil to be shown holding “Judas, fiery, on his knees.”34 The figure in Satan’s lap was, indeed, most often painted red.

This satanic composition obviously resembles the so-called Paternitas type of Trinity icons, in which God the Father holds the child Jesus in his lap (with the Holy Ghost present in the shape of a dove above Jesus’ head), and is probably rooted not only in the Gospel calling Judas the son of perdition, but also in the various Christian writings

29 2 Thes 2:3.
30 See Gurevich 1989, ill. 64; Makhov 2007, p. 171.
31 The manuscript itself perished in a fire in 1870; however, an early 19th century copy remains.
32 See in more detail in Antonov and Mayzuls 2011, p. 186.
33 Pokrovsky 1887, p. 91.
34 Buslayev 1910, p. 136 (on the basis of two 18th century copies).
which describe his posthumous fate (for instance, the vision of Gregory from the *Life of St. Basil the New*, which tells about the punishment inflicted on the sinners after the Last Judgment, and mentions the Arians being tortured “in the same place as the Devil is and all his demons and the traitor Judas”\(^35\)).

This visual motif is often used in larger compositions or on its own in manuscripts, illustrating various accounts of infernal torture. Very often, the Devil and Judas are accompanied by a third character, the personified Hell, which sometimes serves to stress the idea that the chief demon and the chief sinner are together incarcerated in the depths of the Inferno. While the figures of these two are fairly uniform and vary but little from manuscript to manuscript, Hell takes on many forms. For example, in many images of the *Last Judgment*, it is depicted as a beast, which Satan rides, holding Judas (Figure 6), so that the body of the beast is his throne.\(^36\)

A very different idea was used in the iconography of the *Fruits of the Christ’s Passion* (which emerged in the 17th century and became very popular with Old Believers, finding its way into icons and miniatures): there, the Devil sits in Hell’s open maw

\(\text{Figure 6. (left and right) "Damned Trinity," Model 1: Judas sits in the Devil’s lap, the Devil sits on a Hell-Beast. Details from 18th century miniatures.}\)

\(\text{Figure 7. "Damned Trinity," Model 2: Judas sits in the Devil’s lap, the Devil is locked in a Hell’s Mouth. Fragments of the Fruits of the Christ’s Passion icon. 18th century.}\)

\(^{35}\) Russian State Library. F. 98. № 375. L. 194 rev.

\(^{36}\) As on a 16th century Northern Russian icon kept in the Hermitage (Inv. №ERI-230; published in Sinay 2000, R-32).
(Figure 7), again, holding Judas—with or without his traditional money bag. Here, Hell is not a throne, but a fanged prison for Satan and Judas.

The third version is common for the Descent into Hell compositions. A vivid example (Figure 8) can be seen in a late 16th century Vladimir-Suzdal icon, where the characters are aligned almost exactly as the Divine Hypostases in the Paternitas icons: a red-skinned giant representing Hell holds in his lap a winged Satan, who in his turn holds in his lap Judas—a small, beardless, naked childlike figure, looking straight at the viewer and holding his money bag, the name Iuda written nearby. (There exist other icons of the Resurrection which include this motif.) Here, Hell holds the Devil in his bosom, thus turning from a throne or a prison into his virtual father, and Judas, the son of perdition, becomes the last in this hierarchy, or indeed this Ladder of Infernal Descent—from the huge many-eyed monster to the small naked sinner.

In Old Believers iconography of the 18th to early 20th centuries, this “Damned Trinity” (or “Anti-Trinity”) became a very popular motif. It was included in the illustrations of infernal torture, where the Devil, with Judas in his lap, can be found riding the Beast among the flames, demons and sinners. It was also used as a model for a separate type of image meant to depict sins: there, a sitting Satan surrounded by demons would hold in the same position not Judas but a small imp representing one of the sins.

The “Anti-Trinity” is a good example of how sacred models are turned upside down, or mirrored, to depict evil. Many features of the visual representation of Hell in mediaeval art were formed this way (such as the Tree of Jesse and its negative reflection, the Tree of Sins, a visual motif, spread in Old Believers miniatures). Apart from the Holy Trinity, the image of Abraham’s bosom is a reference point here: Abraham would sometimes be portrayed holding numerous small figures of righteous men in his lap, arms, or in the folds of his clothing, an iconography similar to that of the Devil with Judas.

39 As, for example, on a late-16th-century icon from Yaroslavl in: Yaroslavl Art Museum, Inv. № I-1754, KP-21119; published in Ikony Yaroslavlya 2009. № 83, p. 454-459.
40 See also a late but vivid example from an 1820s Old Believers manuscript, including a large foldout page with a huge miniature depicting Hell. The Devil, surrounded by demons, presides over a large flaming “rose,” with the sinners’ heads poking out from inside it. In Satan’s lap is Judas, with a bag of silver coins. Sec: Archives of the Pushkin House (the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences). The Northern Dvina collection, № 152. L. 82.
The visual model of the “Anti-Trinity” also influenced literature and folklore. Not only stories of visionaries, but even the most unexpected texts, such as the early 17th century Tale of How Boris Godunov Stole the Moscow Throne With Iniquity, written soon after Vasily IV’s coming to power, mention Judas sitting *in sinu diaboli*. In the passage describing the demonized False Dmitry (the enthroned and later killed pretender), the writer condemns the pride of the self-called tsar and says that this heretic wanted to be above Satan himself in the depths of Hell, and coveted the place of Judas in the bosom of the Devil.

Stories about Judas on the knees of the Devil are as well spread in Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian folklore, often with remarkable details. For example, some legends claim that Judas was dandled on the knee of Satan even as a child, or that all self-murderers are to be found there; or that the Devil’s lap is the location where all the sinners who haven’t been forgiven by God are kept. There is also a special legend which explains, if not why Judas is to be found in such an unusual place, then at least why he did not leave Hell after the Resurrection. It says that as the Savior was taking sinners out of Hell, He asked Judas whether he was comfortable, and the Devil started prodding the ex-apostle’s sides, urging him to answer in the positive. This was repeated thrice, and, as a result, Judas was left where he was—exactly where he is depicted in various icons, frescoes and miniatures.

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41 See, for example, in an Old Believers Tale of a Man named Timofey (1680s): Pigin 2006, p. 252. On the Tale itself, see pp. 208–217.
42 Pamyatniki 1909, p. 166.
44 This belief is found with the Lemkos in Western Ukraine, Poland and Slovakia. See in: Belova 2000, p. 345; Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 337.
46 Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 308; Slavyanske drevnosti 2, p. 430.
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