

The Feigned Ignorance of Judas. Rhetorical Question from the Category *interrogatio*/ἔρώτημα in Matt 26:25

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Abstract: The article analyzes the utterance made by Judas in the Cenacle (1) in the context of his efforts to hand Jesus over to the chief priests (Matt 26:14–25). The fact that his question (Matt 26:25) includes the particle μήτι which assumes a *negative response* from the interlocutor (1–2) suggests that the disciple was unaware that he was betraying Jesus. Consequently, there is no shortage of positive opinions about Judas, expressed both in the past and today. Matthew’s narrative, however, says something different in this regard. The research problem is therefore seeking an answer to the question: how to interpret Judas’ words? The referenced various biblical translations (3.1) and claims of exegetes (3.2) quote the words of the apostles (Matt 26:22, 25) and explain them in an ambiguous manner. The attempts to solve the problem shown in sections 2 and 3.1–2 do not provide a satisfactory conclusion. In the last section (4), the *grammatical* rules and *narrative* logic – which are clearly in contradiction – are supplemented with a *rhetorical* perspective, which leads to a definitive resolution of the dilemma. The synchronic approach applied to the pericope Matt 26:14–25 allows one to draw the conclusion that in Judas’ utterance one should identify a rhetorical question from the category *interrogatio*/ἔρώτημα whose function in Matt 26:25 is *auferendae dissimulationis* (“misleading pretense”). Many exegetes have decrypted Judas’ dishonest conduct, but it is only this article that precisely defines this rhetorical phenomenon.

Keywords: Judas, betrayal, misleading, pretense, rhetorical question, *interrogatio*/ἔρώτημα

The person of Judas and his deed(s) intrigue many people, not only believers. On the one hand, it is noted that it was he who was entrusted with the purse of the apostles’ community, which means that he must have enjoyed the special trust of Jesus (and perhaps also fellow disciples), as well as an appropriate level of resourcefulness and intelligence. On the other hand, however, it became apparent that Judas’ moral attitude left much to be desired: he would steal from his friends (John 12:6). Furthermore, his disloyalty in a “little” matter (cf. Luke 16:10) led to his betrayal in a more serious matter: he handed the Son of Man over to the executioners. And this is probably why his name was always placed at the end of the list of the twelve apostles,¹

This article is an expanded, updated and thoroughly reworked version of an already published text, entitled: “Mateuszowa prezentacja Judasza: czy uczeń był świadomy, że zdradza swego Mistrza [Matthew’s presentation of Judas: was the disciple aware that he was betraying his Master?],” *Studia nad Ewangelią według św. Mateusza. Nowy Testament: geneza - interpretacja - aktualizacja* (eds. J. Kręciło – W. Linke; Lingua Sacra. Monografie 5; Warszawa: Apostolicum 2015) 329–347.

¹ See Matt 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:19. Cf. Limbeck, “Ιούδας,” 1765.

often – including elsewhere – with the addition of the term “traitor/the one who had betrayed Him.”²

Jesus predicted the betrayal of Judas at the Last Supper,³ but only the Gospel according to St. Matthew states – after the saddened disciples expressed the hope that the traitor was none of them (Matt 26:22) – that Judas, separately, on his own behalf, also suggested that he had nothing to do with it (Matt 26:25). Such an understanding of Judas’ words is dictated by the meaning of the negative particle μήτι present in his utterance. This is quite an intriguing issue, because from the content of Judas’ question it follows that the disciple was unaware that he was betraying his Master. But is such an interpretation possible? Can one adopt it considering the context in which these words were spoken? The narrative logic of the events recounted in Matt 26:14–25 seems to contradict this by clearly indicating that Judas’ actions showed his awareness of their consequences. On what condition, therefore, should a different solution be adopted and how should it be formulated?

This article undertakes to solve the problem thus outlined. First, sections 1–2 will show the role of the particle μή/μήτι in Matthew’s Gospel (and especially in 26:22, 25). Then, section 3.1 will reference various English-language biblical translations quoting the utterances of Judas (Matt 26:25) and other disciples (Matt 26:22), which translate the words of the apostles in many different ways. The subsequent section 3.2 will present the opinions of exegetes on Judas’ question, derived especially from the particularly authoritative English-language commentaries on the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Next, section 4 will supplement the grammatical rules and narrative logic with a rhetorical perspective, which will greatly contribute to resolving the dilemma under investigation. This is also where the *novum* of this study will be clearly demonstrated since, unlike previous commentaries, in addition to an interpretation of Judas’ behavior and words, it will also propose a specific *name* for the rhetorical question uttered by the disciple in Matt 26:25 as well as identify the *function* it performs in the analyzed text. The presented opinion will be sealed by a short commentary, present in one of the last footnotes, concerning the title “Rabbi” which Judas used to address Jesus in the Cenacle.

A synchronic approach will be applied, focusing on the grammatical and rhetorical analysis of the pericope Matt 26:14–25 (taking into account the narrative logic of the events reported) and, in particular, of Judas’ utterance itself recounted in verse 26:25. A correct interpretation of the disciple’s question should help solve the problem under consideration: why did Judas speak in the Cenacle as if he was not aware that he is handing his Master over to the executioners? How should his words be understood?

² Cf. Matt 26:25; 27:3; John 12:4; 18:2, 5.

³ Cf. Matt 26:21; Mark 14:18; Luke 22:21; John 13:21.

1. Judas' Problematic Question in Matt 26:25

It was noted above that only St. Matthew presents the dialogue between Jesus and Judas in the scene where the traitor is revealed. Although the other evangelists – each, of course, in their own distinct way – also show this episode,⁴ Matthew, although his account largely coincides with Mark, concludes this sad scene in a unique way, presenting an exchange between the Master and his tragic disciple (Matt 26:21–25).

