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Item Type	Article
Authors	Middleton, Paul
Citation	Middleton, P. (2018). The "Noble death of Judas Iscariot: A reconsideration of suicide in the Bible and early Christianity. <i>Journal of Religion and Violence</i> , 6(2), 245-266. <a href="https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv201882154">https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv201882154</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv201882154">10.5840/jrv201882154</a>
Publisher	Philosophy Documentation Center
Journal	<i>Journal of Religion and Violence</i>
Download date	2026-06-13 18:20:44
Item License	<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10034/621441">http://hdl.handle.net/10034/621441</a>

**THE ‘NOBLE DEATH’ OF JUDAS ISCARIOT:  
A RECONSIDERATION OF SUICIDE IN THE BIBLE  
AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

Paul Middleton

*Abstract*

This essay problematizes the often repeated claim that Jewish and Christian traditions have always and unambiguously opposed suicide. By examining the suicide narratives in the Hebrew Bible and late Second Temple texts, alongside early Christian martyr texts which demonstrate not only enthusiasm for death, but suicide martyrdom, I argue that many Jewish and Christian self-killings conform to Greco-Roman patterns Noble Death. Finally, I consider the death of Judas Iscariot, and having removed any *a priori* reason to interpret his suicide negatively, I argue Matthew’s account of his self-killing compares favourably with Luke’s narrative, in which he is the victim of divine execution. Moreover, I conclude that Matthew’s main concern is to transfer the blame for Jesus’ death from Judas to the Jewish authorities, and that he has Judas impose on himself to the appropriate and potentially expiatory penalty for his action. Thus, I conclude, even Judas’s iconic suicide can be read quite plausibly as an example of Noble Death.

*Keywords:* Judas Iscariot; Samson; Saul; Martyrdom; Noble Death; Self-killing

**Introduction: Condemnation of Suicide**

Suicide is condemned as a sin in Christianity. Indeed, since it is the only sin for which the perpetrator cannot ask for forgiveness, it was viewed with particular horror as literally “unforgivable.” From the middle-ages onwards, suicides were denied Christian burial, and often their bodies were subjected to degrading treatment, such as burning, being buried face down or at crossroads with stakes through their hearts (see Clare 2013, 214–252). In English Civil Law, unless a self-killing was explained by accident or insanity, the property of those who took their own lives was confiscated by the State. While in more recent times Churches have recognized the psychological distress of suicide, providing alternative prayers to be read

at their funerals, it was as late as 2017 that the Synod of the Church of England finally overturned the ban on regular funeral services being offered in cases of suicide.<sup>1</sup>

In common with Christianity, Judaism and Islam similarly condemn suicide as a sin against God, extinguishing a life that was both a gift from God, and belonged to God. However, while the Qur'an condemns suicide (4.29), the Hebrew Bible and New Testament lack such explicit prohibition. Instead Christian tradition rests on more general theological claims asserting the ownership of God of the life over the individual. So in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), John Paul II writes, "In its deepest reality, suicide represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death" (66). In the absence of any biblical prohibition, appeal is generally made to texts that reinforce the sovereignty of God over human life,<sup>2</sup> or to the sixth commandment (Exod. 20.14; Deut. 5.17). John Paul II concludes, "Suicide is always as morally objectionable as murder. The Church's tradition has always rejected it as a gravely evil choice" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 66)

However, this claim about Christian tradition is problematic. Not only is there no condemnation of the practice in the Bible, several self-killings are found within the Jewish and Christian scriptures, although they tend to be ignored in contemporary ecclesiastical discussion on issues such as assisted suicide.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, most of the characters who take their own lives in the Hebrew Bible are not positive role models, but, as I will demonstrate,

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<sup>1</sup> Contributions to the synod debate suggested the ban on using regular authorised funeral liturgy (Canon B38) was already being widely ignored. It is possible the growing popularity of cremation removed the 'problem' of burying victims of suicide in 'consecrated ground,' which in turn made the involvement of the Church less problematic.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II's assertion to that effect above cites Wisdom 16.13 and Tobias 13.2, neither of which obviously support his claim.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Church of Scotland's main report on assisted dying boldly asserts (in bold type), "The Old and New Testaments do not condone assisted dying," yet remarkably simply ignores the self-killing narratives. Church and Society Council (Church of Scotland), "End of Life Issues: A Christian Perspective" (n.d.).

the manner of their deaths form little part of their negative portrayal. Indeed, the suicides of Samson and those of the Maccabean tradition are unambiguously favorable.

Arguably the most notorious biblical suicide is that of Judas Iscariot, who, full of remorse for betraying Jesus, “went out and hanged himself” (Matt. 27.5). Many commentators see in Judas’ despairing suicide a fitting end for such an evil figure.<sup>4</sup> However, others go further, arguing that the description of Judas’ suicide “carries overtones of evident repugnance for the act itself” (Blázquez 1985, 66). While this reading is no doubt colored by centuries of Christian antipathy towards suicide, it finds support from at least some early Christian readers. Jerome reckoned that Judas’ suicide added to his crime of betrayal (*Comm. Matt. IV.17*), while Augustine was even more critical:

We rightly abominate the act of Judas, and the judgment of truth is that when he hanged himself he did not atone for the guilt of his detestable betrayal but rather increased it, since he despaired of God’s mercy and in a fit of self-destructive remorse left himself no chance of a saving repentance. How much less right has anyone to indulge in self-slaughter when he can find in himself no fault to justify such a punishment! For when Judas killed himself, he killed a criminal, and yet he ended his life guilty not only of Christ’s death, but also of his own; one crime led to another. (*City of God* 1.17)

Judas, in hanging himself, added to his crime of betraying Jesus.

