

## ANTI-JUDAISM IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW?

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### Personal Introduction

At Dieter's prompting, let me begin by saying a few things about myself. I cannot remember a time when the topic of Jewish-Christian relations has not played an important role in my life. By the age of twelve I was engaging in theological debates with my Southern Baptist friends and their parents, who felt obliged to witness to me by quoting the standard repertoire of biblical texts to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, my first lectures on Hebrew philology were directed to my neighbors, as I explained, on the dubious authority of my very little Hebrew and no Greek, that the translation "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 was based on the Greek and not the original Hebrew text. One of the first books I remember reading about Jesus and early Christianity was Joseph's Krauskopf's *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play*. Written by a scholarly Reform Rabbi in 1901, it showed me how an historical-critical approach to Christian Origins could be used to counter anti-Jewish elements in the gospels in general and the specific arguments of my fundamentalist friends. I'm happy to report that polemics soon gave way to genuine intellectual interest, as I became fascinated with the historical question of how a small Jewish sect developed into a dominant world religion.

When I entered a New Testament doctoral program in 1970, I knew of only a handful of Jewish NT scholars, among whom were my father's rabbinical colleague Samuel Sandmel and my teacher Sheldon Isenberg who had studied with Dieter several years before I had. The topic of Jewish-Christian relations was not yet a major topic for NT scholarship, though the question of "Anti-Semitism in the NT" was beginning to be discussed with some regularity. Today, Jews are well represented among American NT scholars and early Jewish-Christian relations is an important field of NT studies, with the usual vast bibliography that no one individual can master.

The context in which I work is, I imagine, quite different from that of most of the participants here. For the past twenty-five years I have taught undergraduates, MA and PhD students in a Religion Department in a large state university. I realize that thanks to the debacle of last year's presidential election, the city of Tallahassee and the demography of the state of Florida are better

known internationally than they were a year ago. It might still be useful to point out that we have one of the most diverse populations of any state. This diversity is reflected in my classes in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, New Testament, and ancient Judaism, where, for example, Jewish students from south Florida and conservative evangelical Christians from the north mix freely and develop close friendships. The bulk of my teaching consists of introductory New Testament surveys and advanced exegesis courses. Here I find myself, the son of a Rabbi, raised in Oklahoma, the heart of the American Bible Belt, teaching conservative evangelical Christian students the methods of historical-literary criticism I learned from my English and American Roman Catholic, German Protestant and Swedish Lutheran teachers. I should add, that though I am an active member of the Jewish community in Tallahassee, I do not in any sense see myself, nor do my students see me, as representing Jews or Judaism. I study and teach ancient Judaism and early Christianity as humanistic subjects. While I have taught with a more theological focus at Catholic and Protestant seminaries, at Florida State, the questions I ask and the answers I offer are equally accessible (and I hope equally interesting) to students of any or no religious faith.

### **New Testament Polemic and Jewish-Christian Relations**

Any discussion of early Jewish-Christian relations, whether undertaken in the context of a historical investigation of ancient religious communities or as part of the theological dialogue between Jews and Christians today, must at some point confront the harsh polemic against the Jewish leaders and their followers in the narratives and speeches of the gospels and Acts.

There can be little doubt that over the centuries these passages have provided substantial ammunition for Christian attacks on Jews and Judaism. The fact that the representatives of institutional Judaism play the role of the villains in the foundational Christian narratives and that the Jewish crowds are presented as their eager accomplices provides a powerful image that can be easily projected onto any group of Jews who continue to reject the claims of the gospel. It has been difficult for Jews to hear or read these texts without the fear that anti-Judaism is deeply rooted in the New Testament. The history of the interpretation of these passages would do little to ease this anxiety, since it would reflect the full range of Christian anti-Judaism from dismissal of Judaism as a false and hypocritical religious consciousness to vilification of Jews as bloodthirsty murderers.

Fortunately we live in a time and place where such interpretations are seldom heard. The fact is that Jewish-Christian relations have never been so good as they are today. This is due in large measure to the concerted efforts of Christians from the most conservative to the most liberal to speak out loudly and clearly against anti-Semitism and to take steps to guard against any interpretation of the NT texts that would promote it. This new sensitivity can not only be found in official church pronouncements. It is also reflected in practical commentaries and handbooks for the clergy and educational materials for lay study groups. Jews have been greatly encouraged by this development. Recently, in response to this Christian initiative a group of American Jewish scholars issued "A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," in which they state that "it is time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism." A collection of essays was published in conjunction with the statement and, probably more significant for our time, a website created.