First, however, the prophecy of betrayal receives a unified response from the apostles who ask about the addressee of the announcement “one of you will betray me.” They formulate the words expressed in Greek as follows: μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, κύριε; (Matt 26:22).⁵ Because of the subjective negative participle μήτι present in this sentence, it should be understood as a question expecting a negative answer and translated as: “It is not I, is it, Lord?/Surely not I, Lord?,” with appropriate vocal intonation so as to express the disciples’ concern and their *anticipation of denial* from Jesus. It clearly fits into the narrative logic, as none of the disciples had previously undertaken any actions constituting a betrayal of their Master.

Surprisingly, however, three verses later, Judas – known for his murky dealings with the Sanhedrin (cf. Matt 26:14–16; Mark 14:10–11) – also utters (almost) the same words, also expecting a negative answer from Christ: μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ῥαββί; (Matt 26:25). This interpretation of both questions follows from strict adherence to the definition of the above-mentioned particle μήτι.⁶ Was Judas therefore also convinced that he had nothing to do with the betrayal of Jesus? Was he not aware of

⁴ Cf. Mark 14:18–21; Luke 22:21–23; John 13:21–30.

⁵ Textual criticism does not note any significant variants in this or the following case.

⁶ Cf. Blass – Debrunner – Rehkopf, *Grammatik*, § 427,2: “μή (μήτι), wenn eine verneinende Antwort erwartet wird”; BAGD, § 4910: “μήτι. A marker that invites a negative response to the question that it introduces”; Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*: “μή, a particle of negation [...] But μή is either [...] an interrogative particle (Latin *num*) i. e. (generally) implying a negative answer”; LSJ: “μή [...] § C (in questions) I. (direct questions) a. with indicative, implying a negative answer, *surely not, you don't mean to say that*”; Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, § 2651: “μή [...] expect[s] the answer *no*”; Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*: “μή [...] 3. as an interrogative particle when a negative answer is expected”; Friberg – Friberg – Miller, *Analytical Lexicon*: “μή negative particle *not*, [...] (2) used to introduce questions expecting a negative answer (cf. 1 Cor 12:29–30)”; Romizi, *Greco antico*, 812: “μή [...] nelle interrogative retoriche in cui si attende riposta negativa”; Montanari, *Vocabolario*, 1355: “μή [...] con indicativo nelle [proposizioni] interrogative retoriche con riposta negativa”; Lampe, “μή,” 371: “con l’indicativo in proposizioni indipendenti è un interrogativo suggestivo: forse che? (→ μήτι). La risposta attesa è «no»”; Balz – Schneider, “μήτι,” 381–382: “particella interrogativa, per lo più in domande che attendono una risposta negativa, talvolta anche in domande con risposta incerta [...] [Cf.] Matt 26:22, 25 (dove il v. 25 formula la domanda come è pensata da Giuda, e in contrasto ad essa la risposta di Gesù)”; Abramowiczówna, *Słownik*, III, 139: “μή [...] w pytaniach niezależnych w indykatywem, gdy domysłna jest odpowiedź negatywna”; Popowski, *Wielki słownik*, 396: “μή [...] jako partykuła pytajna w pytaniach, na które oczekuje się odpowiedzi przeczącej”; *ibidem*, 399: “μήτι [...] partykuła pytajna w zdaniach, na które oczekuje się normalnie odpowiedzi zaprzeczającej; może też oznaczać wątpliwość”; Hagner, *Matthew*, 766; Davies – Allison, *Matthew*, 461 and n. 44; Bruner, *Matthew*, 615; Harrington, *Matthew*, 366–367; Osborne, *Matthew*, 965; Gibbs, *Matthew*, 1393–1394.

his misdeeds? It is possible that it is precisely this understanding of Judas' conduct that inspired some people to assume a positive attitude towards his person. The contemporary common views on this disciple are eagerly replicated, clearly whitewashing his character. On the one hand, it is a way to show "pity" for Judas' fate, but on the other hand, it suggests that his action was indeed necessary to fulfil God's plan of salvation.⁷ Disregarding Jesus' warning,⁸ Judas is attributed with good intentions (and betrayal does not, after all, give rise to positive connotations: it is difficult to give a favorable opinion on a traitor!) and it is claimed that Judas was pushed to act because he was "impatient with Jesus' failure to inaugurate the kingdom."⁹

2. The μή/μήτι Particle in the Gospel according to St. Matthew

At this point, however, it is worth asking the following question: is it certain that Judas was awaiting a negative response from Jesus? In other words: did St. Matthew, who recounts this brief dialogue, always strictly observe grammatical rules in his work? Indeed, it is possible that sometimes he made exceptions and put different interpretations on, inter alia, the negative particle which is key to the present study. The fact is that the κοινή dialect frequently deviated from the rules of classical Greek and, in addition, individual authors sometimes had a rather peculiar understanding of the rules of the language (often foreign to them) they used to write the books of the New Testament. It is therefore important to "enter," as it were, the mind of the author and examine how he considered the μή/μήτι particle in his work.

It appears that μή initiating an independent interrogative sentence in St. Matthew's Gospel always – in line with the definition – expects a negative answer. There are few examples of this kind (four), and their meaning is not difficult to decipher.¹⁰

7 Cf. Mark 14:43–45.49 and parallel; John 13:18; Matt 27:9. In fact, as early as the 2nd century, heterodox works began to emerge showing this disciple in a favorable light (e.g. the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*). Judas was strongly condemned in the Middle Ages, yet – after modern times, when his character was understood in various ways – he is again approached with forbearance in contemporary history. Cf. Boccian, *Leksykon postaci biblijnych*, 213–217; Krasucka – Partyka, "Judasz," 208–209; Kramarek, "Judasz," 209–213; Starowieyski, *Judasz*; Starowieyski, *Apokryfy*, 880–886, 907–937; Myszor – Tondera, "Ewangelia Judasza," 887–906; Grochowski, "...miłujmy się wzajemnie," 67–68.