In this essay, I argue Augustine’s reading of Judas’ suicide is wrong. By re-examining Biblical descriptions of self-killing, I will argue these texts are relatively positive about suicide. Biblical self-killing, including that of Judas, largely conform to established notions

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<sup>4</sup> For a history of interpretation on this point, see Cane (2005, 129–145).

of Noble Death, the ancient philosophical tradition in which suicide was valorized—but only under the right circumstances.<sup>5</sup> By examining early Jewish and Christian suicide and martyrdom accounts, I will demonstrate that, while there are isolated voices of protest, there was in fact no general, wide-spread condemnation of suicide in Christian tradition prior to Augustine.

### **Suicide in the Hebrew Bible**

There are six suicides in the Hebrew Bible: the two famous stories of Saul (1 Sam. 31.1–6; cf. 1 Chron. 10.1–6) and Samson (Judg. 16.23–31), as well as Saul’s armor-bearer (1 Sam. 31.5), Abimelech (Judg. 9.52–54), Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17.23) and Zimri (1 Kgs 16.18).

Unfortunately, many scholarly treatments of these texts are found in the context of wider discussions of contemporary ethics of euthanasia or assisted dying, which invariably predetermine their interpretation. Those who maintain that Christians ought to be against relaxing laws against assisted death view these suicides negatively (Merrill 1998, 324), while others who argue the contrary position (Droge and Tabor 1992; Saari 2006) are often explicit in their support for a change in the law in these matters. Indeed, Clemons, in his short but important wide-ranging study, perceptively notes that when authors discuss the definition of suicide, “those who approach the subject from different perspectives tend to formulate a definition that best facilitates their own purposes” (1990, 12).<sup>6</sup>

#### *Abimelech*

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<sup>5</sup> On various ancient philosophical attitudes to suicide, including when it was impermissible, see Droge (1988). On noble death more generally: van Henten (2012); Barton (2001); Straw (2001); Droge and Tabor (1992, 17–51).

<sup>6</sup> Clemons offers the following definition: “Suicide is the choice and the successful completion of the act to end one’s life regardless of motive, circumstances, or method.”

The first biblical suicide is also the most melodramatic. After Gideon's death, Abimelech made what would turn out to be a premature bid to be Israel's king by murdering the seventy men of the ruling council (Judg. 9.1–6). After reigning three years with success on the battlefield, Abimelech moved against the tower of Thebez in which the people of the city had shut themselves. As he was about to set it on fire, he was struck on the head by a millstone thrown by "a certain woman" (9.53), which crushed his skull. He then called to his armor-bearer to kill him so people would not say "a woman killed him" (9.54), and the young man obliges. The narrator moralizes, "Thus God repaid Abimelech for the crime he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers" (9.56).<sup>7</sup>

However, while Abimelech's reign is viewed negatively, the narrator is more neutral about the manner of his death than the events leading up to it (Sasson 2014, 400; Droge and Tabor 1992, 54). Abimelech's concern not to die at a woman's hand is understandable, for as Niditch (2008, 114) notes, it is an "ignoble and shameful end to a would-be man of power in the bardic, epic-like tradition of Judges." Earlier in Judges, the enemy commander Sisera had been slain by Jael driving a tent-peg through his head (4.21), bringing both victory and peace to Israel (5.31). In Deborah's triumphal song, Sisera's death at the hands of a woman is prominent (5.23–31), heightening the shame of a man killed this way. Clearly, "suicide was less disgraceful than being killed by a woman" (Clemons 1990, 22). Ironically, Abimelech's efforts are in vain, for this is in fact how he is remembered (2 Sam. 11.21)!

Nonetheless, Abimelech's concern to redeem an otherwise shameful situation by taking control of his own death is a standard reason for suicide in the Noble Death tradition, in which "the wise man will for reasonable cause make his own exit from life, on his country's behalf or for the sake of friends, or if he suffer intolerable pain, mutilation, or

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<sup>7</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

incurable disease.”<sup>8</sup> The other Hebrew Bible suicides more clearly follow this tradition, especially the deaths of Saul, his armor-bearer, and Zimri following military defeat.

### *Zimri*

Zimri reigned over Israel for only seven days after slaughtering King Elah along with all his male relatives (1 Kgs 16.9–12), but suffered defeat in a retaliatory rebellion. Seeing that all was lost he set fire to his palace, killing himself in the process (16.18). The narrator offers a negative assessment of his life, indicating his death was caused by “the sins that he committed, doing evil in the sight of the LORD” (16.19). However, there is no suggestion that the suicidal manner of his death was particularly noteworthy. Indeed, his regicidal act against Elah and his house is put down to the action of God:

Thus Zimri destroyed all the house of Baasha, according to the word of the LORD...because of all the sins of Baasha and the sins of his son Elah that they committed, and that they caused Israel to commit, provoking the LORD God of Israel to anger with their idols. (1 Kgs 16.12–13)

The stories of Zimri and Elah come within a larger cycle of erring kings, including Elah’s father Baasha, who all die with God’s disapproval. Yet the manner of each death is somewhat different. Elah dies at Zimri’s hand while drunk (1 Kgs 16.9–10), while Baasha, despite “doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD” for the twenty-four years of his reign (15.33–34), provoking God to the anger that would wipe out his house, does not undergo a violent death (16.6). There is, therefore, no warrant to imagine Zimri’s suicide was in any sense an especially fit or tragic punishment for a particularly evil life.

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<sup>8</sup> Diogenes Laertius 7.130. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169a.

## *Saul*

Similar attempts are made to link suicide with appropriate divine punishments in the case of Saul's battlefield self-killing. To be sure, Saul's death is no surprise having been prophesied by the spirit of Samuel, raised by the woman of Endor: "The LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" (1 Sam. 28.19). Samuel also tells Saul that God has become his enemy, and that his kingdom has been handed over to David (28.17). Nonetheless, Saul faced [MK1][PM2]the Philistines in battle, and, after his sons had been killed, was wounded by the Philistine archers. Rather than risk being made sport by his enemies, he asked his armor-bearing to kill him. After his servant refused through fear, "Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. When his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him" (1 Sam 31.4–5).