Christian scholars and theologians have employed a wide range of strategies, naturally enough reflecting the perspectives of their particular traditions, to counteract possible anti-Jewish interpretations of these passages. Virtually every church statement, beginning from *Nostra Aetate*, rejects the idea that the Jews or Judaism from later generations could be blamed for the actions of specific Jewish individuals who opposed Jesus. In this context, it is often pointed out that Jesus and his earliest followers were themselves Jews. Theologically, many would hold that the opposition to the difficult demands of the gospel and the sinfulness that caused Jesus' death are characteristic of the human condition and not to be limited to one group. Romans 9-11 is frequently invoked as a more authentic and direct NT response to Jews and Judaism, whether interpreted minimally as a warning against Gentile arrogance at any failure to acknowledge Christianity's Jewish roots or more generously as a recognition that Jews can remain in a valid covenant relationship with God even if they do not accept Christ.

Still the harsh words and powerful narrative of the gospels and Acts remain. Some Christian perspectives allow the historical accuracy of the text itself to be called into question. For them, it is possible to recognize that the Jewish leaders and their teachings are caricatures and that their role and that of the Jewish crowds in the execution of Jesus have been greatly exaggerated, if not

invented. This strategy, which ultimately lays the blame for the bitter, unforgiving language and the dualistic plot on the evangelist, is not always easily communicated to or well received by even liberal congregations. Nevertheless, it opens the possibility for a more complicated and honest approach, which challenges readers to understand the historical and sociological context in which the text was produced.

Placed in the context of the communal conflict and competition of the last third of the first century, the evangelists' words can be seen to reflect the struggle of a small sect to define itself over against the larger and more established community from which it emerged. Historical and sociological research can thus not only be a tool for establishing a critical distance that allows us to see the problems in a text. It can also be a means by which we can understand with some degree of empathy the human beings and communities that produced it. Perhaps such an approach can allow us to encounter these texts not just as members of particular religious, cultural or political traditions but as human beings trying our best to learn from the mistakes, struggles and triumphs of other human beings.

The gospel of Matthew provides a particularly good test case for exploring the complexity of Jewish-Christian relations at the end of the first century. Situated on the border between the two communities, it forces us to struggle with the very meaning and usefulness of the terms Judaism and Christianity. It also challenges us to understand the origin and function of some of the harshest and most bitter polemics from antiquity whose legacy has been many centuries of religious hatred and intolerance.

### **The Gospel of Matthew, Jews and Judaism**

Since antiquity, the relationship of the Gospel of Matthew to Jews and Judaism has been seen as a key to understanding its origin and purpose. The frequent references to Jesus' fulfillment of specific prophecies have led many to conclude that one of the main purposes of the gospel was to convince Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah, a view of the gospel's purpose which is still probably the most widely held on a popular level. Since the advent of historical-critical scholarship in the nineteenth century, scholars have often noted (not always sympathetically) that the general theological outlook and much of the specific terminology of the gospel exhibit

particularly close ties to apocalyptic and especially rabbinic Judaism of the period, making "the converted Jewish rabbi" (Dobschütz) a staunch supporter of the Jewish-Christian wing of the church. The uniquely Matthean declarations that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets (5:17), that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:6; 15:24) and that those who fail to repent are to be classed with Gentiles and tax collectors (18:17; cf. 5:47 and 6:7) would seem to be irrefutable proof of the thoroughly Jewish perspective of the gospel.

Another set of themes, however, has seemed to many to call for a different, or at least a more nuanced, assessment. The Matthean additions to the parable of the wicked tenants (21:43) and the parable of the marriage feast (22:6-7) imply that the Jewish rejection of Jesus and the gospel has led to the punishment of those who considered themselves God's people and their replacement by gentiles. The chilling curse that "all the people" call down upon themselves, "his blood be upon us and upon our children," (27:25) seems to bring an ignominious end to any special Jewish role in Salvation History and looks forward to the "Gentile Mission" announced in the Great Commission (28:16-20).