8 Matt 26:24 and parallel: "...woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would be better for him if he had never been born."

9 Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1402. Similarly Mounce, *Matthew*, 239; Stein, "Judasz," 495; Świderkówna, *Rozmowy o Biblii*, 78.

10 Cf. Matt 7:9: "Is there anyone among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"; 7:10: "Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"; 9:15a: "The wedding guests cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them, can they?"; 11:23a: "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be thrown down to Hades!"

The case is slightly different with μήτι, i.e. the emphatic “version” of μή:¹¹ out of also four occurrences in Matthew (as a negative particle starting an interrogative sentence), two times it clearly awaits a negative response,¹² one time it is (possibly) ambiguous,¹³ and yet another time it suggests a “yes” answer (!), with a faint tinge of doubt.¹⁴ The last case could indicate the author’s openness to the possibility of non-standard treatment of the μήτι particle, as adopted by St. John the Evangelist quoted in the footnote.

Conclusions:

- (Ia) Since the narrative logic clearly states that Judas was *aware* of his treacherous actions, perhaps, in the first place, it is worth trying to find in his question a formula used by him to hear a *positive answer* from Jesus. The example of μήτι in Matt 12:23 opens the possibility for a special approach to that particle also in Matt 26:25. In that case, the disciple’s words should be considered a provocation involving Iscariot sarcastically and ironically saying to Jesus: “Is it I/Am I the one/Could it be I, Rabbi?,” obviously with the appropriate intonation in his voice. Would he have been able to make such an emphatic statement immediately after Jesus announced the tragic fate of his betrayer (Matt 26:24: cf. footnote 8)? It might have been possible, although it would mean Judas’ astonishing confidence, arrogance and disrespect toward Jesus.
- (Ib) Bearing in mind that in Matt 12:23, the μήτι particle was associated not only with an affirmative answer but also with accompanying *doubts*, this time, if one wanted to try to find that second aspect (“doubt”) in the behavior of Judas, his words could be translated as follows: “Is it (possible that it is) I, Rabbi?” That approach would mean that Judas *was rather unaware* of his betrayal, although Jesus’ words would make him *doubt* his own innocence. Contrary to what was expected by the crowd in Matt 12:23, he would not have expected a positive response from

11 BAGD, § 4910: “μήτι [...] This marker is somewhat more emphatic than the simple μή”; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 989, n. 17: “A question introduced by μή expects the answer no, and the emphatic form μήτι [...] makes the idea sound even more far-fetched: «surely not!».”

12 Cf. Matt 7:16b: “Grapes are not gathered from thorns or figs from thistles, are they?”; 26:22b: “Surely not I, Lord?”

13 This is about Judas’ utterance from Matt 26:25 analyzed in this article. In the main text, the word “possibly” is added in anticipation of the next, last – and, as will be shown, peculiar – case of using the μήτι particle in Matt 12:23, and also because of the diversity of opinions about Matt 26:25 among exegetes (to be discussed a little later). In turn, we ourselves are convinced of the univocal meaning of this particle in the said verse.

14 Cf. Matt 12:23: “All the crowds were amazed and said, «Could this one be the Son of David?».” The *doubt* potentially expressed by the μήτι particle was mentioned above in the dictionaries of Remigiusz Popowski and Balz – Schneider, and Morris (*Matthew*, 656, n. 41) also writes about it, citing yet another exegete: “Chamberlain points out that, while μή is used to introduce a question expecting a negative answer, «For a hesitant question, μήτι may be used». He cites John 4:29, where the Samaritan woman asks, «Might this be the Messiah?».” The quote from the Fourth Gospel cited here is very reminiscent of Matt 12:23. So here the speaker expects a *positive answer* to the question asked, although *with a hint of doubt*.

Jesus but rather *an answer confirming or denying* that fact, probably hoping that Jesus would say the word “no.”

However, it should be noted that the hypotheses Ia and Ib, trying to apply to Matt 26:25 the specific meaning of μήτι from Matt 12:23 and thus attempting to make the question of Judas the second exception (out of all 8 cases of μή/μήτι in the Gospel of Matthew), are not an accurate reflection of the case in Matt 12:23. The crowd asking about the identity of Jesus as the Son of David waited for a positive answer while expressing uncertainty about that matter. In contrast, each of the propositions, Ia and Ib, reflects one aspect of the crowd’s behavior: Ia emphasizes Judas’ expectation to hear “yes” from Jesus, while Ib represents his doubt. Therefore, the hypotheses Ia and Ib do not necessarily find their validation in the non-standard meaning of the μήτι particle in Matt 12:23. For the record, it is considered that the former emphasizes Judas’ awareness of betrayal (which corresponds to the narrative logic), and the latter – his unawareness (which contradicts that logic).

- (II) If one were to follow most of the cases of μή/μήτι in the Gospel of Matthew, which respects the grammar rules, it should be acknowledged that Judas – when uttering his μήτι ἐγώ εἶμι, ῥαββί; – expected a *denial* from Jesus, giving the impression that he was *unaware* of his betrayal. Although the above contradicts the situational realism present in Matthew’s narrative, such a conclusion is prompted by the rules of Greek grammar.