There is nothing in the narration to suggest there is anything particularly ignoble about Saul's suicide. Indeed, the choice of a general to die rather than face capture is common enough in ancient literature. Cato the Younger stabbed himself rather than plead to Caesar for his life, and so, according to Plutarch, remained in control of his life (*Cato*, 69–71). Similarly, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra, Brutus, and Cassius all killed themselves after military misadventure. Plutarch's account of the death of Publius after his defeat at the hands of the Parthians in 53BCE is strikingly similar to Saul's death: "Then he himself, being unable to use his hand, which had been pierced through with an arrow, presented his side to his shield-bearer and ordered him to strike home with his sword" (*Crassus* 25.11).<sup>9</sup> Publius is later described by his enemies as "noble" with "splendid valor" (*Crassus* 26.4), and his suicide conforms to Greco-Roman ideals of the Noble Death.

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<sup>9</sup> Translation by Perrin (1916).

Given the treatment of his corpse (1 Sam. 31.8–10 // 1 Chron. 10.8–10), Saul was correct to worry about mistreatment should he have been taken alive by the Philistines (Auld 2011, 349), and so his suicide prevented a shameful and humiliating death. The Chronicler's retelling of the story (1 Chron. 10.1–14) is more anti-Saul than his source,<sup>10</sup> and inserts a theological lesson about Saul's death that firmly establishes David as God's rightful king (Japhet 1993, 229). In Chronicles, Israel's defeat at the hands of the Philistines is transformed instead into merely a personal defeat for Saul. However, while Saul is criticized for disobedience to God, his suicide is not among the Chronicler's list of complaints:

So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.  
(1 Chron. 10.13–14)

For the Chronicler then, God is responsible for Saul's death, but once again, the fact that it is a suicide does not emphasize this point. We have already noted the variety of ways in which "bad" kings can be "killed" by God, even by natural causes, and Saul is by no means the only king wounded and killed on the field of battle according to God's will (1 Kgs 22.34; 2 Kgs 9.24; 2 Chron. 35.23).

In any case, while clearly privileging David over Saul, the Deuteronomist's assessment of Saul's character is more generous than that of the Chronicler. Saul remains a great though flawed king. In his lament, David praises the former king as the glory of Israel

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<sup>10</sup> See Knoppers (2004, 526–531) for a discussion of scholarly positions on the portrayal of Saul in Chronicles.

(2 Sam. 1.19), who, with his son Jonathan was “swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions” (1.23), and clothed the daughters of Israel with crimson and golden ornaments (1.24). Despite its ill treatment at the hands of the Philistines, his body is recovered, and his bones buried first in Jabesh by the men of Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam. 31.11–13), and then moved by David to Zela, in the tomb of his father (2 Sam. 21.13–14), an act which appears to win God’s favor (2 Sam. 21.14). Therefore, an overly negative interpretation of Saul, let alone his self-killing, which conforms to the characteristics of the Noble Death, is unwarranted.

### *Ahithophel*

It was an uprising against David by his son, Absalom, which led to the most premeditated suicide in the Hebrew Bible. Absalom sought Ahithophel’s counsel against David, and he advised attacking while the king was in retreat. However, Absalom was persuaded by David’s spies not to follow this good advice. The narrative continues:

When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order, and hanged himself; he died and was buried in the tomb of his father. (2 Sam. 17.23)

While Ahithophel’s calm decision to end his own life has drawn criticism from some commentators (Merrill 1998, 323), there is no suggestion of criticism in the narrative; he dies and is buried without comment. Later, Josephus judged that “it was better for him to remove himself from the world in a free and noble spirit” than to face punishment by David (*Ant.* 7.229, *LCL*).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Auld has argued (2011, 538), Ahithophel’s death compares

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<sup>11</sup> The later rabbis were divided over the ultimate fate of Ahithophel. He is both granted (*m. Sanh* 10.2) and denied (*b. Sanh.* 104b–105a) a place in the next world.

favorably with that of Absalom. While Ahithophel calmly orders his affairs and hangs himself, Absalom's death, narrated soon after (2 Sam. 18.9–18) is chaotic. Fleeing on his mule, his head got caught in an oak tree, and as he is left hanging, Joab ran his through with three spears, while his ten armor-bearers hacked him to death (18.14–15). Unlike the respectful burial of Ahithophel, who had deliberately hanged himself, Absalom, who died after accidentally hanging himself on a tree was thrown in a pit and buried under a heap of stones (18.16).

So far, we have considered five of the six suicides in the Hebrew Bible. Each of the characters, with the possible exception of Saul's armor-bearer, is morally problematic, yet there is no indication any of the narrators find the manner of their deaths particularly noteworthy; any negative interpretation of their self-killings is, therefore, imported. Suicide is merely one, relatively infrequent, way in which characters die, and indeed, a way in which God's purposes are carried out. That some self-killings conform to patterns of Noble Death means the general impression of suicide in the Hebrew Bible is neutral if not [MK3][PM4], ambiguously positive. However, no such ambiguity exists in relation to the death of Samson, which is portrayed as a positive, heroic, and noble (Niditch 2008, 171).

### *Samson*

Samson was captured by the Philistines after being tricked into revealing the secret of his strength by Delilah (Judg. 16.15–21). They gouged out his eyes and set him to grind the mill in prison. In celebration, the Philistines gathered in the temple of Dagon, believing their god had delivered Samson to them (16.23). When they brought Samson into the temple to entertain them, he leaned on the pillars, praying that he might die with the Philistines (16.30). His strength returned, and he pulled the temple down on top of himself and the three thousand men and women gathered there.