From this perspective, the exclusive mission to the Jews during Jesus' lifetime ended with his death. Thus, far from signaling any favoritism towards Jews, this theme serves to emphasize their rejection of his message and their guilt for his murder. A minority of scholars has held that only a Gentile could be responsible for such sentiments. Most, however, see reflected here the bitterness of a community originating with Jews who have been driven from the synagogue for their faith in Christ and remain in sharp conflict with it. For these interpreters, at least by the time of the gospel's writing, the community has become largely non-Jewish. Its ties to the synagogue have been permanently severed and its chief religious institutions have become the church, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

The pendulum, however, is currently swinging back to a more Jewish Matthew and Matthean community. A number of recent studies argue vigorously that the community represents simply one other manifestation of the multiform Judaism (or in a more common formulation - one of the many Judaisms) of the first century. Both Saldarini and Sim, for example, label Matthew's

perspective "Christian-Judaism" rather than Jewish-Christianity, describing it sociologically as a sect (Sim and Saldarini), "reformist movement," or "deviant association" (Saldarini).

Leaving a full discussion of the usefulness of terms such as Judaism, Christianity, Jewish-Christianity and Christian Judaism for the theses appended to the text of this paper, let me state at this point my working assumptions about Matthew's community and the composition of the gospel:

1. I see Matthew's church to be very close phenomenologically to "rabbinic" Judaism, i.e. keeping all the commandments of the written Torah and following an oral Torah expounded by trained scribes who see themselves as part of an ongoing halakhic tradition based on the oral Torah of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The focus in Matthew's church I take to be teaching the commandments and obeying them

2. I am less skeptical than most today about the dominance of Pharisaic/Rabbinic Judaism at the end of the first century and am even willing to admit its considerable power in the pre-War period of the first century. The joint evidence of Paul, Josephus, and the Gospel writers seems to me to carry greater weight than is often acknowledged. Whatever the influence of Pharisaic/Rabbinic Judaism elsewhere, it clearly seems to be dominant in Matthew's town.

3. I believe the evidence to be overwhelming that Matthew was written sometime between 80-100 and used Mark and Q. The place of composition is much less certain, with Antioch, Galilee or southern Syria no more than educated guesses. The identity of the author is unknown. For convenience, I follow the convention of using Matthew and "he". I take virtually all the non-Markan and non-Q traditions to be Matthew's own composition or the relatively recent product of his community.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mt 5-7; 13:51-52; and especially the Matthean redaction of Mk 2:23-28 (Mt. 12:1-8) and Mk 7:1-23 (Mt 15:1-20).

## **The Matthean Community and "Anti-Judaism"**

Whether Matthew's community is seen as still trying to maintain close ties to the local synagogue or as having just recently separated from it, it is widely held that the Gospel's apparently anti-Jewish rhetoric is, in fact, best understood as inner-Jewish polemic rather than anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism.

According to Craig Keener

Matthew does not represent a conflict between Jews and "Christians" as mutually exclusive groups, but "details the tensions and issues that existed between different Judaisms at the close of the first century C.E. in Palestine" (Keener, 48-49).<sup>2</sup>

For Scott McKnight, Matthew is a "loyal critic". His language is to be understood in the context of "the rhetoric of early Judaism" which "robustly attacks opponents and heartily defends its truthfulness." It is not only one particular group of Jews or type of Judaism that Matthew attacks, but all "nonmessianic" Judaism.

He writes;

It is my contention that Matthew's Gospel, however harsh and unpleasant to modern sensitivities, is not anti-Semitic. It is, on the contrary, a compassionate and vigorous appeal to nonmessianic Judaism to respond to the Messiah. True to the prophetic form, however, Matthew does not hesitate to use the harsh rhetoric of condemnation for those who opt to reject Jesus. But Matthew's rhetoric is conventional, unabrasive for its time, and founded upon his theological convictions (salvational-historical and christological)... Matthew, then, needs no apology, for he is not anti-Semitic. He is no more anti-Semitic than Amos or Jeremiah. Those who have read Matthew so, I believe, have surely misread

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<sup>2</sup> David Sim states the argument succinctly in his recent book attempting to demonstrate that Matthew represents a sustained and vigorous attack on Pauline/Gentile Christianity: "The conclusion that the community underlying the Gospel of Matthew considered itself to be Jewish rather than Christian is an important one for a number of reasons. First, it clarifies the Gospel's polemical material against its Jewish opponents. The evangelist and his readers are not anti-semitic since they are Jews themselves. Nor are they anti-Jewish, since their own religion is Judaism" (Sim, 5)

him. His rhetoric may be unacceptable to modern sensitivities, but it was not to his Jewish world (McKnight, 78).