3. A Contemporary Way of Understanding Judas’ Question

The ambiguous interpretation of the μήτι particle is evidenced not only by the arguments presented in section 2 but also by the presence of different biblical translations – where Matt 26:22, 25 is interpreted in various ways – and different opinions expressed by the exegetes relating to the words spoken by Judas in the Cenacle. The examples of various interpretations, presented in the tables below, correspond to the conclusions that sum up the grammatical analysis (see section 2) and confirm the legitimacy of the research problem formulated at the beginning of this article. Not everyone understands Judas’ words in the same way.

3.1. Judas' Question in Various English-Language Biblical Translations¹⁵

The first table presents the biblical translations of the questions formulated by the apostles and Judas, treating the μήτι particle as if its role resembled the one in Matt 12:23. It is assumed that those asking Jesus do not necessarily expect a negative answer:¹⁶

Translation	Matt 26:22 μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, κύριε;	Matt 26:25 μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ῥαββί;
Tyndale New Testament (1534)	Is it I, master? (<i>sic!</i>)	Is it I, master?
Bishop's New Testament (1595)	Lord, is it I?	Master, is it I?
Geneva Bible (1599)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Master?
King James Version (1611)	Lord, is it I?	Master, is it I?
The Webster Bible (1833)	Lord, is it I?	Master, is it I?
Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)	Is it I, Sir?	Is it I, Rabbi?
George Noyes Bible (1869)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Rabbi?
English Revised Version (1885)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Rabbi?
Darby Bible (1884/1890)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Rabbi?
The Douay-Rheims American Edition (1899)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Rabbi?
American Standard Version (1901)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Rabbi?
Revised Standard Version (1952/1971)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Master?
Revised Webster Update (1995)	Lord, is it I?	Master, is it I?
The Rotherham Bible (1999)	Can it be, I, Lord?	Can it be, I, Rabbi?
New Living Translation (2007)	Am I the one, Lord?	Rabbi, am I the one?
English Standard Version (2016)	Is it I, Lord?	Is it I, Rabbi?

¹⁵ Considering the fact that most of the readers of this article speak English, the translations and commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew written in other languages are not included. Obviously, the other proposals could enrich the discussion but – to the author's knowledge – they would not necessarily lead to conclusions different than those based on the ones in English.

¹⁶ No information about the intonation used to ask both questions (in English) may give rise to uncertainty as to the interpretation of their meaning.

The following table presents translations of the Bible that take grammatical rules into account while interpreting the μήτι particle, thus implying that Judas and the apostles were expecting a negative response from Jesus:

Translation	Matt 26:22 μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, κύριε;	Matt 26:25 μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ῥαββί;
New Jerusalem Bible (1985)	Not me, Lord, surely?	Not me, Rabbi, surely?
New Revised Standard Version (1989)	Surely not I, Lord?	Surely it is not I, Rabbi?
The New American Standard Bible (1995)	Surely not I, Lord?	Surely it is not I, Rabbi?
God's Word to the Nations (1995)	You don't mean me, do you, Lord?	You don't mean me, do you, Rabbi?
Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	Lord, you don't mean me, do you?	Surely, Rabbi, you don't mean me?
New International Reader's Version (1998)	It's not I, Lord, is it?	It's not I, Rabbi, is it?
Today's New International Version (2001)	Surely not I, Lord?	Surely not I, Rabbi?
New English Translation (2006)	Surely not I, Lord?	Surely not I, Rabbi?
New American Bible (2010)	Surely it is not I, Lord?	Surely it is not I, Rabbi?
Revised Patriarchal Greek Orthodox New Testament (2010)	It is not me, is it, Lord?	It is not me, is it, Rabbi?
New International Version (2011)	Surely you don't mean me, Lord?	Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?
Common English Bible (2011)	I'm not the one, am I, Lord?	It's not me, is it, Rabbi?
MacDonald Idiomatic Translation of the NT (2012)	You are not referring to me, are you, Lord?	It is not me, is it, rabbi?
Holman Christian Standard Bible (2017)	Surely not I, Lord?	Surely not I, Rabbi?

With reference to the definition of the participle μήτι, the conclusions can be grouped as follows:

(I) The translations presented in the first table, in the case of which not much attention is paid to the precise translation of the participle μήτι, are ambiguous considering the matter discussed in the study. The intonation used by Judas while asking the question was of great importance:

- (Ia) On the one hand, the words might have been said in such a way (phonetically) that they constituted sentences of a provocative nature and a “yes” response was expected. In that case, Judas – aware of handing Jesus over to his enemies – would have additionally shown his arrogance and disregard for the Master.
- (Ib) On the other hand, however, they might have suggested uncertainty of Iscariot, in which case his question – this time revealing *unawareness* of the betrayal – would have shown the disciple’s puzzlement and anxiety while waiting for the response from Jesus (*positive or rather negative*).
- (II) With regard to the translations included in the second table, in the case of which the rules of grammar are respected, the question of Judas is presented in such a way as if he was *unaware* that he was handing Jesus over to the enemies and, at the same time, absolutely convinced of his innocence. He expects a *negative* response from the Master and – implicitly and emphatically – underlines that he has nothing to do with that foul action.

3.2. Interpretations of Exegetes Relating to Matt 25:22, 25

The difficulty in understanding some biblical translations is related not only to the lack of access to the intonation in which the text should be read but also to the absence of a commentary which – provided by those translating the Bible into English – could dispel any doubts. The case is different in the works of exegetes who, in addition to the translation, included explanatory notes.

