

Motivating the Great Betrayal in Egon Friedell's *Die Judastragödie*

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Abstract

*In 1923 the eminent Viennese philosopher, playwright, cultural historian, and theatre critic Egon Friedell turned to what by then had become an evergreen theme in European literary history by publishing his *Judastragödie* as an alternative explanation of what had motivated Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. In doing so, he swam vigorously against a stream of modern efforts to rehabilitate the reputation of that despised character. Jewish in origin but a convert to Christianity of a post-orthodox sort, Friedell explored his theme against the background of first-century Judaism, which he portrayed in a deprecating light, one chapter in a long saga of materialism which was incompatible with the spirit of Jesus. It is argued that Friedell's contrarian interpretation manifested various weaknesses which rendered his portrayal of Judas self-contradictory and arguably implausible.*

Egon Friedell's *Die Judastragödie*, which had its premiere performance at Vienna's Burgtheater on 6 March 1923, not only marked a new dimension of this writer's multifaceted productivity but also contributed to a growing body of post-Enlightenment creative literature in several languages in which the arch-traitor in the history of Christendom was re-interpreted and at times exonerated. Although literary scholars have illuminated many previously unexplored corners of that international tradition, Friedell's contribution to it remains largely tenebrous. His biographer Wolfgang Lorenz called *Die Judastragödie* Friedell's „Lieblingskind“ (Lorenz 1994:222), but this subjective status has not led to an equally noteworthy scholarly analysis of the piece. In the present article it is my intention to take steps towards filling the abiding *lacuna* in the historiography of German literature by examining in its historical context and against the backdrop of Friedell's generally deprecating view of Judaism his imagination of the eponymous central figure's motivation for the betrayal of Jesus as well as the portrayal of first-century religious life in Jerusalem, especially as personified by Caiaphas, the High Priest on whose doorstep he laid the primary guilt for the rejection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The theme of Judas is, of course, an evergreen one, its vitality nurtured by its intimate association with what is arguably the most widely known narrative in the world. Challenges to conventional, demonising portrayals of him are by no means a

novel topic in either literary or visual art. Especially in the twentieth century, though with several antecedents in the nineteenth, various writers attempted either partial or complete rehabilitations of his reputation, or at least mined both the scanty Biblical sources about Judas and their own imaginations in efforts to understand what had motivated him. For that matter, non-canonical interpretations of Judas go back much further. The widely discussed discovery of Gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi on the east bank of the Nile during the 1940s left no doubt that some individuals in the second century had discussed Judas with respect and not as one under the sway of Satan (Robinson 2006:229-238). The announcement in 2006 that a Coptic Gospel of Judas (carbon-dated to between 220 and 340 A.D.) which may be a translation of an earlier Greek work with the same title had been found renewed international interest in this non-canonical book. Numerous scholarly publications appeared soon thereafter analysing its significance.¹ In this Coptic text, the actions of Judas are not depicted as a betrayal, but rather as obedience to Jesus's instructions. As Frederick Hale has demonstrated, quite coincidentally the French writer Marcel Pagnol advanced a similar argument in his tragedy of 1955, *Judas* (Hale 2007:48-67).