As will become apparent, I do not believe this line of argument contributes much to a better historical, sociological or theological understanding of Matthew's polemical language. Nevertheless, I recognize the importance of developing new analytical categories that move beyond the concern either to convict or acquit the Gospel of anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism.

In order to advance the discussion, I offer here a reading of some of the key passages in the discussion of Matthean "anti-Judaism" with the aim of understanding both the rhetoric of the narrative and the possible sociological function of its vilification of the near other, which I take to be the local Pharisaic/Rabbinic synagogue.

### **Matthew 23: "To Hell with the Pharisees"**

Among all the attacks on the Pharisees in the gospel tradition, Matthew 23 stands out as the harshest and most sustained polemic. Although it begins with what appears to be a concession to the value of the Pharisees' teaching (23:2-3), any positive understanding of their role is quickly precluded. They might *claim* to expound a Torah-based righteousness, but their actions reveal them to be teachers of iniquity. Carefully structured parallels with the Sermon on the Mount in form (Beatitudes/Woes), general themes, and specific points make it clear that they represent the exact opposite of the righteousness Jesus proclaims as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Instead of being teachers and models of mercy, wisdom, humility, love for others, and purity of heart, they are callous and self-serving hypocrites who care only about their own status, interpret Torah without regard to simple logic or concern for others, and fail to understand and put into practice its essential principles - justice, mercy, and faith. They are blind guides who inevitably lead any who follow them to Hell. "Like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but on the inside are full of bones of the dead and all kinds of filth," they might appear righteous but are "full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (*anomia*)." The intensity of the polemic reaches its full force with the final woe, which, like the final beatitude (5:11-12), associates the

enemies of Jesus and his followers with those who persecuted the prophets:<sup>3</sup>

29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, 30 and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who *murdered* the prophets. 32 *Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.* 33 *You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?* 34 Therefore I send you prophets, sages, *and scribes*, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, 35 so that upon you may come all the *righteous* blood shed on earth, from the blood of *righteous* Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

It is now clear that the Pharisees' transgressions against the law of mercy will extend to murder. Not just burdensome laws and bad exegesis, but blood guilt will lead those who choose to follow them to punishment in this world and the next.

As harsh as this polemic might seem, with its clear message of doom for those whose ancestors murdered the prophets and who themselves will fill up the measure of their people's sins by murdering Jesus and the apostles, many scholars would reject any suggestion that the passage is an attack on Jews or Judaism. For Saldarini, it is the typical rhetoric one would expect from a member of a deviant sect seeking the delegitimation of the leadership of the well-established majority. Its target is not the people of Israel, but those who "(mis)lead" them.

The problems with this reading are that it is not just the leaders who were responsible for the deaths of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah and that the punishment will fall upon "this generation". Furthermore, the Q passage which immediately follows (23:27-39) would seem to include at least the entire city of Jerusalem (cf. Mt 2:3). Prophetic critique might well be the

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<sup>3</sup> I italicize some of the distinctively Matthean features of the passage, which is derived from Q.

appropriate category for understanding the passage in its pre-Matthean (Q) form. However, Matthew's redactional changes here and, more significantly, the discourse's placement within the narrative context of chapters 21-28 make it hard to see its function in the gospel as a call to repentance rather than as a proclamation that the devastation of Jerusalem and its inhabitants in 70 CE represented the just punishment of the church's enemies.