Similarly to sections 2 and 3.1, in this section, 3.2, the opinions of scholars who take into account the possibility that Judas acted *deliberately* as a traitor are presented first. Enjoying great respect, the long-standing secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Fr. Klemens Stock SJ, in his lecture on “The Passion of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels” given at the Pontificium Institutum Biblicum in Rome, at the beginning of his commentary on Matt 26:22, emphasized the role of the particle μήτι – which was to introduce a question with the expectation to receive a negative answer.¹⁷ However, in a subsequent section of the commentary, he stated that in Matt 26:25, the particle has no longer this meaning and that the sentence uttered by Judas is of a *provocative* nature, thus a *positive answer is expected*.¹⁸ Other, although not many, English language-speaking exegetes also interpret Judas’ words in a similar (or only slightly different) way:

¹⁷ Stock, *Il racconto della passione*, 61: “Introducendo tale interrogativo con «mēti» essi esprimono la loro speranza d’una risposta negativa.”

¹⁸ Stock, *Il racconto della passione*, 63: “L’interrogativo di Giuda non può essere dettato dall’angosciosa speranza di sentire il «no» di Gesù (cf. sopra la spiegazione di 26,22), ma sembra avere piuttosto un carattere provocatorio.”

Author and the work	Translation of Matt 26:25
Allen, <i>Commentary</i> , 275 (1907)	Is it I, Rabbi?
Nolland, <i>The Gospel of Matthew</i> , 1064 (2005)	Could it be I, Rabbi?
Turner – Bock, <i>Matthew, Mark</i> , 338 (2005)	Am I the one?

It is not difficult to notice that most scholars do not make an exception here and – strictly following the rules of grammar – translate Judas' statement in such a way that his question (more or less clearly) implies a negative answer from Jesus. This seems to contradict the narrative logic but the opinions of the authors on the words of Judas critically assessing their content and the attitude of the disciple are useful here. Some examples of such interpretations are presented in the table below:

Author and the work	Translation of Matt 26:25	Commentary about Judas
Carson, „Matthew,” 534 (1984)		This exchange [of the words], preserved only in Matthew, magnifies Judas's effrontery and [...] the deceit of the betrayer
France, <i>Matthew</i> , 371–372 (1985)	You can't possibly mean me, can you?	Judas, surely disingenuously, uses the same incredulous form of question as the others [...] his question, in comparison with theirs, rings hollow
Blomberg, <i>Matthew</i> , 387 (1992)	Surely not I, Rabbi?	
Morris, <i>Matthew</i> , 653, 655, 656–657 (1992)	Is it I, Rabbi? (the author inclines later to a different translation: Surely, not me, Rabbi?)	It must have come as something of a shock to Judas to hear these words, but since Jesus did not denounce him he was still safe and could go ahead with what he had planned
Hare, <i>Matthew</i> , 296–297 (1993)		Judas' question is as hypocritical as his kiss in Gethsemane. He knows the answer!
Gundry, <i>Matthew</i> , 527 (1994)	I'm not the one, Rabbi, am I?	[σὸ εἶπας] heightens the guilt of Judas by implying that he already knows the affirmative answer to his question, which therefore lacks sincerity. Woe to the hypocrite!
Hagner, <i>Matthew</i> , 766, 768 (1995)	I'm not the one, Rabbi, am I?	Judas questions Jesus, perhaps just to see whether he really knew who betrayer was [...]. ὁ παραδιδούς αὐτόν [...] (present participle), perhaps points to the fact that the betrayal had already been initiated [...] Judas was the betrayer as he himself well knew
Malina – Rohrbaugh, <i>Social-Science Commentary</i> , 129 (2003)		Judas proves his total lack of shame by brazenly asking whether Jesus knew it was he who was part of the secret plan

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Author and the work	Translation of Matt 26:25	Commentary about Judas
Wilkins, <i>Matthew</i> , 824, 835 (2004)	Surely not I, Rabbi?	The tone of his reply is disingenuous, deceptive sincere, expecting a negative reply from Jesus. Judas has been carrying out his arrangements for the betrayal in secret [...] but Jesus' knowledge is divinely revealed: "Yes, it is you" [...] Rather than masking his insincerity, Judas's own question has indicated him [...] Jesus's reply confirms the truth that the interrogator is trying to avoid"
Davies – Allison, <i>Matthew</i> , 461, 464 (2004)	Surely it is not I?	the hypocritical question
Luz, <i>Matthew</i> , 358, 360–361 (2005)	It is not I, is it, Rabbi?	Judas [...] pretends not to know what is going on – behavior that [...] casts a most unfavorable light on his character [...] enormous impudence [...] In addition to the betrayal is the brazenness: Judas thinks that by asking the same question as the other disciples he can hypocritically hide his betrayal [...] it is his shame that causes Judas to act hypocritically in v. 25
Witherington, <i>Matthew</i> , 483 (2006)	Surely not I, Rabbi?	
Harrington, <i>Matthew</i> , 367 (2007)	It is not I, is it, Rabbi?	
France, <i>The Gospel of Matthew</i> , 986, 990 (2007)	You don't mean me, do you, Rabbi?	Judas' question is insincere, since he is already contracted to betray Jesus; he merely echoes the other disciples so as not to appear out line. Perhaps he hopes that while Jesus is aware that he has a traitor in his inner circle he has not yet worked out who it is
Bruner, <i>Matthew</i> , 618 (2007)	You don't mean me, do you, Rabbi?	Judas's question (<i>mêti</i>), which expects the answer «no», suggests Judas's false security or perhaps his duplicity [...] Judas is surely foolish in thinking that Jesus does not know what is going on
Albright – Mann, <i>Matthew</i> , 322 (2008)	«Is it I, Master?» The words are more emphatic than can easily be rendered in English, and perhaps we could here translate rather more freely by «Surely not I?»	
Turner, <i>Matthew</i> , 624, 625 (2008)	Surely it is not I, Rabbi?	Judas hypocritically asks if he could be the betrayer
Chamblin, <i>Matthew</i> , 1288 (2010)	It is not I, is it, Rabbi?	

