

Jesus Teaches in Meroz and Receives Judas Iscariot to the Number of His Disciples. Ancestry and Character of Judas Iscariot

Jesus had never before been in Meroz. It was surrounded by a dry moat, which at times received some water from the mountain streams. The place had a bad name

in Israel on account of the perfidy of its inhabitants. It had been peopled by the descendants of Aser and Gad, sons of Jacob and the handmaiden Zelpha, some of whom had intermarried with the Gentiles of Sichem. The other tribes refused to acknowledge the offspring of these mixed marriages, and they were despised likewise on account of their faithlessness and perfidy. Meroz, in consequence, became an isolated place, and its inhabitants, being thus cut off from much good, were likewise shielded from much evil. They had fallen into oblivion, perished, as it were, from among men. Their chief occupations consisted in dressing skins, making leather, preparing furs and garments of the same, and manufacturing leather sandals, straps, girdles, shields, and military jerkins. They brought the skins from afar on asses and dressed them partly near Meroz, using for that purpose a cistern supplied with water from their fountain in the city. But because this itself was fed from an aqueduct and had not always a full supply, they tanned the skins near Iscariot, a marshy region, a couple of hours to the west of Meroz and northward from Aser-Machmethat. It was a desolate little place of only a few dwellings. Nearby was a ravine through which a little stream flowed to the valley of the Jordan. It was on its banks that the people of Meroz prepared their skins. Judas and his parents had for some time dwelt in this locality, hence the surname borne by the former.

Jesus was very joyfully received at some distance from their city by the poor citizens of Meroz. They knew of His approach and went out to meet Him, carrying sandals and garments for His use while they cleaned and brushed His own. Jesus thanked them and went with the disciples into the city, where they washed His feet and offered the customary refreshments. The Pharisees came to salute Him. Toward evening He taught in the synagogue before a large audience, taking for His subject the slothful servant and the buried



talent. By this parable Jesus designated the inhabitants themselves. Born of the maid servant, they had received one talent only which they should have put out at interest; but instead of that they had buried it. The Master was coming and they should hasten to gain something. Jesus rebuked them also for their little love for their neighbor and their hatred of the Samaritans. The Pharisees were not well pleased with Jesus, but the people so much the more, as they were very greatly oppressed by them. They rejoiced likewise at Jesus' visit because their whole region seemed to lie forgotten by all the world, and no one ever came to help or instruct them in any way.

After the sermon, Jesus went with His disciples to an inn that stood outside the western gate of the city. Lazarus had erected it for their use on some ground that he owned in these parts. Bartholomew, Simon Zelotes, Jude Thaddeus, and Philip came here to see Jesus, by whom they were cordially received. They had already spoken with the disciples. They dined with Jesus and remained overnight. Jesus had often before seen Bartholomew, had given him an interior call to His service and had even spoken of him to the disciples, Simon and Thaddeus were his cousins. Philip also was related to him and, like Thaddeus, was already among the disciples. Jesus had called all these to follow Him when, upon His last visit to Capharnaum at Peter's fishery on the lake, He had spoken of their soon being summoned to do so. It was then that Peter had expressed himself so desirous of being allowed to remain at home as unfit for such a calling. Then it was that Peter uttered the words that later on were recorded in the Gospel.

Judas Iscariot likewise had come with the above named disciples to Meroz. He did not, however, spend the evening with Jesus, but at a house in the city where he had often before stayed. Bartholomew and Simon spoke with Jesus of Judas. They said that they knew him to be an active, well-informed man, very willing to be of service, and very desirous of a place among the disciples. Jesus sighed as they spoke and appeared troubled. When they asked Him the cause of His sadness, He answered: "It is not yet time to speak, but only to think of it." He taught during the whole meal, and all slept at the inn.

The newly arrived disciples had come from Capharnaum where they had met Peter and Andrew. They had messages from there and had also brought Jesus some money for the expenses of the journey, the charitable gift of the women. Judas, having met them at Naim, accompanied them to Meroz. Even at this early period, he was already known to all the disciples, and he had recently been in Cyprus. His manifold accounts of Jesus, of His miracles, of the various opinions formed of Him, namely, that some looked upon Him as the Son of David, others called Him the Christ, and the majority esteemed Him the greatest of the Prophets, had made the Jews and pagans of the

island very inquisitive with regard to Him. They had heard, too, many wonderful things of His visit to Tyre and Sidon. The Cyprian pagan, the officer who visited Jesus in Ophra, had in consequence of all these marvelous accounts been sent thither by his master, who was very much impressed by them. Judas had accompanied the officer back to Cyprus. On his return journey he stopped at Ornithopolis where the parents of Saturnin, originally from Greece, then dwelt.