Crucially, there is no narrative moral queasiness about Samson’s suicidal killing. In fact, through his slaughter of the three thousand Philistines, he fulfilled his God-given destiny “to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Judg. 13.5). Even Samson’s desire for a Philistine wife that caused the initial enmity between himself and the Philistines was put down to God (Judg. 14.4). Samson’s death is described in wholly positive terms.<sup>12</sup> In the temple, he represents YHWH in a cosmic battle with Dagon, and any failure in his life is redeemed by his death.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the narrator revels over the body count created by Samson’s suicide: “So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life” (16.30). By his suicide, he exceeded the glorious exploits of his life.

Obviously, those who wish to import a negative interpretation onto these self-killings run aground on the Samson cycle. O’Mathúna, who claims (1998, 350) that “the biblical accounts [of suicide], *properly interpreted*, support the long-standing *Christian* position that suicide is morally wrong” (emphasis added), insists (with no obvious reason) that Samson’s death was not really suicide, but martyrdom (1998, 361). Similarly Merrill (1998), who argues suicide is morally equivalent to murder omits Samson from his discussion, despite the fact that Samson actually committed murder through his death! He is also remembered in the New Testament as a hero of the faith for his military exploits, of which his death was the pinnacle, thus embedding the valorization of suicidal murder in Christian tradition (Heb. 13.12).

### **Suicide in Second Temple Judaism**

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<sup>12</sup> Droge and Tabor (1992, 55–56) uncharacteristically underplay the positive nature of Samson’s death, suggesting only that the fact it was suicide was not an issue.

<sup>13</sup> There is no warrant for Cragg’s negative assessment (2005, 32): “Samson, like all other suicides, is the victim of his own hate.” Even in the doubtful event Samson was a historical figure, the narrator makes clear any hatred which motivates Samson is shared by YHWH!

Further examples of suicide, even more clearly modelled on noble death, are found in late Second Temple Jewish literature. As well as the martyr tradition of the Maccabees (see especially van Henten 1997), self-killings in order to defeat an opponent (such as Samson), or to evade capture by the enemy (such as Saul and Zimri) are portrayed positively in this period. One of each type, roughly corresponding with the Noble Death tradition of “death for the fatherland” (see van Henten 2012), take place in the Maccabean wars. Eleazar Avaran fought his way to the enemy king’s elephant, and stabbed it from underneath so that it fell on him and killed him (1 Macc. 6.45–46). The narrator praises Eleazar’s suicide: “So he gave his life to save his people and to win for himself an everlasting name” (6.44). A similarly noble suicide occurs in the story of Razis (2 Macc. 14.37–46). Locked in a tower and facing certain capture, Razis “fell upon his own sword,” like Saul, “preferring to die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth” (14.41–42). For the narrator, there was no doubt that death was preferable to capture, and that suicide in this context was heroic (van Henten 1997, 85–124). In a further similarity with Saul, Razis’ body is compromised. However, unlike Saul, this happens at his own hand. Razis makes two failed attempts to kill himself, first by stabbing, then throwing himself down from the tower. Then:

Still alive and aflame with anger, he rose, and though his blood gushed forth and his wounds were severe he ran through the crowd; and standing upon a steep rock, with his blood now completely drained from him, he tore out his entrails, took them in both hands, and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again. This was the manner of his death. (2 Macc. 14.45–46)

For the author, there is no question that Razis' suicide was honorable, and certainly no sense in which the fact that it was a self-killing made his death problematic. Indeed, he calls to God for posthumous vindication (van Henten 2012, 88), and there is no reason to doubt the narrator thought this to be a credible request in spite of his suicide.

There are several other similarly positive Jewish suicide accounts around this period. Josephus praises Herod's brother Phasaël, who, having been captured by the Parthians, killed himself, because "it was a most bitter and shameful thing to suffer at the hands of a foe... thus he deprived the enemy of the power of killing him as they pleased" (*Ant.* 14.368).<sup>14</sup> He also recounts acts of corporate family suicide to avoid capture, such as the father and his seven children (*Ant.* 14.15.5; cf. Taxo in *Ass. Mos.* 9), Simon (*War* 2.18.4), and, of course, Masada (*War* 7.320–388), in which the Jewish rebel leader, Eleazar, persuades nearly a thousand Jews to take their own lives rather than face slavery and abuse at the hands of the Romans: "I believe that it is God who has granted... that we have it in our power to die nobly and in freedom."<sup>15</sup>

Of course, as has been noted, Josephus is not uniformly positive about suicide,<sup>16</sup> and argues against the suicides of Jotapata (*War* 3.362–382). However, in both his advocacy and resistance to the practice he frames his argument in terms of the Greco-Roman philosophic tradition. It is worth noting that Josephus' own life was at stake in Jotapata, and that his subsequent capture was just the shameful situation he praised<sup>[MK7]</sup><sup>[PM8]</sup> other suicides for avoiding. It would be difficult to conclude that Josephus had any principled theological position against suicide. Like the Greco-Roman philosophers, he believed suicide under the right conditions constituted a noble death. It so happens that in the circumstances in Jotapata,

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<sup>14</sup> We have noted Josephus' positive view of Ahithophel's suicide (*Ant.* 7.229). He is similarly positive about the death of Samson (*Ant.* 5.317).

<sup>15</sup> For the argument that corporate suicide in Jewish tradition protects religious identity, see Middleton (2016).

<sup>16</sup> For discussion, see Droge and Tabor (1992, 86–97) and Newell (1982).

with all but himself and one other compatriot dead, the circumstances—coincidentally—were not right!

In Jewish tradition, therefore, before the Rabbis formalized a theological criticism of suicide, there is little or no evidence that self-killing per se drew any negative judgment. The assertion that “ancient Jewish morality had no place for suicide” (Blázquez 1985, 65) is simply wrong. Indeed, as with Greco-Roman traditions, suicide could instead be a means of restoring honor to an otherwise shameful situation. Before turning to the death of Judas, the only suicide in the New Testament, I briefly survey an enthusiasm for death exhibited in early Christian martyr accounts that made little if any difference between execution and suicide.