Author and the work	Translation of Matt 26:25	Commentary about Judas
Gundry, <i>Commentary</i> , 117 (2010)	Surely I'm not [the betrayer], am I, Rabbi?	Judas's question exudes hypocrisy. He knows very well that he's the betrayer. He has been paid to betray Jesus. The thirty silver coins are jingling in Judas's pocket [...] So his question [...] that expects a negative answer, lacks sincerity. „And answering” adds emphasis to his pretending loyalty to Jesus with the question
Osborne, <i>Matthew</i> , 959, 966 (2010)	I am not the one, am I, Rabbi?	Undoubtedly, Judas is hoping that Jesus is not aware of his earlier evil betrayal
Talbert, <i>Matthew</i> , 286 (2010)	It is not I, is it, Rabbi?	
Mounce, <i>Matthew</i> , 241 (2011)	Surely not I, Rabbi?	
Gibbs, <i>Matthew</i> , 1393, 1397 and n. 21 (2018)	It is not I, is it, Rabbi?	Jesus, against Judas' rhetorical insistence, answers yes. We cannot be sure precisely what to make of Judas' question either. It seems most likely that, given the portrait in 26:14–16, Judas is simply trying to hide his true intentions. It is not, however, beyond the realm of possibility that there is genuine anguish in this question. We simply do not know

Almost all of the opinions presented in the table above emphasize Judas' hypocrisy and insincerity, that is, his dishonest action and a disguised lie in his surprising statement. Therefore, the authors suggest – not so much in the translation proposed by them but in the commentaries to the translation – *a deliberate* action of Judas, although covered with false words. Jeffrey A. Gibbs, in his recently published commentary (2018), even speaks of the “rhetorical insistence” in Judas' words, and – citing rhetoric – shows the right way to interpret the disciple's question. However, this author does not specify which phenomenon of a rhetorical nature the person reading verse Matt 26:25 is dealing with.

4. Rhetoric Comes to Help

How to get out of this stalemate situation? Can a problem in the case of which the grammatical rules seem incompatible with the narrative logic be solved? Or maybe it is possible to strictly follow the definition of the μήτι particle and take the realism of the situation in which Judas found himself into account at the same

time? Unlike other apostles, this particular disciple had already taken specific steps towards betraying Jesus – since he had visited the chief priests with an offer to “hand over” his Master (καὶ γὼ ὑμῖν παραδώσω αὐτόν – Matt 26:15) and was looking for an opportunity to “hand Him over” (ἐξήτει εὐκαιρίαν ἵνα αὐτὸν παραδῶ – Matt 26:16), then how, in response to Jesus’ words about his upcoming betrayal = “handing over” (εἰς ἐξ ὑμῶν παραδώσει με – Matt 26:21), he can ask the Master “Surely not I/It is not me, is it, Rabbi?” and expect a negative answer?

It appears that it is possible to clarify the matter and that the interpretation of Matt 26:25 in a plausible manner may be a groundbreaking achievement. The unravelling of such a *crux interpretum* is aided by rhetoric.¹⁹

Considering that Judas’ words form a *question* addressed to Jesus, it is worth recalling various definitions of rhetorical questions and reflecting on whether, by any chance, the verse Matt 26:25 fits into one of them.

Since Judas’ statement indicates that he expects Jesus’ response in the form of a “yes” or “no,” then, of all the categories of rhetorical questions cited to interpret Matt 26:25, two groups must be eliminated in advance: “the interplay (*Spiel*) of question and answer” (§§ 771–775) and “the helplessness question (§§ 776–779).”²⁰ On the other hand, the third group of questions (“the purely emotive question” – §§ 767–770) should exclude *πύσμα/quesitum*, since only the remaining category – *ἐρώτημα/interrogatio* – by virtue of the anticipation of a “yes” or “no” answer, seems suitable for attempting to define the question uttered by Judas in the Cenacle.

This is how – first in general and then in detail – Heinrich Lausberg defines the aforementioned rhetorical figure in three points:

Interrogatio/ἐρώτημα is a question “to which no answer is expected, since [...] from the point of view of the speaking party, the answer is supposed to be self-evident” (§ 767).

- 1) “[A] question is intended to humiliate the opposing party” (§ 767). “*Interrogamus [...] invidiae gratia [...] aut instandi*” [= We ask [...] as a result of hatred [...] or when we attack] (§ 768);
- 2) “ἐρώτημά ἐστιν, πρὸς ὃ ἀνάγκη ἀποκρίνασθαι κατ’ ἀπόφασιν ἢ κατάφασιν οὕτω ‘ναὶ’ ἢ ‘οὐ’” [= erotema occurs when it is necessary to choose between denial and confirmation, “yes” or “no”] (§ 767);
- 3) “Several functions of *interrogatio* may be distinguished [...] *Interrogamus etiam quod negari non possit [...] aut auferendae dissimulationis [...] [interrogatio]*

¹⁹ Even if Matthew’s work is a *narrative* text (and, therefore, not *poetry*, a *speech* provided by Jesus or a work resembling, for example, any of the NT *letters* – and these types of texts are more suitable for rhetorical analysis), it exhibits certain phenomena of a rhetorical nature, the consideration of which may be not only useful but even necessary to better understand the Gospel message.