### **Matthean Redaction of 23**

Although the main themes and outline of the woes are found in Q (where they were structurally parallel to the beatitudes), Matthew has turned up the volume of the critique and focused it more directly on "the synagogue down the street." He explicitly identifies the Pharisees with the rabbis (cf. 26:25 where Matthew has Judas greet Jesus as Rabbi), mentions the synagogues as the place of persecution, and includes scribes (cf. Mt 13:52, where the term might be a self-designation of the gospel writer) among its victims. Verses 31-32 make the connection with the sins of previous generations more direct. The introduction of the terms murder and righteousness, as well as the additional reference to blood, tie this passage to prominent themes elsewhere in the gospel. The "fulfillment" of the full measure of their sins which began with their murdering the prophets and righteous Abel and Zechariah contrasts sharply with Jesus' fulfillment of the prophets (*passim*) and all righteousness (3:15).<sup>4</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that those who misread the prophets and reject the gospel are identified as members of the group that killed the prophets and persecute the church.<sup>5</sup>

### **27:24-25: The Cry of the Crowd**

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. 2 Macc 6:14: "When it comes to other nations, the Lord shows his forbearance, and delays punishing them until they have reached the fulness of their iniquity, but for us he had determined differently, in order that he may not be compelled to punish us later when our sins have reached finality" (trans. Hadas); Gen 15:16.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. John Chrysostom, *Against the Jews* 1.5: "the Jews read the prophets from ancient times, yet they crucified the one spoken of by the prophets. Do you realize that those (Christians) who are fasting (with the Jews) have dealings with those who shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him! and with those who said, "His blood be upon us and upon our children?" Since there are some who think of the synagogue as a holy place, I must say a few words to them. Why do you reverence that place? Must you not despise it, hold it in abomination, run away from it? They answer that the Law and the books of the prophets are kept there. What is this? Will any place where these books are be a holy place? By no means! This is the reason above all others why I hate the synagogue and abhor it. They have the prophets but do not believe them; they read the sacred writings but reject their witness - and this is the mark of men guilty of the greatest outrage" (trans. Harkins, 19).

24 So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25 And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children."

There is little need to discuss this famous Matthean addition to Mark's account of the Trial before Pilate, which dramatically records the very moment when the crowd fills up the measure of their ancestors' sins mentioned in chapter 23 and passes the blood guilt down to those opposing Matthew's church. In spite of various attempts to see Matthew's perspective as tragic (one can look at Judas for a more convincing case) or even as hopeful that the blood of Jesus will save the very crowd who calls for his death, the chilling cry of "all the people" (*pas ho laos*, using the usual LXX term for Hebrew *am*) clearly demonstrates two things: (1) the people, not just the leaders who mislead them, are guilty of murder, and (2) their blood guilt was punished precisely in the next generation, i.e. 70 CE, in the time of the children of those who cried for Jesus' death. A direct link is thus drawn between the Jerusalem crowd in Jesus' time and the local synagogue in Matthew's.

### **22:6-7: Parable of the Wedding Feast**

4 Again he sent other servants, saying, "Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast." 5 But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. 7 The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy."

The awkwardness of the introduction of the theme of the murder of God's messengers into the parable of the wedding banquet is a clear indication of how important this theme is to the gospel writer. I do not know of any interpreters who detect in this passage a note of tragedy or hopefulness for the repentance of the perpetrators.

### **21:43: Parable of the Wicked Tenants**

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people (*ethnei*) that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

Matthew's version of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants follows Mark closely. The introduction of the Pharisees among Jesus' opponents is typically Matthean and looks forward to their depiction in chapter 23. The most striking addition to the Markan narrative, of course, is 21:43 whose interpretation has played a central role in the history of scholarship on Matthean anti-Judaism. The exegetical debate has focused on the identity of the "you" and of the "ethnos."

In conjunction with 28:19 (make disciples of all the nations - *panta ta ethne*), many have taken the use of *ethnos* here to mean that gentiles (*ta ethne*) will replace the Jews as God's people as a punishment for their rejection and murder of Jesus. The killing of the previous servants thus corresponds to their ancestors' murder of the prophets, and the murder of God's son represents the filling up of the full measure of their sins.

The use of the singular is, however, a problem for this interpretation. Furthermore, the concluding note that "the Pharisees and chief priests perceived that the parable was directed toward them" (21:45; Mk 12:12 does not specify a subject) has caused many to see the targets as only the leaders and not the people. Against this is the odd use of *ethnos* to refer to the leaders. Saldarini, citing cases of *ethnos* being used for a group within a group, argues that the leadership is being taken away from one group of Jews and given to another who better fulfill the commandments. I agree with the position argued most extensively by Stanton that Matthew is referring to a new people (*ethnos*) of God with a growing membership from among the gentiles (*ta ethne*) but which would still include individual Jews (see also Levine). This would seem to take into account better the likely play on words *ethnos/ethne*. It should not be surprising to find that Matthew is associating the Pharisees with the people who follow them. In fact, taken together with 27:25 the point is that those led by the Pharisees are an *ethnos* of murderers.