### **Noble Death in Early Christianity**

Discussing martyrdom in the context of suicide is controversial because martyrs are generally killed by others. Nonetheless, early Christian literature demonstrates such enthusiasm for martyrdom that it borders on a pathological desire for death (Butterweck 1995; Middleton 2006).<sup>17</sup> Durkheim included Christian martyrdom in his classic discussion of suicide, because for him, suicide was[MK9][PM10] a “death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result” (1951, 44). To be sure, most martyrs could have avoided death, as van Henten notes, “martyrdom is a form of voluntary death in public...the martyrs could easily avoid torture and execution by giving in to the foreign authorities” (2012, 86). Indeed, the elderly Jewish scribe Eleazar is given but rejects an opportunity to save his life by only pretending to eat pork, lest he provide a poor example to the young (2 Macc. 6.21–28). However, given that martyrdom was a significant factor in early Christian identity-making, such that to refuse to undergo martyrdom once a

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<sup>17</sup> Classically, Ignatius desires to be “ground by the teeth of wild beasts” to “become pure bread of Christ” (*Rom.* 4.1–5.3). For Morris (1994), this represents a “neurotic death-wish.” Droge and Tabor (1992) collapse early martyrs’ clear desire for death with suicide, which is one of Amundsen’s (1998) main complaints.

trial had begun would be to risk one's status as a Christian, I will only consider the subset of martyrdom in which there is clear evidence of volunteerism, either by provoking one's own arrest, or cutting out the executioner, and taking a more a direct route to martyrdom through self-killing.

So-called "voluntary martyrdom" can be divided into three types.<sup>18</sup> First is those who makes themselves known to the authorities by expressing outrage at the treatment of other Christians, or by bringing food to imprisoned Christians. Given that it is not clear from the presentation of these stories that their motivation (as perceived by the narrators) was death rather than service, I will not consider this category. However, the second and third types are relevant: those who, unprovoked, present themselves to authorities, often demanding to die; and finally, those who take their own lives.

There is ample evidence that many Christians presented themselves for arrest from texts that valorize this action, from Christian texts that criticize it, and from Roman writers bemused by what they perceived as a Christian desire for death. A few examples will suffice. First, the fourth century Christian Euplus went to the Prefect's chamber and shouted, "I want to die; I am a Christian" (*Acts Euplus* 1.1). The "blessed (μακάριος) Euplus" was eventually tortured and killed, having "endured the contest of martyrdom (τὸν τοῦ μαρτυρίου ἀγῶνα) and received the crown of orthodox belief (ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως)" (2.2–4). More dramatically, Tertullian and Eusebius recount two incidents where a mass of Christians presented themselves to bemused authorities. Tertullian describes the proconsul Arrius Antonius responding to their demand to be martyred by "ordering a few persons to be led forth to execution," but saying to the rest, "O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have cliffs and

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<sup>18</sup> For discussion of the phenomenon, see de Ste Croix (1963), Butterweck (1995), and Middleton (2006). Buck (2012) disputes the extent of voluntary martyrdom in the early church, but see the response by Middleton (2013). Moss (2012) makes the important point that the concept of "voluntary martyrdom" is a scholarly construction imposed on the ancient world.

nooses!” (*Scap* 5.1). Tertullian clearly approves of these Christians’ behavior, and threatens the authorities to which he writes with similar actions. In the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius describes a similar scenario in which six men, having bound their hands, demanded that the official Urbanus martyr them, which he did (3). Other voluntary arrests are mentioned in passing, including the Christian leader Saturus, who is described in the *Passion of Perpetua* as “the builder of our strength” and who “gave himself up of his own accord” (4–5).

However, voluntary arrest did meet early resistance. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* recounts the tale of the Phrygian, Quintus, “who had given himself up and had forced others to give themselves up voluntarily,” but then “turned cowardly when he saw the wild animals” and apostatized. The narrator warns, “This is the reason, brothers, that we do not approve of those who come forward of themselves” (*Mart. Poly.* 4).<sup>19</sup> Of course, not everyone who volunteered recanted, and so the narrator’s argument does not follow. Nonetheless, even when successful some early Christian writers criticized voluntary martyrdom. Clement of Alexandria, writing in the mid-third century, complained of martyrs too eager for death:

We too blame those who have rushed on death, for there are some who are really not ours but share only the name, who are eager to hand themselves over in hatred against the creator, athletes of death. We say that these men take themselves off (ἐξάγειν ἑαυτούς) [MK11][PM12] without witness (ἀμαρτύρως), [MK13][PM14] even if they are officially executed. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of faithful witness, because they do not know the real God, but give themselves up to a futile death. (*Strom.* 4.16.3–17.3)

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<sup>19</sup>Although the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is usually taken to be the earliest of the Christian “Acts of the Martyrs,” there are problems with leaning too heavily on the Quintus pericope as evidence of very early antipathy towards volunteerism. The paragraph may be an interpolation (Campenhausen 1963, 253–301; Middleton 2013, 569–570), or the text as a whole may be third century (Moss, 2010). For discussion, including a defense of a second century date and the integrity of the text, see Hartog (2013).

Clement claims that although these martyrs share the name “Christian” they are not of his group because they do not know God. According to Clement, even if they look like martyrs, they are “athletes of death” who “do away with themselves.”<sup>20</sup> Later, he claims that those who present themselves for arrest, or do not take active steps to avoid persecution<sup>[MK15][PM16]</sup> become responsible for their own deaths (*Strom.* 10). This is in direct contrast to Tertullian, who regarded Clement’s position to flee from persecution to constitute apostasy (*De Fuga* 5.1). On account of such incompatible views, Frend (1965, 360) suggests “it is perhaps fortunate for the Church that Clement and Tertullian never met!”