²⁰ Subsequent section numbers (§) refer to Heinrich Lausberg’s monumental work: *Handbuch der Literarischen Rhetorik*. Its English translation is: *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*. It is also worth referring to the work of the same author entitled *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik*.

indignationi convenit [...] et admirationi [...] est interim acrius imperandi genus
 [= We ask about something that cannot be denied [...] or in misleading pretense
 [...] [the question] suits both indignation [...] and bewilderment [...] There is also
 a type in which we strongly command] (§ 768).

In view of the words spoken by Judas in the Cenacle, it is intriguing that this type of rhetorical question can be used to “pretend to mislead the interlocutor” (*aufferendae dissimulation* – “misleading dissembling”). This definition, proposed by Marcus Fabius Quintilian in *Institutionis oratoriae* IX, 2.8, seems to be fully in line with Iscariot’s attitude and thus contributes to the resolution of our dilemma.

Without fear of possible error, it can therefore be concluded that the reader of Matt 26:25 is faced with a rhetorical question from the category ἐρώτημα/*interrogatio* whose function in the text is *aufferendae dissimulationis*. Indeed, it is not difficult to see that the words formulated by Judas are not intended to seek out information (confirming or [rather] denying his assumption – and this was the case with the other apostles in Matt 26:22), but – abandoning their dialogic function and, consequently, assuming a rhetorical character – they are precisely a tool for adopting an attitude of “pretending/feigning” (i.e., suggesting that “he is not the disciple who will betray Jesus”) in order to “mislead the Master and the other apostles.”²¹ Judas, therefore, although he said the same words as other disciples, expressed them with a completely different intent: knowing that he was the one Jesus was referring to, he wanted to defend himself, hoping perhaps that Jesus would pass over the matter or, for example, change the topic of the conversation.²² However, to his surprise the Master – possibly without revealing this truth to other disciples, that is, speaking in a hushed and discreet voice – affirmed the secret he had been hiding.²³ Who knows, perhaps Jesus did

²¹ There is a clear difference between the words of the apostles and those spoken by Judas. While other disciples undoubtedly express considerable emotion – in addition to content – with their suggestive question, they ultimately wait for Jesus’ response in the form of a clear answer to the burning question: “perhaps it is not I, Lord (who is the one who will betray you)?” Therefore, they are seeking information that would confirm their conviction of innocence regarding the Master’s betrayal. Cf. Allen, *Commentary*, 275–276: “They answer Him in indignant words which are half-interrogative, half-negative.”

²² One might ask: why did Judas speak at all in Matt 26:25 if he was one of the apostles speaking in Matt 26:22? However, taking into account John 13:26, it is possible that Matt 26:23 implicitly informs us of Jesus’ act of handing Judas a piece of bread, to which it was “not appropriate” for Judas to remain silent, but to try to divert attention from himself. Frederick D. Bruner (*Matthew*, 618) expresses a different view: “Judas has said this only because the other disciples have said it, *pro forma*, perfunctorily, because it was the thing to do.”

²³ Stock, *Il racconto della passione*, 63: “La persona del traditore non viene [...] rivelata agli altri discepoli. Tutti vengono informati del fatto del tradimento e il traditore, in specie, del fatto che Gesù ne conosce le intenzioni più profonde.” Although “Jesus’ reply to Judas οὐ εἶπας [...] is enigmatic” (Gibbs, *Matthew*, 1394), the fact that these words should be understood as a *confirmation* of the message that has just been provided is evidenced by Strack – Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 990; Bartnicki, “Ewangeliczne opisy Męki,” 111; Gnilka, *Il vangelo di Matteo*, 580: “...Gesù lo abbia riconosciuto. «Tu l’hai detto» va letto come una conferma”; Paciorek, *Ewangelia Mateusza*, 556 and most of the exegetes quoted in the last table (under section 3.2). An interesting comment regarding the words spoken by Jesus is made by Bruner, *Matthew*, 618–619:

so “suggesting to the traitor himself the certainty that his treachery was known [...] and leaving opportunity to Judas of withdrawing from his course of treachery before its absolute and final exposure.”²⁴ In fact, a little earlier, when he openly announced to his disciples the fact that one of them will prove to be a traitor (Matt 26:21), already then – as noted by the Church Fathers – Jesus gave a signal to perform the examen and abandon any unholy plans.²⁵

“A clear «yes», if it had been heard, might have provoked the other disciples’ fury and, surely, Judas’s mock indignation. A «no» would have been untrue. And no response at all could have suggested that Judas’s person or question was indifferent to Jesus.” On the other hand, the understanding of Jesus’ σὺ εἶπας as an affirmation is not necessarily at odds with the situation where participle μήτι anticipates – also in the case of Judas – a negative response. In fact, it is possible to answer affirmatively to a question expecting a denial, just as it is possible to answer negatively to a question expecting an affirmative answer (cf. John 18:26b-27a: οὐκ ἐγὼ σε εἶδον ἐν τῷ κήπῳ μετ’ αὐτοῦ; πάλιν οὖν ἠρνήσατο Πέτρος [“Did I not see you in the orchard with him? Then Peter denied it again”]; cf. also the opinion of Balz – Schneider [“μήτι,” 381–382] cited in footnote 6).