Pre- and post-Enlightenment European portrayals of Judas

The backdrop of antecedent artistic and literary representations of Judas Iscariot against which Friedell wrote is far too extensive to allow more than brief consideration here, and it has been ably discussed in detail by numerous other scholars. Nevertheless, mention of certain prominent features and recurrent themes in that evolving representation is particularly germane for understanding Friedell's place in this dimension of European cultural and religious history. In continental literature and art, Judas was almost invariably depicted negatively until the Enlightenment (Paffenroth 1997:32). In his fourteenth-century *Divine Comedy*, for instance, Dante Alighieri described him being eternally eaten by Lucifer at the centre of the Inferno, the ninth circle of which is eponymously labelled *la Giudecca*. Medieval European artists typically portrayed Judas with exaggerated Semitic facial features and surrounded by demons. In other manifestations of his alterity outside the familiar fold of the faithful, he was occasionally painted as a black man at a time when Christianity was regarded – at least by its adherents in Europe – as primarily the religion of that continent's inhabitants, not as a faith for all nations. To cite but one fairly representative example of conventional portrayals, the fifteenth-century Florentine Dominican monk Fra Angelico placed a conspicuously dark halo above Judas in his San Marco fresco of the Last Supper as well as in another, portraying the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane. The other disciples in these pictures, by contrast, are adorned with golden haloes (Morachiello 1996:304). The significantly different status of Judas is thus too obvious to overlook. In short, Judas was for many centuries essentially a negative referent, an object lesson for Christians. As Kim Paffenroth has observed in a commendable survey of the subject, the „negative, frightening, and scolding images” of him were not gratuitous and without purpose but were intended to be „deeply positive and redemptive” as verbal and nonverbal admonitions: „Although Judas is eternally trapped on the other side of the abyss, his story has been used to lead people from the darkness of the cross to the hope and light of the resurrection” (Paffenroth 1997:32).

Since the Enlightenment, literary artists in several countries have made countless attempts to probe the mind of Judas and either advanced theories of his motivation or, in some cases, lifted from his shoulders the burden of endless guilt. To cite but two examples of the former, in his epic poem *Der Messias*, completed in 1773, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock posited that Judas was envious of John, the beloved disciple, and his own frustrated ambition drove him to betrayal. The French scholar Ernest Renan echoed this sentiment in his well-known work of 1863, *Vie de Jésus*, by cautiously suggesting that the cause may have lain in „quelque sentiment de jalousie” or „quelque dissension intestine”, i.e. among the disciples, and found evidence for this in „la haine particulière que Jean témoigne contre Juda”. In tandem therewith, Renan believed that differences regarding the management of the apostolic funds also underlay the strife, not least by giving Judas „les sentiments étroits de sa charge”. „Par un travers fort ordinaires dans les fonctions actives, il en sera venu à mettre les intérêts de la caisse au-dessus de l'œuvre même à laquelle elle était destinée,” theorised Renan. „L'administrateur aura tué l'apôtre.” In addition to the disagreement concerning the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, he suggested that the difficult financial straits in which the disciples presumably found themselves created a tense environment in which differences of opinion became magnified (Renan 1863:239).

In the tumultuous world of nineteenth-century German biblical scholarship, a seminal departure was made by David Friedrich Strauss of the University of Tübingen in his *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, which appeared in two volumes in 1835 and 1836 and opened the flood-gates to much of the subsequent radical re-interpretation of the New Testament. Denying the historical trustworthiness of its accounts of Jesus, which he categorised as „myths”, he attributed the betrayal not to direct Satanic influence (mentioned in John 13:27) but rather to covetousness (*Habsucht*), possibly galvanised by the incident at Bethany in which Jesus had rebuked Judas for criticising Mary's anointing of him. But even that, he thought, was improbable, because the treachery seemed to exceed vastly the extent of the reproach which ostensibly wounded his ambition (*Ehrgeiz*) (Strauss 1837:390, 394).

Taking the issue a crucial step further, in the twentieth century numerous literary artists have marshalled their imaginative skills to craft revised versions of the gospel narrative and, in the process, virtually absolved Judas of the burden of guilt which both the canonical Scriptures and nearly two millennia of ecclesiastical and artistic tradition had heaped upon him. Among the better known examples of such texts are George Moore's *The Brook Kerith*, Robert Graves's *King Jesus*, Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Greek Passion* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Paul Raynal's *A souffert sous Ponce Pilate*, and Pagnol's previously mentioned *Judas*.