When Judas learned on the way that Jesus was going into the region of Meroz, where he himself was well-known, he went to seek Bartholomew in Debbaseth. He was already acquainted with him and he invited him to go with him to Meroz and present him to Jesus. Bartholomew expressed his willingness to do so. But he went first to Capharnaum with Jude Thaddeus to see the disciples there, thence with Thaddeus and Philip to Tiberias, where Simon Zelotes joined them, and then stopped at Naim for Judas who had journeyed thither to meet them. He begged them again to present him to Jesus as one desirous of becoming a disciple. They were well pleased to do so, for they took delight in his cleverness, his readiness to render service, and his courteous manner.

Judas Iscariot may have been at that time twenty-five years old. He was of middle height and by no means ugly. His hair was of a deep black, his beard somewhat reddish. In his attire he was perfectly neat and more elegant than the majority of Jews. He was affable in address, obliging, and fond of making himself important. He talked with an air of confidence of the great or of persons renowned for holiness, affecting familiarity with such when he found himself among those that did not know him. But if anyone who knew better convicted him of untruth, he retired confused. He was avaricious of honors, distinctions, and money. He was always in pursuit of good luck, always longing for fame, rank, a high position, wealth, though not seeing clearly how all this was to come to him. The appearance of Jesus in public greatly encouraged him to hope for a realization of his dreams. The disciples were provided for; the wealthy Lazarus took part with Jesus, of whom everyone thought that He was about to establish a kingdom; He was spoken of on all sides as a King, as the Messiah, as the Prophet of Nazareth. His miracles and wisdom were on every tongue. Judas consequently conceived a great desire to be numbered as His disciple and to share His greatness which, he thought, was to be that of this world. For a long time previously he had picked up, wherever he could, information of Jesus and had in turn carried around tidings of Him. He had sought the acquaintance of several of the disciples, and was now nearing the object of his desires. The chief motive that influenced him to follow Jesus was the fact that he had no settled occupation

and only a half-education. He had embarked in trade and commerce, but without success, and had squandered the fortune left him by his natural father. Lately he had been executing all kinds of commissions, carrying on all kinds of business and brokerage for other people. In the discharge of such affairs, he showed himself both zealous and intelligent. A brother of his deceased father, named Simeon, was engaged in agriculture in Iscariot, the little place of about twenty houses that belonged to Meroz and from which it lay only a short distance toward the east. His parents had lived there a long time, and even after their death he had generally made it his home, hence his appellation of Iscariot. His parents at one time led a wandering life, for his mother was a public dancer and singer. She was of the race of Jephthe, or rather that of his wife, and from the land of Tob. She was a poetess. She composed songs and anthems, which she sang with harp accompaniment. She taught young girls to dance, and carried with her from place to place all sorts of feminine finery and new fashions. Her husband, a Jew, was not with her; he lived at Pella. Judas was an illegitimate child whose father was an officer in the army near Damascus. He was born at Ascalon on one of his mother's professional journeys, but she soon freed herself from the encumbrance by exposing the child. Shortly after his birth, he was abandoned on the water's edge. But being found by some rich people with no children of their own, they cared for the child and bestowed upon him a liberal education. Later on, however, he turned out to be a bad boy and, through some kind of knavery, fell again to the care of his mother, who assumed the charge for pay. It is in my mind that the husband of his mother, becoming acquainted with the boy's origin, had cursed him. Judas received some wealth from his illegitimate father. He was possessed of much wit. After the death of his parents, he lived mostly in Iscariot with his Uncle Simeon, the tanner, and helped him in his business. He was not as yet a villain, but loquacious, greedy for wealth and honor, and without stability. He was neither a profligate nor a man without religion, for he adhered strictly to all the prescriptions of the Jewish Law. He comes before me as a man that could be influenced as easily to the best things as to the worst. With all his cleverness, courteousness, and obligingness, there was a shade of darkness, of sadness, in the expression of his countenance, proceeding from his avarice, his ambition, his secret envy of even the virtues of others. He was not, however, exactly ugly. There was something bland and affable in his countenance, though at the same time, something abject and repulsive. His father had something good in him, and thence came that possessed by Judas. When as a boy he was returned to his mother, and she on his account was embroiled in a quarrel with her husband, she cursed him. Both she and

her husband were jugglers. They practiced all kinds of tricks; they were sometimes in plenty and as often in want.