Branding those led by the Pharisees/rabbis as an *ethnos* of murderers serves an obvious sociological function. The tiny *ekklesia*, precisely because it was so close to the Jewish

community, must have felt deeply threatened by the synagogue and its rabbinic leaders. No doubt the synagogue was attractive to many in the church, and so Matthew, like John Chrysostom three centuries later, used the full force of his invective to threaten those Christians who frequented the synagogue with divine punishment. Although the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple must have been widely seen by Christians as divine retribution for the killing of Jesus and the persecution of his followers, Matthew emphasizes the theme more than any other NT writer.

### **28:15: The Guard at the Tomb**

27:62 Next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate 63 and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' 64 Therefore order the sepulchre to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." 66 So they went and made the sepulchre secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard...

28:11...some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.12 And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers 13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'14 And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Matthew gives us the best evidence in the gospel tradition of an attempt to counter Christian claims. In one of the exceedingly rare instances when a gospel writer refers to the situation at the time of its composition, we are told that Jews of Matthew's day continued to spread the rumor that the disciples stole Jesus' body. The entire episode of the guard at the tomb seems to have been invented to refute such claims. It also provides important evidence of what some from the synagogue were saying about Jesus in Matthew's time. In fact, many of the changes Matthew

makes to Mark's gospel can be seen as an attempt to counter a member of the synagogue who has used the text of Mark to refute key Christian claims<sup>6</sup>. Most significantly, the opponents of Jesus, those who throughout the gospel have been depicted as his enemies, are explicitly identified as Jews.

This passage seems to me to be as close to a "smoking gun" as we can get to prove that Matthew distinguished his group from "the Jews." In fact, it suggests that it is precisely the ethnos of the Jews who are to be identified with the ethnos of murderers led by the Pharisees/Rabbis. The suggestion that the attack is only directed to the people of Jerusalem (or Judaea) or that Jews here means Jewish leaders does not change matters, since ethnic groups were often identified with their chief city and official leaders. If anything, it shows how easy it is for attacks on a particular group of Jews to become attacks on Jews as a people.

### **27:3-6; The Death of Judas**

3 When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." 5 And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money."

The relevance of Judas to Matthew's anti-Jewish polemic is often not fully appreciated. Many have noted the clear connections with 27:24-25 (innocent blood [*haima athoon* - the adjective is only found in these two places in the NT]; see to it yourselves [*su opseis*]).

Clearly it is the chief priests and elders who are the real villains. True to their characterization in Matthew 23, they hypocritically refuse to put the blood money in the Temple treasury, the very money that they had used to instigate murder. While there is a clear verbal link between Judas and "all the people" in 27:25, the contrast between them should not be missed. Unlike "all the

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. No evidence of Jesus' origins or Davidic ancestry (possible illegitimate birth), no appearance stories; apparent antinomianism.

people," who will eagerly follow their leaders' plot against Jesus (27:25), Judas repents. His fate, however, serves as a dire warning to any member of the church who would have dealings with such murderers. His repentance makes him a character with whom it is much easier to identify and hence whose death is that much more frightening, especially in the rigorist atmosphere of Matthew's church (12: 36-37; 5:27-30). The point again is to distance Matthew's church from "all the people," a nation of murderers.

### **Observations**

Much of the scholarly literature discussing this polemic has been burdened with the question of whether it should be labeled as anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish, with the implication that if that label is accurate, it would prove to be a theological embarrassment. As we have seen, one of the most common strategies used to deal with the question is to claim that because Matthew's community represents one of many forms of a diverse first-century Judaism, therefore, the gospel cannot be anti-Jewish. There are several problems with this approach. First it appears to be a semantic game in which a difficult and not easily defined concept (Judaism) is introduced to elucidate an equally elusive concept (Anti-Judaism/Anti-Semitism). More problematic from my perspective is that it distracts us from addressing the important question of the social function of the polemic in its specific ancient context. This historical and sociological approach to the question not only is important for scholars seeking methodological clarity, but also, I believe, offers the most promising way for contemporary Jews and Christians to come to terms with these difficult and often painful texts.

