Jesus Christ Superstar

Authors: Tim Rice (1944- ) and Andrew Lloyd Webber (1948- )
First Published: pb. 1970, pr. 1971 (staged), pr. 1973 (film)
Genre: Drama
Subgenres: Biblical fiction; lyric poetry; morality tales; rock opera
Core Issues: The divine; doubt; Jesus Christ; love; martyrdom; responsibility

Although the Gospels tell of Jesus and his crucifixion, but there always remain questions about Jesus' divinity. If Jesus were divine, why did he allow himself to suffer so, and if he were divine what was his all-too-human relationship with Mary Magdalene? Finally, why were the Jews and the Romans not punished for what they did to the Son of God? These are the issues with which Webber and Rice deal in their innovative rock opera, which presents the story of the Crucifixion in contemporary music and words.

Principal Characters
Jesus Christ, the protagonist
Judas, his closest friend, who will betray him
Mary Magdalene, in love with Jesus
Peter, a trusted friend who will deny him
Caiaphas, Jewish high priest
Simon Zealotes, the disciple who urges Jesus to rebel
King Herod of Galilee, who returns Jesus to Pilate
Pontius Pilate, the Roman ruler who crucifies Jesus

Overview
Although the Gospels tell of Christ and his crucifixion, there always remain questions about Jesus' divinity. Jesus Christ Superstar was first recorded in 1970 as a rock opera, the story of the final days of Jesus' life presented in a contemporary idiom.
After the record's release, the opera was staged on Broadway in 1971 and in London in 1972, and it was released as a film in 1973. The rock opera, among the first of its genre, has since seen many stage productions around the world.

The work begins with an aria by Jesus' disciple and later betrayer Judas, in which he worries that Jesus has gone too far and that his message of love and peace is being distorted into a call for rebellion against the Roman rulers, who Judas is sure will destroy all of Israel. The scene then turns to Christ's followers, who are excited about the upcoming entry into Jerusalem and sing out, "What's the Buzz?" Jesus is disturbed by the talk of rebellion, but Mary Magdalene comforts him, much to the dismay of Judas, who decries Mary's sordid reputation as a prostitute. Angered, Jesus points out that only those without sin should cast stones. Mary calms Jesus, telling him to try not to worry in the soothing song "Everything's Alright."

Meanwhile, the Jewish high priest Caiaphas meets with his council, who urge him to kill Jesus before the Romans lose their tempers. Caiaphas agrees; Jesus is a threat to the priests' authority as much as that of the Romans. As Jesus and his followers make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Simon Zealotes urges rebellion against the Romans. Saddened, Jesus argues that they have misunderstood his message.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea, is troubled by a recurring nightmare in which a haunted-looking man appears and is torn apart by a roomful of angry people who keep mentioning Pilate's name. Pilate worries about the blame he would incur if ever such an event occurred. The scene then changes from Pilate to the rage of Jesus at finding the Temple in Jerusalem filled with merchants and moneylenders. He furiously drives everyone out and then finds a quiet place to relax, only to be smothered by a crowd of lepers and paupers begging for his help. Mary Magdalene appears and leads him off to an isolated area, where she comforts him with song and caresses. As Christ falls asleep, Mary Magdalene, in emotional torment about the actual nature of her feelings, sings, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," in which she wonders whether there is an all-too-human sexual attraction involved in her platonic love for Christ. She also considers the question of whether Jesus is more than just another man: "He's just a man, but. . . ."

Judas, however, is convinced that Jesus is becoming a dangerous image to his followers, who will not stop until they incur the wrath of the Romans. Judas goes to the Jewish high priests for council, and they persuade him that his worries are real and that he should tell them where to find Jesus. In the belief that he will save all of his people, Judas agrees to reveal Jesus' location.

Jesus and his disciples gather in the Garden of Gethsemane for a Passover supper. There is consternation when Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him and that Judas will betray him. Judas responds by furiously pointing out that Christ has been too ambitious and has let everything get out of control. Jesus tells Judas to leave and then goes off alone to agonize over the coming events.