Friedell's departure from his Jewish heritage

Like many other twentieth-century *littérateurs* who took up the Judas theme, Friedell approached it from a theological/religious background which differed markedly from the prevailing form of Christian orthodoxy in his national culture or denominational tradition. Indeed, he was a multiple nonconformist. Born the third child of a Jewish textile manufacturer in Vienna and originally named Friedmann, he lost both parents

during his child and adolescence. (He would change his surname to Friedell only in 1916.) Divorced in 1887, his mother left the family. Following the death of his father four years later, Friedell lived with an aunt in Frankfurt, but within two years was expelled from school there for repeatedly disturbing and provoking his teachers (Dencker 1997:24-25). He subsequently attended several schools in Austria and Germany, and finally achieved his *Abitur* in Heidelberg on his fourth attempt in 1899 (Dencker 1997:49-53).

Two years earlier, Friedell had renounced his birthright Jewish heritage and been baptised in the Lutheran church in Vienna on 12 July 1897, thereby moving from one religious minority to another in the Austrian capital. Lorenz has pointed out that this conversion was less dramatic than it may seem; like many other Jews in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, Friedell and his siblings celebrated certain cultural aspects of Christmas and in most respects other than purely confessional ones did not differ markedly from their Gentile peers. That he chose to affiliate with a Protestant as opposed to a Catholic church Lorenz has suggested was „wohl eine Frage momentaner Opportunität“, although on what this historical judgment is based is not apparent (Lorenz 1994:80-81). In any case, Friedell's theological convictions bore scant resemblance to those of Martin Luther and were only marginally in accordance with the doctrines of the Lutheran *Confessio Augustana*. As Lorenz has pointed out, Friedell denied the messiahship of Jesus, regarded the material world as ultimately unreal, advocated the deletion of the Old Testament from the Christian canon of scripture, and rejected the notion of the death of Jesus as an atonement for sin as a doctrine irreconcilable with the notion of a just and loving God. Some of these convictions aligned him in part with the second-century theologian Marcion and with Gnosticism, both of which were at odds with what became orthodox Christianity (Lorenz 1994:81-93). Nevertheless, Lorenz found enough Christian spirituality permeating Friedell and his works to claim that he was

einer der ganz wenigen Christen, die in diesem Jahrhundert gelebt haben; ein durchdringender Denker, ein rasanter Skeptiker, nicht eigentlich ein Theolog, sondern im Gegenteil: ein zutiefst religiöser Mensch, für den alles Denken der Gotteserkenntnis zustrebte und sich in ihr begründete. (Lorenz 1994:93)

Having gained control of his considerable financial inheritance in 1899, Friedell studied at the University of Vienna from 1900 until 1904, when he received a doctorate for his dissertation, „Novalis als Philosoph“ (Dencker 1977:57-60). He then embarked on a checkered career as a journalist, historian, actor, drama critic, and more in both Austria and Germany. After his publications had been suppressed in the Third Reich, Friedell's life ended at the age of fifty during the *Anschluss* of March 1938 when, in order to avoid being arrested by the SA, he committed suicide by leaping from a window of his apartment.

Friedell's deprecating perception of Jews generally

In a bluntly phrased *Nachwort* to *Die Judastragödie*, Friedell bared his opinion of Jews and how he believed that a fundamental flaw in their ethnic character had prevented them in the first century from accepting Jesus as the Messiah and, on a microcosmic level, led Judas to betray him. A consideration of this appendix is essential to a

comprehension of the central thrust of the tragedy, which is not merely that of Judas but of his ethno-religious group.

„Der Grundzug des Judentums ist ein tief gewurzelter, organischer Materialismus,“ Friedell declared without placing any geographical, cultural, or chronological bounds on his generalisation. „Selbst dort, wo der jüdische Geist sich in die allerspiritualistischen Höhen verliert, behält er doch noch immer den Charakter des Materialismus, der sich verstiegen hat; und immer bleibt er rationalistisch.“ The assumption that reality consists of tangible things Friedell dismissed as „him melschreiender Nonsens“ and „eine jüdische Erfindung“. He did not juxtapose this explicitly with a Hellenistic *Weltanschauung* or the metaphysical traditions stemming therefrom in the history of Western civilisation but, echoing the enthusiasm he had shown a few years previously for the Central Powers' campaign in the Great War, thought that it harmonised with „die französische Ideologie“. Homogenising an extremely variegated cultural and religious legacy to fit his monolithic allegation, Friedell asserted,