Variations of these two positions co-existed within early Christianity without resolution. Peter of Alexandria (*Canon* 9) thought voluntary martyrdom was fine so long as it was carried through, while Origen’s preference was for Christians not to flee from persecution, but flight was preferable to denial (*Contra Celsum* 8.44). On the other hand Cyprian, in dealing with the problem of the many lapsed Christians in the mid-third century persecutions, had to play down the value of martyrdom in order preserve the authority of bishops who had fled, including his own (*Lapsed*). This was the trajectory that would lead to Augustine’s denigration of martyrs who were from a different Christian tradition (see Leemans, 2004; Middleton 2012). Perhaps most confusing, both positions in favor and against voluntary martyrdom are found in a single text, the *Acts of Cyprian*. Cyprian was arrested and asked about the whereabouts of the other Christians. He told the authorities, “our discipline forbids anyone to surrender voluntarily” (1.5). However, when the death sentence was pronounced, his fellow Christians presented themselves, demanding, “Let us also be beheaded with him!” (5.1).

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<sup>20</sup> Ἐξάγειν ἑαυτοῦς becomes a standard term for suicide in the Hellenistic period (Daube 1972, 405–408; van Hooff 1990, 140).

Within the “canon” of early Christian martyrologies, there are also clear examples of direct self-killing. Eusebius mentions positively the suicide of Apollonia, who chose to immolate herself rather than commit blasphemy (*H. E.* 6.41.7), a mother and her two daughters who drowned themselves to escape defilement (*H. E.* 8.12.3–4), and many men and women who “rushed into the fire” during the persecutions of Diocletian (*H. E.* 8.6.6). Ambrose (*Virginité* 3.7; *Ep.* 37.38) mentions Pelagia, a teenage Christian girl, who leapt from the top of her house to her death to prevent possible assault. While each of these martyr-suicides appear in the context of persecution, albeit sometimes in cases in which death was not imminent, the third century *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyllus, and Agathonicê* records what appears to be a spontaneous, unprovoked, suicide. Agathonicê, who had brought her son to the arena, witnessed a vision at the death of a Christian martyr, and:

Realizing that this was a call from heaven, she raised her voice at once: “Here is a meal that has been prepared for me. I must partake and eat of this glorious feast!” The mob shouted out, “Have pity on your son!” And the blessed Agathonicê said: “He has God who can take pity on him; for he has providence over all. Let me do what I have come for!” And taking off her cloak, she threw herself joyfully upon the stake. (*Mart. Carp.* 42–44)

Agathonicê appears to be a pagan bystander who is moved by what she sees. While some readers have sought to deny Agathonicê’s martyrdom was spontaneous, but instead the result of careful and prayerful preparation (e.g. Buck 2012), there is nothing in the text to warrant this [conclusion](#)<sup>[MK17]</sup><sup>[PM18]</sup>.

Moreover, those who seek to draw a sharp distinction between suicide and martyrdom have to make entirely arbitrary decisions regarding who counts as a true or false martyr,

despite the fact that the early Christian narrators did not differentiate [MK19][PM20] between them. So Blázquez seeks to bracket the examples of suicidal martyrdom mentioned above from examples of Greco-Roman noble death [MK21][PM22]. So of Pelagia's self-killing, he asserts (1985, 67), "such an act cannot be called suicide in the sense of a proud decision over one's own life in the Stoic manner." Blázquez, like other interpreters with a clear contemporary anti-suicide agenda, simply cannot countenance positive early Christian examples of suicide. Therefore, they are arbitrarily re-designated "not-suicide."

Moreover, his claim, supported by O'Mathúna,<sup>21</sup> that early Christian martyrdom should not be associated with Greco-Roman models of noble death runs aground on the fact that early Christians make precisely this comparison. Tertullian (*Apol.* 50) complains that pagans dismissed Christians as being in love with death, and suggests that Christian martyrdom is on a par with examples of the Greco-Roman noble death traditions, including those ascribed to Empedocles and Dido, both of whom killed themselves. Moreover, in addressing potential Christian martyrs, he encourages them that although the flesh might fear the oncoming tortures, the spirit should emulate the bravery of notable examples of men and women who "voluntarily sought after [death] for the sake of fame and glory," listing, among others, Lucretia, who stabbed herself, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Peregrinus, who all burned themselves to death, and he exhorts women afraid of the beasts to consider the example of Cleopatra (*To the Martyrs* 4). Similarly, John Chrysostom (*Homily IV on I Corinthians 1.18 – 20*) argued that Christian martyrs compared favorably with examples of pagan noble death, even that of Socrates, noting that Socrates had a choice whether or not to die, his death was like falling asleep compared to the violent deaths of Christians, Christian martyrs are far more numerous than pagan equivalents, and Socrates was far older

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<sup>21</sup> O'Mathúna (1998, 360) complains, "Greek stories...and Roman suicide narratives are commonly cited as support by those who condone suicide."

[MK23][PM24] than most Christian martyrs. Therefore, for Chrysostom, Christian martyrdom compared well with the paradigm of noble death. However, for their part, the pagans remained largely unconvinced (Middleton 2015).

Modern attempts to draw distinctions between Greco-Roman conceptions of noble death and Christian martyrdom, or to insist that voluntary martyrdom is somehow a less appropriate [MK25] mode of Christian devotion, or even that those martyrs who took their own lives have to be specially justified is to draw distinctions that most early Christians simply did not make (Moss 2012). In the early church, whether Christians were arrested, put on trial and executed, or brought themselves to the authorities' attention, or whether they took their own lives, this was simply martyrdom. To be sure, Christian attitudes to suicide changed. Even Agathonicê's story was rewritten to make it conform to a more acceptable non-suicidal pattern.<sup>22</sup> However, it is clear that in the early Church, as in the Hebrew Bible and other early Jewish literature, a death by suicide was not particularly noteworthy. It was not considered to be an appropriately tragic end to, at least according to some, a morally ambiguous [character][MK26][PM27]. As we have seen, in some cases suicide was the solution to a problematic life.