Judas returns with Roman soldiers and places the betrayal kiss on Jesus, who is taken for interrogation by Caiaphas. When asked if he is the Son of God, Jesus replies that he is what people believe he is. Satisfied that Jesus is dangerous, Caiaphas turns Jesus over to Pontius Pilate for prosecution. Christ's followers scatter
in terror, and, while hunting them down, the Romans accost a frightened Peter, who denies knowing Jesus.

Pilate turns Jesus over to Herod, ruler of Galilee, who urges Christ to perform a miracle for his entertainment. Jesus refuses, and Herod sends him back to the Romans. Judas, meanwhile, agonizes over what he has done to his friend and rails against God for turning him into a villain. In despair, Judas commits suicide.

As Pilate conducts Jesus' trial, he is baffled by the crowd's hatred of a seemingly innocent man. Pilate pleads with Jesus to defend himself, but Jesus is adamantly silent. Pilate has Jesus publicly scourged, but the crowd's appetite for death is not assuaged, and, buckling under pressure, Pilate condemns Jesus to crucifixion.

While Jesus is being readied for execution, Judas appears from the dead and questions Christ about the horrible turn of events and then in the song, "Jesus Christ Superstar," Judas rehearses the doubts and fears Christ has about his own role in the legacy he is about to leave. Judas's song asks if Christ really thinks he is what his followers say he is. Judas asks why, if Jesus is divine, did he let things get so out of hand?

On the cross, Christ forgives his tormentors. He then asks God why he has been forsaken. He cries out piteously that he is thirsty; then he commends his spirit into his father's hands and dies. His grief-stricken followers carry his body to its final resting place.

Christian Themes
The rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar combined emotionally wrenching music and lyrics employing contemporary idiom to speak to the post-hippie 1970's generation in a radically new form that brought the story of Jesus alive for an idealistic, young, but largely secular and agnostic generation. Librettist Tim Rice and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber daringly presented the story of Jesus' final days in contemporary terms, raising doubt about a number of Christian assumptions.

The first of these is the divine nature of Jesus. Jesus' divinity is questioned at several points, but the most powerful doubt is presented in the title song. Sung by Judas after that disciple returns from the dead, the song asks, sarcastically and with some vitriol, if Christ is really what he thinks he is, and, if he is the Son of God, why he let things "get so out of hand." When asked by Pilate if he is what his followers claim, Jesus answers that he is what they say he is. All is doubt, but Jesus' prophecies about who will betray him and who will deny him do come true. Obversely, though Judas is resurrected, the opera ends short of the resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Christ cries from the cross as a suffering human, calling out that he is thirsty and pleading for his mother.

The question of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is raised throughout: Mary is seen comforting and caressing Jesus, but especially when she sings the powerful song "I Don't Know How to Love Him" while Jesus lies sleeping in her arms. Some three decades after the Webber and Rice opera, the issue of sexual relations between Mary Magdalene and Christ was again explored in Dan Brown's popular novel The Da Vinci Code (2003), as it was earlier in a serious scholarly

A final issue is the matter of the character of Judas, who is really the costar of the opera. Often portrayed as a greedy coward who betrayed his friend, Judas here appears as a sympathetic victim of events, a sensible man with reasonable doubts who attempts to address the dangerous conditions being created by Christ's followers.

In many ways, then, *Jesus Christ Superstar* can be interpreted as the story of Jesus the man—not Christ the Son of God. Certainly this emphasis on the humanity of Jesus—highlighted by the "hip" music, lyrics, and political themes that resonated with the opera's first audiences—called traditional Christianity into question and thus created much controversy when the musical first appeared in the 1970's. Such controversy has greeted other portrayals of Jesus' humanity, from Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1960) to *The Da Vinci Code*. At the same time, however, *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a powerful dramatization of the real emotional, political, and social turmoil faced by Jesus, filling audiences with a sense of the dilemmas, struggles, pain, and finally betrayal and death endured by a man who gave his life to be true to God—and the very human responses to Jesus' insistence on that truth.

**Sources for Further Study**


Smith, Terrence. "Review of *Jesus Christ Superstar.*" *The New York Times*, November 6, 1971. This, the original review of the stage production, attacks and rejects several aspects of the opera.


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