Das jüdische Volk hat in zahllosen Kriegen den äußersten Heroismus und die blindeste Todesverachtung bewiesen, aber immer aus sehr realistischen Gründen. Alle großen jüdischen Reformatoren waren Realpolitiker, [und] das jüdische Ritual besteht in wesentlichen aus sanitätspolizeilichen Vorschriften [...]. (Friedell 1963:109)

This ostensibly thoroughgoing mentality had had enormous and self-defeating consequences for the religious history of the Jews. The Messiah anticipated in the first century, Friedell professed in another oversimplification, was „keineswegs weltfremd“ but „ein konkretes Hirngespinnst“. The disharmony between this expectation and the reality of the man from Nazareth, he thought, explained „die ungeheure Erbitterung des gesamten zeitgenössischen Judentums gegen Jesus“; it was directed essentially „gegen den gefährlichen Frondeur, der zu verkündigen wagte: ‘Mein Reich ist nicht von dieser Welt.’“ That declaration was nothing less than „die vollständige Aufrhebung und Umkehrung des spezifisch jüdischen Weltgefühls“ (Friedell 1963:109f). Read against the backdrop of this *Nachwort*, it becomes obvious that *Die Judastragödie* is the tragedy of Judaism generally. As will be demonstrated shortly, however, in his assessment of first-century Jews Friedell did not limit his indictment exclusively to this materialism. He also cited disparagingly their alleged cultural philistinism and disputatiousness as deeply entrenched national characteristics which militated against both their spiritual growth and independence from Roman hegemony.

Friedell's portrayal of Judas's appearance, personality and disillusionment

Friedell's portrayal of Judas and his theory of that disciple's motivation for the betrayal can be discussed succinctly. In harmony with artistic representations from the Middle Ages onward, he is depicted as a manifestation of darkness and otherness, an extraordinary figure though clearly a human being. In Friedell's stage directions, Judas is described as „ein hochgewachsener Mann von prachtvoller Erscheinung, die ihm besonders im Moment des Affekts etwas Romantisches und Überwirkliches verleiht“. Moreover, „Alles an ihm ist schwarz: die Augen, die Locken und der gewaltige blaue Bart, der ihm bis zum Gürtel reicht.“ It immediately becomes obvious that Marry

Magdalene, with whom he converses in his first appearance in the plot, is infatuated with this very human but nevertheless somewhat otherworldly character (Friedell 20f).

It also emerges immediately that Judas is bursting with anger. Jesus, who does not appear directly in the plot, has been arrested, and Mary Magdalene appeals to Judas to intervene on his behalf. He refuses brusquely: „Ich bin kein Redner” and spurns her inveigling flattery: „Laß mich! Bei meinem Zorn!” Precisely why he is furious is not disclosed, but a hint emerges when he responds to Mary Magdalene’s praise of Jesus: „Euch Weibern ist er sonderlich gekommen. Liegt er nicht über euren zagen Seelen wie der bleiche Mond auf schwarzen, schwankenden Gewässern?” (Friedell 20f)

In a conversation with fellow disciple Simon at the beginning of the second act, Judas reveals the grounds for his disillusionment. He believes that Jesus has merely sown the seeds of „ein Reich der Worte”, and while the „bilderfroh” world can welcome the images drawn in the parables, he himself has come to reject it. To this the ageing, surprisingly mildly portrayed Simon replies, „Sein Same ist das Wort, sein Acker ist die Zeit.” Judas’s rejoinder springs from his revolutionary impatience: „In einer Zeit wie dieser ist Liebe Feigheit, milder Sinn Verbrechen.” After Simon queries him about his loyalty *vis-à-vis* the Sadducees and Pharisees and Judas denies having any respect for either party, Simon asks what he actually believes in. Nothing less than a revolutionary Messiah is the answer:

An den Erschnten, der dah erbraust im Feuerhauch des Herrn und den Bedrückern seiner Zornheimzahlen wird im Schmetter der Trompeten, mit den Funkenstürmen seines Schwerts! Der endlich Israel emporhebt aus der Asche und die stolze Hure in Rom darniederstreckt in Finsternis!
(Friedell 1963:42)

Friedell’s attempt to explain how Judas was transformed from following to rejecting Jesus as the national saviour founders on the rocks of faulty chronology and a careless misreading of the gospel narratives. Simon reminds Judas that he held the reins of the donkey when Jesus had ridden triumphantly into Jerusalem. Judas acknowledges this but insists that his mind subsequently changed and explains this *metanoia*:

Das tat ich damals, weil ich glaube, er sei der Rechte! Weil er anfangs machtvoll auftrat und die Händler aus dem Tempel stieß. Doch als das Volk, von seinem Wort geblendet, ihn zum König ausrufen wollte, da hatte er die Kraft nicht, solchen Glanz zu tragen, und zog sich scheu zurück auf Berg und See und Blum enwiesen und predigte! [...] Damals ward mir’s klar: der ist nicht der Messias. (Friedell 1963:42f)

The debilitating problem with this explanation lies in its chronological confusion. In the three Synoptic gospels, the confrontation between Jesus and the moneychangers and hawkers at the Temple occurs *after* the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. To be sure, in the second chapter of John Jesus makes a brief trip to that city in connection with Passover, and during that stay he wields a whip to drive these pecuniarily motivated men and their livestock out of the Temple. But in all four canonical gospels, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem comes only after extensive preaching and teaching in Galilee and elsewhere, not the reverse, as Friedell’s explanation requires. Even a moderately more rigorous reading of the gospels would have allowed Friedell to avoid this problem which erodes his theory of Judas. How he then would have explained Judas’s fundamental change of mind regarding Jesus is impossible to know. Moreover,

why Friedell's Judas remains with Jesus and continues to associate with other disciples until very shortly before the arrest and crucifixion remains a mystery.

However, apparently in cognizant of this underlying implausibility, Friedell presses on, allowing Judas to explain why Jesus must be dispensed with. This brings the narrative to the motivational core of the betrayal. From the perspective of the disillusioned, erstwhile disciple, Jesus is „das größte Hindernis für den, der kommen soll, er ist der Felsblock, der dem Großen, auf den wir harren, im Weg liegt. Er verdirbt das Volk, statt es, wie unser aller Pflicht, für seine Siegestage würdig zu bereiten.“ To Judas, the time for clearing this hurdle from the way of liberation is at hand: „Das Römerreich ist im Verfall, man sieht's an tausend Zeichen. Über seinen Trümmern werden wir ein Reich errichten, ein neues Reich auf sicherem Grunde, nicht wie das römische [...]“ He insists that Simon also make an imminent decision in this regard:

Du hast zwei Wege. Entweder folge diesem (*er deutet nach links*) und baue aus trägen Wünschen, kranken Träumen und armen Worten den Zöllnern, Bettlern, Dirnen einen Nebelgott! Oder harre mit mir auf den, dessen Zunge Feuer und dessen Leben Macht und Schwert ist! Du kannst wählen, doch wähle bald, denn nahe ist der Tag. (Friedell 43f)

The final tragic fall of Judas

Judas never overcomes his conviction that Jesus cannot be the Messiah. Indeed, his rejection of Jesus and concomitant commitment to an armed revolt leads to his downfall, which Friedell presents in a way that departs from the gospel narratives. For Judas, there is some eleventh-hour appreciation of the message of Jesus. In a conversation with him on the morning of the crucifixion, Pontius Pilate urges Judas to remember that military power and imperial expansion were not saving Rome: „Ihr Juden, lernt von uns Römern! Die Weltgier hat uns arm gemacht.“ He adds words regarding the fleeting nature of worldly power which strike a chord with the erstwhile disciple: „Lechzt nicht nach gebeugten Knien, sondern erfleht von eurem Gott, daß er eure Knie sich beugen lehre! Dann werdet ihr die Könige, die wahrhaft Reichen sein und wir Weltbeherrscher werden zu euch pilgern und euch um Almosen bitten!“ Judas says to himself, „Die Weisheit des Nazareners [...]“. But wisdom in itself cannot lift the Roman yoke from the Jews, Judas believes, and he tells Pontius Pilate, „Gott weiß von keinem Messias, der am Kreuze stirbt.“ (Friedell 1963:74f)