The disciples in the beginning were favorably inclined toward Judas on account of his obliging ways, for he was ready even to clean their shoes. As he was an excellent walker, he made at first long journeys in the service of the little Community. I never saw him work a miracle. He was always full of envy and jealousy and, toward the close of Jesus' career, he had become weary of obedience, of the wandering life of the disciples, and of the—to him—inexplicable mystery that surrounded the Divine Master.

In the center of Meroz was a beautifully constructed fountain, the water of which was conducted through pipes from the neighboring mountain, at a little distance to the north of the city. There were five galleries around the well, each of which contained a reservoir. Into these reservoirs the water of the well could be pumped. In the outer gallery of all were little bathing houses, and the whole place could be closed. Here to these galleries around the well had numbers of very sick persons belonging to the city, some of them considered incurable, been brought on beds. The worst were placed in the little bathing houses in the outside circle. Meroz, abandoned, despised, and helpless, possessed an astonishing number of sick, dropsical old people, paralytics, and sufferers of all kinds. Jesus, accompanied by the disciples, Judas excepted (he had not yet been presented to Jesus), went into the city. The Pharisees of the place and some strangers who had come from a distance were present. They took their stand at the center of the fountain where they could see all that went on. They appeared astonished and even somewhat scandalized at the miracles of Jesus. They were old people grounded in their own opinion, who had listened to previous accounts of such wonders with wise shakes of the head, smiles, and shrugs, giving credence to none of it. But now they beheld with surprise and vexation those seriously affected, those incurables of their own city, by whose deep-seated maladies they hoped to see Jesus' healing power set at naught, taking up their beds and going off to their homes with songs of praise for their perfect cure. Jesus preached, instructed and consoled the sick, and gave Himself no trouble about the Pharisees. The whole city resounded with joy and thanksgiving. This lasted from early morn till nearly noon.

Jesus and the disciples now returned to their inn by the western gate of the city. On their way through the streets, some furious possessed, that had been allowed to leave their place of confinement, cried after Jesus. He commanded them to be silent. They instantly ceased their cries and threw themselves humbly at His feet. Jesus cured them and admonished them to purify themselves. From the inn He went to the hospital of the lepers a short

distance from the city, entered, called the lepers before Him, touched them, healed them, and commanded them to present themselves before the priests for the customary purifications. Jesus did not allow the disciples to follow Him into the leprous hospital. He sent them up to the mountain where, after healing the lepers, He was to deliver an instruction.

On the way the disciples were met by Judas Iscariot, and when Jesus again joined them, Bartholomew and Simon Zelotes presented him to Jesus with the words: "Master, here is Judas of whom we have spoken to Thee," Jesus looked at him graciously, but with indescribable sorrow. Judas, bowing, said: "Master, I pray Thee allow me to share Thy instructions." Jesus replied sweetly and in words full of prophetic meaning: "Thou mayst have a place among My disciples, unless thou dost prefer to leave it to another." These were His words or at least their purport. I felt that Jesus was prophesying of Matthias, who was to fill Judas' place among The Twelve, and alluding also to His own betrayal. The expression was more comprehensive, but I felt that such was the allusion.

They now continued the ascent of the mountain, Jesus teaching all the while. On the summit was gathered a great crowd from Meroz, from Ataroth off to the north, and from the whole region around. There were also many Pharisees from these places, Jesus had some days previously announced the sermon by means of the disciples. He preached in vigorous terms of the Kingdom, of penance, of the abandonment in which the people of Meroz lived, and He earnestly exhorted them to arise from their sluggishness. There was no teacher's chair up here. The preacher took his stand on an eminence, surrounded by a trench and a low wall, upon which the listeners leaned or stood.

The view from this point was very beautiful and extended. One could see over Samaria, Meroz, Thebez, Machmethat, and away over the whole country around. Mount Garizim, however, was not in view, though the towers of its ancient temple were visible. Toward the southeast, the horizon stretched off to the Dead Sea and eastward over the Jordan to Gilead. To the north in an oblique direction rose the heights of Thabor, the view further extending in the direction of Capharnaum.

When evening closed, Jesus informed His hearers that He would teach there again in the morning. A great many of the people slept on the mountain under tents as they were at so great a distance from home. Jesus and the disciples went back to the inn near Meroz. All along the way Jesus taught of the good employment of time, of salvation so long looked for and now so near, of abandoning their relatives in order to follow Him, and of helping the needy. Arrived at the inn, He dined with the disciples. While on the

mountain, He had caused to be distributed to the poor the money that the disciples had brought with them from Capharnaum. Judas regarded that distribution with a covetous eye. During the meal at the inn, Jesus continued His instructions, and indeed after it far into the night. Today, for the first time, Judas sat at table with the Saviour and spent the night under the same roof with Him.