### **Judas Iscariot**

Finally we turn to the only suicide recorded in the New Testament; that of Judas Iscariot, whose death is seen as a fitting climax for such an evil character. However, as we have noted, there is nothing in Hebrew Bible, Second Temple Jewish, or early Christian traditions that casts suicide *per se* in a negative light [PM28]. Therefore, there is no *a priori* reason to interpret Judas' death by suicide as a bad death. Indeed, as with the other examples we have

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<sup>22</sup> In a later Latin version, Agathonicê is arrested, tried, but refuses to recant, and so hung on a stake and burned (*Mart. Carpus* [Latin] 6.3).

considered, we should not rule out that death by suicide is better than other kinds of death. While the Hebrew Bible characters' suicides have to be compared with alternative *imagined* deaths—for example, Saul at the hands of the Philistines—this is not in fact the case with Judas. For although the “fact” that Judas hanged himself is deeply ingrained in the popular imagination, it is important to note that only Matthew and Luke record Judas' death, and only Matthew depicts it as suicide. In Acts, Luke offers a quite different account of Judas' death:

Now this man [Judas] acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood. (Acts 1.18–19)

While there have been unconvincing attempts to reconcile the two accounts,<sup>23</sup> for Luke, God is responsible for executing Judas. Indeed, his is one of four divine killings of evil characters recounted in Acts: Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead for holding back proceeds from a land sale from the apostles, a withholding which is deemed to be lying to the Holy Spirit (5.1–11); and Herod is killed by an angel for receiving divine honors instead of giving glory to God (12.21–23).<sup>24</sup> Judas' execution at the hands of God should be interpreted as divine punishment, as this method of execution is typical for evil characters (cf. 1 Chron. 21.18–19; 2 Macc. 9; Bel 27; *Ant.* 17.168–179; *War* 7.452–453); in Acts, Judas suffers an unambiguously bad death.

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<sup>23</sup> Augustine attempted to reconcile the accounts by suggesting when Judas hanged himself, the rope snapped and he fell into the “Field of Blood.” (C.Fel. 1.4)

<sup>24</sup> Pervo (2009, 52–53) also notes examples on non-lethal “punitive miracles,” such as the blinding of Saul (9.1–19) and Elymus (13.6–12). He also puts the demonic attack on the sons of Sceva in the same category, but this is less clear cut.

Therefore, in order to make an assessment of Matthew's better known account of Judas' suicide, it should be compared with his rather graphic slaying in Luke.<sup>25</sup>

When Judas, his betrayer (ὁ παραδιδούς αὐτόν), saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented (μεταμεληθείς) and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned (ἥμαρτον) by betraying innocent blood (παραδούς αἷμα ἀθῶον)." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself (ἀπήγγξατο). (Matt. 27.3–4)

Matthew gives Judas time to repent and return the money, while in Acts, there is no room for remorse or repentance. Judas keeps "the reward of his wickedness" and buys the "Field of Blood" in which he appropriately dies (Acts 1.18). Nonetheless, commentators have been quick to dismiss the remorse shown by Judas. Davies and Allison (1997, 561) sum up the verdict of Christian interpretation: "Judas experiences regret but not repentance. He is an everlasting failure doomed for destruction." However, while this may very well be a valid composite reading of the Judas story, it is far more difficult to draw that conclusion from Matthew's account alone.

Most readers grant Judas' remorse, but because they see suicide as a sin, and a sign of "terminal despair" (Keener 1999, 656), they assume it could not have been true repentance. Moreover, it has also been argued that Matthew would have used μετανοέω rather than

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<sup>25</sup> There are, in fact, a number of legends about Judas' death, including two preserved by Papias, in which he lived on as "a terrible example of impiety; his flesh swollen to such an extent that, where a wagon can pass with ease, he was not able to pass." He was eventually run over by a wagon. Interestingly, then, keeping Judas alive in a pitiful and putrid state was considered worse than him dying soon after the betrayal. The Judas legends are collected in Meyer (2007).

μεταμέλομαι had he meant genuine repentance. So, for Harrington (1991, 386), “Judas merely changed his mind, but could not bring himself to repent.”<sup>26</sup> However, Matthew has already used μεταμέλομαι to illustrate saving repentance in the Parable of the Two Sons (21.38–42), in which a father asked his two sons to work in the vineyard. The first refuses, but “later changed his mind (μεταμεληθείς) and went” (Matt 21.28–29), whereas the second initially agreed but did not go (21.30). In his explanation of the parable, Jesus attacks the chief priests and elders, for not repenting (μεταμέλομαι) and believing John the Baptist’s message, despite seeing the change of mind of the initially disobedient tax collectors and prostitutes who believed John the Baptist and repented, and who will therefore enter the kingdom of God (21.31–32). Unlike the chief priests and elders who saw but did not repent, the initially faithless Judas, when he saw that Jesus had been condemned, did (Nolland 2005, 1150). To be sure, there is a difference in degree between the sins of the tax collectors and prostitutes compared with Judas, but there is no warrant for concluding that Matthew attributes a lesser repentance to Judas by Matthew’s use of the verb [MK29][PM30] μεταμέλομαι.

Brown sees a second reason for not taking Judas’ repentance at face value. He criticizes Judas for going to Jesus’ enemies to seek “a form of absolution from his sins” rather than to “Jesus, who had forgiven many sinners,” leading him to conclude, “in the psychology of the Matthean story his remorse has not really meant [MK31][PM32]belief” (1994, 641).<sup>27</sup> This is not a strong argument. It is unwise to psychologize an event that Brown himself considers historically uncertain,<sup>28</sup> but in any case, in Matthew’s plot, Jesus has been arrested, making any such meeting impossible. Furthermore, Judas must go to the chief priests to return the

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<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Brown (1994, 638) and France (2017, 1039–1040).