In the wake of the crucifixion, and with foment stirring in Jerusalem, one mob proclaims the kingship of Barabbas, who is raiding the Temple. Another sector of the public declares univocally that Judas, who has declared that the day of judgement has arrived, is the Messiah and demands his anointing as such in the Temple. Indicative of the incredulity of a desperate people, rumours immediately circulate that he has begun to lead a successful revolt. „Und hier flieht Rom von unsern Waffen!“ professes one enthusiastic member of a crowd. „Judas kämpft wie ein Panther!“ (Friedell 1963:88f)

The localized revolt is suppressed almost immediately. A gain disillusioned, on the following day, as the sun again shines, Judas admits dejectedly as he looks at a grave, „Israel, dein König ist besiegt. Dein Traum ist ausgeträumt. Gott schenkte dir den Messias – für eine Nacht.“ In another imaginative departure from the conflicting narratives of the gospels about the death of Judas, it is reported that he has hanged

himself in Pontius Pilate's garden. It is a manifestation of classical tragedy; the flaw in the man's character, in this case his fixation on armed revolt, has prevented him from appreciating the spiritually powerful message of Jesus and, never having been spiritually fulfilled, consequently leads him to suffer physical death. (Friedell 1963:97-99)

Victims of themselves? The negative portrait of the Jews

The Jews in Judea are collectively described in *Die Judastragödie* as a divided, endlessly disputatious, politically desperate, culturally impoverished, and spiritually bankrupt people whose materialistic nature not only prevents them from accepting Jesus but who bear part of the responsibility for their own oppression. The critical, in places almost calumnious, tone is set as the curtain rises for the first act. In the opening scene, two secretaries of the procurator Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem discuss how the Passover, to begin the following day, will positively affect the conduct of the local populace. „Da können sie we nigstens nicht z anken,“ expresses one thankfully. „Ich glaube, nur die Streitsucht erhält dieses Volk so lange.“ He adds, „Der Aberglaube dieses Volkes ist der häßlichste, den ich k enne.“ The religious character of the Jews also comes under the loupe in this exchange. Their monotheism, it is said, causes even more confusion than Roman polytheism, although neither of ficial states the reason for this. They agree, in any case, that Jewish legalism is „ ganz unverständlich“ and had led to endless disputatiousness. But this, they believe, facilitates imperial control of the Jews. „Nein, man sollte sie einfach gewähren lassen. Sie würden sich dann langsam selbst auf fressen“ (Friedell 1963:17f).

The attitude of the Roman occupants towards Jewish culture and Judea in general is entirely condescending. This, too, is established in the first scene. Strobilus, an elegantly clad legate who travels extensively within the Roman Empire and has just returned to Jerusalem, declares the city to be a „ Narreninsel“. His assessment dovetails neatly with that of Pontius Pilate's wife, Claudia, whose affectations include spouting Greek phrases to Roman officials and who finds nothing of value in the local culture. „Hier gibt es keine N umachieen, keine P ferdereennen, keine B uchläden, in denen man plaudern kann, und nur eine einz ige, finsere Therme,“ she grouses. „ Nicht einmal Statuen und W andbilder sieht man hier , denn der Gott, der hier her rscht, ist ein Feind der Künste.“ (Friedell 1963:19f)

That the Jews are a disputatious lot is stressed repeatedly. Pontius Pilate is a principal witness in this regard. When High Priest Caiaphas attempts to pressure him into dispensing with Jesus, the procurator replies bluntly, „Rom hat es satt, der Büttel eures kleinen Hasses zu sein.“ In the same scene, the masses call for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. Pontius Pilate asks Strobilus, „Verstehst du dieses Volk? Einer, der am Sabbath eine Ähre ausgerauft hat, scheint ihnen todeswürdiger als einer, der brandschatzt und mordet.“ (Friedell 1963:34f)

