

Jesus Christ Superstar

By David Chandler

[Based on a term paper written in 1971 for a course at the American Baptist Seminary of the West. The assignment was to write about the religious value of Jesus Christ Superstar, which had only recently "made a hit around here" as an LP album, and only later as stage and film versions. I listened to the album through so many times to catch and scrutinize the lyrics that I can still sing/recite practically the whole thing start to finish.]

Jesus Christ Superstar has won widespread praise for its artistic merit and its effort to deal seriously with Jesus Christ in a rock musical setting. These evaluations may suffice for the purposes of artistic and literary interest, but an evaluation of its religious content is also necessary if it is to be useful to the church. To say that it "communicates to the younger generation" is not enough. We must understand what it is saying and what it can contribute to one's religious life. I believe Superstar is worthy of a sensitive hearing for its religious content, but to find its value, we need to look beneath the surface.

Superstar is not valuable as a proclamation of the Gospel. The Jesus of Superstar is not understood or proclaimed by himself or anyone else in terms of the saving activity of God, to say nothing of being the incarnation of God. Judas says Jesus is "starting to believe this talk of God is true", and throughout the opera Jesus seems to have a vague sense of a divine mission that drives him to his death, but he understands it fatalistically. In a reply to his disciples he says, "Why are you obsessed with fighting times and fates you can't defy?" The Last Supper, instead of being a sign revealing the meaning of his death, becomes an expression of his sense of hopelessness. In Gethsemane, after struggling with his self-understanding, he resigns himself to his fate, tired, defeated, and trapped by God. There is nothing of the self-giving love of the Gospels here. A final strike against its value as Gospel proclamation is its denial of the resurrection. The resurrection is not merely omitted but tacitly denied in the final instrumental number entitled "Conclusion: John 19:41", a reference to the burial of Jesus.

Neither is Superstar of value as an historical account of the passion of Jesus. The events are modified and arranged according to artistic taste rather than historical interest, and the motives of the characters are purely speculative. A simple example is the way Mary, the sister of Martha, the woman taken in adultery, and a popularized version of Mary Magdalene are combined as a single character. Some accounts of the life of Jesus have been written to offer plausible solutions to historical problems in the Gospels, but Superstar is not one of these. It pays little attention to the historical evidence. History is clearly not its purpose.

Jesus Christ Superstar is neither Gospel proclamation nor history, but it would be a mistake to

stop here and pass judgement. Neither of these is its purpose. If we are to find its true significance, we must first come to a clearer idea of what the opera is "about".

Superstar does not primarily deal with Jesus as a man (statements of the authors to the contrary notwithstanding). The days of Jesus' public ministry, his teaching, his healing, and his miracles are past. He has come to Passion Week where in the crisis of his impending death, one question raises itself above all else: what is the nature of his mission? Judas and Jesus, in the opera, struggle with this question against a background cluttered with followers of Jesus who are too naive or too preoccupied with themselves to recognize the presence of the crisis.

Let us first consider Judas. Judas is the first character presented to the audience. In his opening soliloquy he expresses his disillusionment with the recent turn being taken in Jesus' ministry as the last days approach. Jesus had been doing wonderful works for his people. Judas enthusiastically dedicated himself to the cause as Jesus' follower, but now all is in danger of being swept away. Judas cannot understand why Jesus, whom he loves and respects, would let himself get sidetracked, start believing all this "talk of God" and playing into the hands of the authorities. "It was beautiful but now it's sour." Judas reasons in terms that are unsettlingly familiar to the modern hearer. The audience is given empathy with Judas from the first; it is easy to see things his way. Throughout the opera Judas probes Jesus, searching in vain for a way to understand him and, in the conclusion, the "resurrected" voice of Judas returns, his questions still unresolved. His struggle to understand Jesus' mission binds the opera together.

Who is Judas? The Judas of the Bible is an enigmatic figure. We have no conclusive evidence for his character or his motives for betraying Jesus. He may have been a Zealot disappointed that Jesus failed to fulfill his political hopes, or he may simply have been an opportunist. He found his place in the memory of the church simply as the betrayer of Christ. The writers of Superstar have taken this very malleable, undefined character and made him into a savvy, unsentimental, realistic, goal-oriented pragmatist. There is absolutely no evidence that the Biblical Judas had this character. Rather, through the figure of Judas we join the writers in their own quest to understand Jesus and his ministry. The greatness of the opera is that this is not merely a personal quest. Judas in Superstar is made to represent our cultural ideal. In the person of Judas we see ourselves. In his search for an understanding of Jesus' mission, he speaks for modern man.

The Jesus of Superstar is Jesus through the eyes of Judas, making the opera, in a sense, the "Gospel According to Judas" (keeping in mind that we are speaking of Judas the 20th Century Everyman, not the historical Judas). The opera as a whole is a product of the cultural perspective that is incarnated in Judas, so when Jesus speaks in the opera, we hear his words as Judas understands them. The sayings of Jesus found in the Biblical Gospels are transformed accordingly. "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) becomes "I have got no kingdom in this world--I'm through, through, through." Jesus' words in Gethsemane, "Nevertheless, not

my will but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42) become:

God thy will is hard But you hold every card I will drink your cup of poison, nail me
to your cross and break me Bleed me beat me kill me take me now--before I change
my mind.

Each biblical passage reports a saying of Jesus that the Gospel writer sees to be filled with spiritual meaning. Judas, incapable of grasping that meaning, understands the words of Jesus very differently. When Jesus points beyond this life, Judas hears him as despairing of this life. When Jesus gives Himself into His Father's hands in faith, Judas hears Him as resigning to fate. Thus, even in the words of Jesus, we hear the voice of Judas.

What, then, is the religious value to be found in Superstar? Jesus Christ Superstar is not simply a capricious alteration of the Passion story, but rather is an expression of a struggle for faith in the modern world. There is a fundamental conflict between the purpose of Jesus' mission and the accepted standards of our modern culture. Jesus went up to Jerusalem to die, but to modern man death is defeat. "Victory", for Jesus, is very different from "success", as Judas would have it. Judas betrayed Jesus because he found it impossible to understand Jesus on his own terms. He could see him only as a fatalistic mystic who allowed his passions to override his common sense. Judas' virtues of courage, self-discipline, and unselfish dedication bring him to the point where he betrays Christ rather than "the cause", as he understands it. He has a fatal blindness to the transcendent. Jesus Christ Superstar confronts us with the inevitable conflict between Jesus and our cultural ideal even at its best.

In a very real way Jesus Christ Superstar speaks for something within us even as Christians. Although we are followers of Christ, we are also shaped by our culture. We naturally and quite unconsciously share many of its values and ideals. Jesus Christ Superstar can help us recognize and give us the opportunity to confront the tension that exists between our faith and our world. If we fail to see the tension and identify our cultural values with the mind of God, Christ becomes an enigma. We blind ourselves to Christ and in the end betray Him. If we acknowledge and confront the tension, we are freed to experience the grace of God in our struggle to live as His children in this world.