<sup>27</sup> Saari (2006, 94) rightly questions what Brown means by “belief” in the context of Matthew’s narrative.

<sup>28</sup> For discussion, see Brown (1994, 1404–1410). He concludes (1410), “Disappointing as it may be, historical probability cannot be assigned to any of the different deaths.”

money, which becomes the main concern of the pericope after Judas' death (27.6–10).<sup>29</sup>

Judas acknowledges the extent of what he has done. He confesses that he has sinned by betraying innocent blood (27.4).

Judas' actions heighten the culpability of the chief priests and elders, for Matthew has Judas confess to betraying (*παραδίδωμι*)<sup>30</sup> the innocent Jesus, immediately after they had handed him over (*παραδίδωμι*) to Pilate (27.2). Moreover, Pilate will later deliver (*παραδίδωμι*) Jesus back into their hands, declaring himself to be innocent of his blood (27.24). Whereas Judas repented of betraying innocent blood, all the people accept responsibility for spilling Jesus' blood when he is returned to the chief priests (27.25). Thus, against Brown, the meeting between Judas and the chief priests is necessary to transfer the blood money from him to them.

After confessing his sin to the chief priests, Judas is told to see to it himself (Matt 27.4). Judas confessed to the crime of slaying innocent blood, the penalty for which was death (Lev. 24.17; Num. 35.31, 33; Deut. 21.8–9; 27.25).<sup>31</sup> However, since the chief priests refused to pronounce the sentence, Judas had to carry it out himself.<sup>32</sup> While modern depictions of this scene have portrayed Judas as profoundly disturbed, there are striking

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<sup>29</sup> Davies and Allison (1997, 557) make the important observation that the passage “is less about the fate of Judas than about the money which buys the life of Jesus.” This point strengthens my contention that Matthew is more concerned about the guilt of the chief priests and elders than that of Judas.

<sup>30</sup> The purpose of this essay is not to somehow “redeem” the historical Judas (cf. for example, Saari 2006; Klassen 1996). Nonetheless, it is clear that the character of Judas becomes progressively tainted through early Christian tradition. Whereas in Mark (14.11), the financial consideration for the betrayal occurs only after Judas agrees to betray Jesus, in Matthew Judas first asks for money (26.15). Judas becomes Satan-inspired by the time of Luke (22.3) and John (13.2, 27; cf. 6.70–71). It might be noted that in the earliest Pauline tradition, when the verb *παραδίδωμι*, refers to Jesus the action is usually carried out by God (Rom. 4.25; 8.32). It is unclear in 1 Corinthians 11.23 if Paul has access to an early tradition about the “betrayal” or if once again he means the readers to understand it was God who gave Jesus over.

<sup>31</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, those who, like Judas, confessed, “I have sinned” met a variety of fates. Achan (Josh. 7.20) is stoned to death, Shimei (2 Sam. 19.21) is spared, while David (2 Sam. 24.10) is punished through the loss of his child with Bathsheba. Interestingly, the Rabbis judged that because Achan confessed his sin to Joshua, he won for himself a place in the next life; even for those who are sentenced to death, “all who confess have a share in the world to come” (*m. Sanh.* 6.2).

<sup>32</sup> Droge and Tabor (1992, 60) suggest Jonah's request to be thrown overboard (Jon. 1.12) is an attempt at “self-inflicted capital punishment.” See also Clemons (1990, 22–23).

parallels with the “business-like” suicide of Ahithophel.<sup>33</sup> Matthew’s narrative is economical (21.5); he has Judas carry out the only penalty on himself that could possibly make expiation in these circumstances.<sup>34</sup> While Brown considers this possibility, he rejects it: “the Jewish attitude toward suicide as infringing on God’s rights makes it extremely unlikely that Judas’ hanging himself would have been considered a divinely acceptable expiation” (1994, 644). However, Brown here appeals to a tradition that simply does not exist, and owes more to importing later Jewish and Christian attitudes to suicide. Potentially, Judas carries out the appropriate means of reparation laid down by Mosaic Law.

Ironically, reading Matthew through the lens of Christian tradition, which regards Judas’ suicide as the paradigmatic and treacherous end appropriate for the betrayer of Christ, Luke’s far more savage treatment of Judas has been all but ignored. But freed from the weight of Christian tradition, there is no reason to interpret the suicide of Judas in Matthew as a negative act. Indeed, in depicting Judas’ death as suicide, Matthew transforms the divine execution of an evil character of Acts into a more ambiguous, perhaps even a good or noble death.

## Conclusion

Despite being a widely held assumption, there is no evidence that ancient Jewish or Christian tradition shared any particular antipathy towards self-killing. While it is not obvious what relevance these biblical accounts of ancient suicide have to modern discussions of end of life issues, those who believe in a **robust continuity** [MK33][PM34] between scripture and modern

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<sup>33</sup> These parallels are discussed among others by Brown (1994, 656–657) and Davies and Allison (1997, 565–566). It may be that this link had already been made in the tradition employed by Matthew.

<sup>34</sup> “You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it” (Num. 35.33). There are also positive interpretations of Judas’ betrayal, most notably in the recently discovered *Gospel of Judas*. See, for example, Ehrman (2006).

theology and ethics should acknowledge the claim that Christian tradition has always criticized self-killing is deeply problematic. To be sure, there are occasional voices against the practice, but in the main, as I have demonstrated, Jewish and Christian biblical and post biblical traditions can easily incorporate suicide into a category of noble death in which people could overcome shame or other negative circumstances through taking control of **their** own **deaths**<sup>[MK35]</sup><sup>[PM36]</sup>. Despite his demonization over the last two thousand years, this assessment may even apply to Judas. Perhaps the most iconic hanging in history and literature can be read quite plausibly as an example of noble death.

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