These observations, of course, are made from Roman perspectives. But in one act after another Friedell's Jewish characters, either individually or collectively, provide corroborative evidence against their own national morality and religious life. A few

examples will illustrate the strategy. Not only the religious leaders but also the common people are disunited in their beliefs. Four women who chat while washing clothing discuss the nature of God. One voices the disunity. „Wo ist eigentlich Gott? Die einen sagen, er thront auf Zion, aber dort ist doch der Römer; die anderen sagen, er wohnt in der Wüste, andere wieder beten auf Garizim.“ They also debate Jewish marital practices in relation to the Law. One of the few things on which they can agree is the appeal of the itinerant rabbi Jesus. (Friedell 1963:47)

Nor are the Jews united in opposition to Rome. Not only collaborators like Caiaphas reject liberation movements. A deaf man who is eighty-nine years old has seen enough of ethnic and political hostilities and longs for both peace and prosperity. The presence of Roman symbols bearing eagles does not disturb him. „Ich hab' nichts gegen die Römer,“ he explains to a younger man; „sie bringen Waren, sie nehmen Waren, was gehn mich ihre Adler an?“ (Friedell 1963:48f)

In the longest speech of the play, Herod Antipas of the collaborating royal family confesses a catalogue of sins its members have committed against the people over whom they rule. His late father, Herod the Great, he admits, was a tyrant who had two of his wives decapitated and a brother poisoned, murdered infants in Bethlehem, and committed other violent misdeeds. Herod Antipas therefore pleads Pontius Pilate to pardon Jesus rather than adding to the legacy of misery and shame by senselessly killing him. (Friedell 1963:63-65)

In their attitudes towards Jesus, some of the Jews warmly receive and follow him enthusiastically, although this is not developed as a theme in Friedell's play. Others are ingrates who do not appreciate his healing them, let alone grasp its spiritual significance. One of three such individuals who discuss the matter acknowledges that he can now hear, but what he hears is that his brother-in-law has cheated him in the marketplace. The second thinks that he was happier before his sight was restored. „Seit ich sehe, weiß ich von meinem Weib, daß sie mit dem Palastwächter hält.“ And the third laments that since regaining his hearing he has discovered that his wife no longer loves him: „Aber jetzt höre ich den Ton ihrer Stimme, und nun vermag sie mich nicht mehr zu täuschen.“ (Friedell 1963:86f)

The incompetence of Caiaphas

A final dimension of Friedell's rhetorical strategy in laying bare the spiritual weakness of first-century Judaism, one which injects a rare element of levity into the sombre plot, is to focus on the ineptness of Caiaphas in his capacity as High Priest. This cleric not merely resents the popularity of Jesus as a challenge to the authority of the Temple personnel; he is simply incompetent in his own right. This comes most clearly to the fore in a section of the second act in which he and Nicodemus dispute in the presence of Pilate and, ostensibly on the basis of their Scriptures, the legitimacy of Jesus. Each asks a lector to read requested passages. Nicodemus begins by demanding that which the prophet Isaiah wrote about sacrifices. The lector reads the following

Höret des Herrn Wort, Ihr Fürsten von Sodom! Nimm zu Ohren unsers Gottes Gesetz, du Volk von Gomorra! Was soll mir die Menge eurer Opfer, spricht der Herr. Ich bin satt des Blutes der

Kälber und des Fettes der Lämmer und Böcke. Bringet nicht mehr Speiseopfer so vergeblich. Habe ich Gefallen an Tausenden von Widdern, an unzähligen Bächen Öls? Es ist dir gesagt, o Mensch, was frommt und was dein Gott von dir fordert, Recht tun und Liebe üben und demütig wandeln vor deinem Gott. (Friedell 1963:28)