- ²⁴ Allen, *Commentary*, 276. Other authors add: Carson, “Matthew,” 535: “it is enough [...] to give Judas a jolt”; Luz, *Matthew*, 361: “Jesus does not want to expose Judas publicly and is still hoping that he changes his mind”; Bruner, *Matthew*, 619: “Jesus loved even Judas, and loved him enough to give him still one more chance”; Chamblin, *Matthew*, 1288: “As in the woes of chapter 23, Jesus sounds the most urgent of warnings to Judas. For when the betrayal is complete, his condition will have become hopeless.”
- ²⁵ Cf. Davies – Allison, *Matthew*, 461 and n. 36; Bruner, *Matthew*, 612–613. It is possible to notice a certain difference in the words spoken to Jesus by the apostles and Judas. While the disciples refer to their Master as “Lord,” Judas uses the word “Rabbi” (cf. Davies – Allison, *Matthew*, 461; Hagner, *Matthew*, 767; Osborne, *Matthew*, 965: “There is a sharp contrast between their acknowledgement of Jesus as «Lord» and Judas, who calls him «Rabbi”). Although it does not resolve the issue regarding the interpretation of the participle μήτι in Matt 26:25 – and thus the question of Judas’ awareness (or lack thereof) of the Master’s betrayal – it does shed additional light on the question of *his understanding of Jesus’ identity*. It appears that in the Gospel of Matthew – unlike in the other gospels (cf. Mark 9:5; 11:21; John 1:38, 49; 3:2, 26; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8) – the term “Rabbi” takes on a negative connotation (cf. Matt 23:7–8) and Judas is the only disciple who uses it in Matt (Matt 26:25, 49) (cf. Mickiewicz, *Kroczać śladami męki Chrystusa*, 157; Gnilkka, *Il vangelo di Matteo*, 580–581; France, *Matthew*, 372; Morris, *Matthew*, 657; Hare, *Matthew*, 296; Luz, *Matthew*, 360. A slightly different opinion is expressed by Gundry, *Matthew*, 527: “In view of 23:8, we ought not to think that Matthew rejects «Rabbi» as a Christological title by putting it on the lips of Judas” and Bruner, *Matthew*, 618: “Rabbi [...] is not a wrong title for Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel; it is an inadequate one”). He refers to Jesus as “Rabbi” thus betraying his lack of understanding of his mission and role (cf. Homerski, *Ewangelia według św. Mateusza*, 330; Leske, “Ewangelia według św. Mateusza,” 1198; Viviano, “Ewangelia według świętego Mateusza,” 974). In the Gospel of Matthew, the term κύριε emphasizes His authority and divine power (Harrington, *Matthew*, 366–367: “«Lord», a prominent Matthean title for Jesus”; Gundry, *Commentary*, 117: “when addressed to Jesus, «Lord» points to his deity”). Used by the apostles, it expresses their faith in Jesus and the authenticity of their identity as disciples, contrasting with Judas’ hypocritical questioning (cf. Gnilkka, *Il vangelo di Matteo*, 579; Wilkins, *Matthew*, 835). Ultimately, all that can be said about Judas is that “there is no specific reason provided for his betrayal other than his request for payment” (Brown, *Matthew*, 294).

Summary

After confronting the research problem of this article, it must be concluded that – while observing the rules of Greek *grammar* (that is, perceiving the μήτι particle, initiating an independent interrogative sentence, as expecting a negative answer) and staying true to the *narrative logic* of Matt 26:14–25 – it is possible to solve the problem of interpreting the intriguing question of Judas. This is done by resorting to *rhetoric* and discovering in the words spoken by him in the Cenacle (Matt 26:25) a rhetorical question from the category *interrogatio/ἐρώτημα* whose function in the text is *auferendae dissimulationis*. Judas, by formulating the phrase expressed by the evangelist in Greek as μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ῥαββί; = “Surely not I, Rabbi?,” attempts to “mislead” all participants of the Last Supper with his “pretense/feigning.” He undoubtedly does so consciously, as he had already used the word παραδίδωμι with the chief priests (hand over/give up/betray – Matt 22:15), the one used a little later by the evangelist to describe the actions taken by him (cf. Matt 26:16), and, finally, the one quoted by Jesus when he predicted the betrayal of one of His disciples (Matt 26:21). However, Judas’ attempt at self-defence came to naught: Jesus exposed his plans (at least towards himself) and confirmed the truth he had denied. The title of “Rabbi,” which Judas invoked, reveals his lack of understanding of Jesus’ mission and his lack of faith in Him as Lord; it does not, however, negate the possibility of Judas’ full awareness in his handing over of Jesus to the chief priests, from who he had already received silver coins (Matt 26:15). It is possible that the truth about the tragedy he brought about with his misdeeds later reached Judas and it is possible that his regret (Matt 27:3) was sincere (and, incidentally and inadvertently, he confirmed Jesus’ innocence – Matt 27:4), but his despair and the decision to inflict just punishment on himself proved to be stronger (Matt 27:5). After all, in Judaism, suicide was not perceived unequivocally negatively.²⁶ Judas ended his life tragically but, in doing so, he bore full responsibility for his actions, as also when he denied being a traitor (Matt 26:25) – despite the attempt to pretend otherwise – he acted with full awareness.²⁷

²⁶ Cf. Drzewiecka, *Śmierć Judasza*, 57–58 and n. 86.

²⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 389: “[Matt 26:24] reaffirms the divine certainty of the coming events and points again to Jesus’ fate as scripturally determined [...] But [...] God’s sovereignty does not override human free will or accountability, hence the woe concerning the one who will betray Christ. Had Judas not done the deed, someone else would have, but whoever does it damns himself in the process”; similarly Carson, “Matthew,” 534; France, *Matthew*, 371–372; Morris, *Matthew*, 656–657; Davies – Allison, *Matthew*, 463; Wilkins, *Matthew*, 834–835; Luz, *Matthew*, 360–361; Nolland, *Matthew*, 1067; Witherington, *Matthew*, 483; Bruner, *Matthew*, 617; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 990; Harrington, *Matthew*, 367; Chamblin, *Matthew*, 1287–1288; Mounce, *Matthew*, 241.

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