Caiaphas seeks to deflect this criticism of Temple worship merely by claiming that it was uttered „damals” and that „Jesaia war ein Prophet!” What the High Priest has apparently failed to grasp, however (and one must suspect that the point was also lost on many Viennese viewers of Friedell’s drama) is that the quoted text is not merely Isaiah; it is a conflation of Isaiah 1:10-11 and an equally well-known passage from the Minor Prophets, namely Micah 6:7-8. Less subtle is Friedell’s lampooning of Caiaphas’s folly in asking the lector to read „über Propheten!” from the Malachi scroll, apparently to deal a fatal blow to any rhetorical efforts to use their writings against the abuse of Temple worship. In fact, that book is one of the most caustic and nearly scatological indictments of the priesthood canonised in Jewish scripture. Without commenting on this gaffe, the lector reads instead from Zechariah 13:2-3, which patently looks forward to the victorious end of history, the „Day of Jahweh” when prophets will no longer be necessary; the text is certainly not a wholesale indictment of Israel’s revered tradition of historic prophets. (Friedell 1963:28f)

Conclusion

In his classic study, *Fictional Transformations of Jesus*, the renowned comparative literature scholar Theodore Ziolkowski concluded that it is virtually impossible to craft fully credible symbolic Christ figures in modern literature. The antecedent narrative is simply too well known, and in many quarters regarded as either infallible or immutable, to allow major departures from it (Ziolkowski 1972). By at least oblique analogy, the same might be said of many other biblical characters, tempting as they have long been to literary artists. In the case of Judas, so much liturgical and other attention has been regularly given him, and the historical facts that can be gleaned from the New Testament (and there is no other first-century biographical evidence pertaining to him) are so sparse that the necessity of using literary imagination to flesh out the narrative immediately provokes hostile reactions.

That did not inhibit Friedell. Drawing on the canonical gospels as his only source for Judas and his other central characters, Friedell expanded these *personae* imaginatively in terms of their personalities, religious beliefs, perceptions of first-century Judaism, attitudes towards the province of Judea, and so on. This artistic licence was virtually inevitable. On the other hand, Friedell, notwithstanding his general commitment to and extensive reliance on biblical narratives, contradicted them with *inter alia* his reconstruction of the suicide of Judas. Arguably more damaging to the credibility of *Die Judastragödie* is Friedell’s crassly confused mishandling of certain gospel texts, particularly those dealing with the cleansing of the Temple and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which are necessary to his interpretation of Judas but have transparently been misread.

Friedell scholarship remains in its infancy, despite the publication of works by scholars like Lorenz, Haage (1971) and Dencker in recent decades. The present consi-

deration of *Die Judastragödie* underscores how Friedell swam against a current of literary attempts to rehabilitate Judas after centuries of deprecation in the literatures and visual artistic traditions of many European and other cultures but allowed his overgeneralised perceptions of first-century Judaism to lead him into a severely flawed and ultimately self-contradictory portrayal of Judas and the nation he supposedly represented. Future considerations of Friedell's religious views as they shaped his own creative pen and his interpretation of the cultural history of the ancient world must incorporate a critical analysis of his comments about Judaism, his varied interpretations of the concept of the Messiah, and, not least, his despairing judgement of modern European culture and society as having lost its soul. He lamented:

Man sagt uns freilich, Fetischismus, Mythologie und dergleichen seien alberne und rohe Dinge, aber wir haben diese schlimmen Dinge ja auch noch in unserem heutigen Leben, nur in unsäglich platterer, geistloserer und gemeinerer Form: Unser Fetischtempel heißen Börse, Zeughaus und Parlament, und unsere Mythologie lesen wir täglich dreimal in der Zeitung. Es geschehen heute keine Wunder mehr, aber nicht weil wir in einer so fortgeschrittenen und erleuchteten, sondern weil wir in einer so heruntergekommenen und gottverlassenen Zeit leben. (Friedell 1963:111)

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Randolphe Kasser, et al. (trans. and eds), *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006); James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006); Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007); and Susan Gubar, *Judas: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009).

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