I propose then to list some social factors that might have contributed to the intensity of Matthew's polemic against the Judaism institutionalized in the Synagogue down the street." Then I will suggest how historical and sociological approaches can be particularly helpful in treating Matthew's polemic within the context of contemporary Jewish-Christian relations.

Among the

### **Factors contributing to the Intensity of Matthew's Polemic**

1. A need for members of Matthew's community to define themselves over against a non-Christian Judaism whose existence and power negates their core belief system, especially since the synagogue leaders claim to be authoritative interpreters of the law and

- prophets were recognized widely within and without the Jewish community.
2. At least a memory of persecution by synagogue leaders (and no evidence of opposition to persecution from within the synagogue).
  3. An on-going need to keep church members from being attracted to the larger and more powerful synagogue, which would have become a more serious sociological problem than exclusion from the synagogue.
  4. A threat to Matthew=s community from any conversions to Judaism (cf. 23:15). There did not have to be a large world-wide, well organized, Jewish mission to the gentiles for any conversions of gentiles to be a threat to the ideology (and not just membership role) of Matthew=s community.
  5. A need to maintain commitment to Christ in face of Jewish attacks on church traditions which probably contained not only attack on the resurrection, but charge of Jesus as deceiver and magician and maybe even illegitimate (women in genealogy). Much of Matthew=s redaction of Mark could be explained as a response to a synagogue critique based on a reading of Mark.
  6. The dramatic confirmation of the community=s worldview in 70 CE would have provided the impetus for the elaboration of traditions stressing the just punishment of the leaders and the people for their attacks on Jesus and his followers. These traditions would not only serve to promote missionary activity by demonstrating the truth of the gospel to outsiders, but they would also have provided assurance to community (and especially missionaries in danger of persecution) that their enemies would be punished if they continued to reject them.

### **Historical and Sociological Analysis and Contemporary Jewish-Christian Relations**

Historical and sociological approaches to the New Testament's attacks on institutional Judaism can provide a critical distance from which contemporary Jews and Christians can study together and seek to understand first-century communities as something both different from and similar to contemporary communities. Jews can approach with empathy and help Christians to understand the social dynamics of first-century Christianity as a minority group seeking to maintain its identity by defining itself over against several different larger communities, including one with which it shared, but interpreted differently, primary religious symbols. In many ways, the Jewish

experience in the modern world mirrors the experiences of Christians in the first three centuries, as both groups have had to develop strategies to deal with the threats of cultural assimilation, prejudice and hatred directed against them as well as political oppression and violence. Observing the similarities and differences in the ways various members of both groups have responded to these pressures has the potential of leading to a more profound understanding of the other.

By using the tools of historical, sociological and narrative critical approaches, Christians can learn to appreciate that attacks on rabbinic Judaism are deeply embedded in their formative texts and not easily dismissed. By studying these texts through Jewish eyes and Jewish historical experience, Christians can gain a greater understanding of the world of the texts. They can also become sensitized to the dangers of using the Jewish opponents of Jesus and the early Christians (or the form of Judaism opposed by Paul) as symbols of a false or inadequate religious consciousness. By studying rabbinic literature and reading together with Jews the polemics against rabbinic Judaism in the gospel narratives and the letters of Paul, Christians can recognize the danger of using their community's texts to form an image of the other.

As painful as it might be, Jews and Christians must also study together the history of the interpretation of these texts. Christians will discover that an anti-Jewish reading is not easily dismissed as faulty exegesis, and Jews will discover that in many times and places these texts have not been read to attack Jews and Judaism, but as critiques of other Christians.

Finally, one of the most important lessons the historical and sociological study of these polemics has to offer is how easy it is for language developed by a persecuted minority in order to maintain its faith and identity in the face of oppression to become the basis for religious intolerance and political oppression when that group gains power.

### **Comments on Theses**

You will find in the printed version of this paper a series of theses addressing in more detail the issue of Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew, the use of the terms Judaism and Christianity to describe Matthew's community, and the question of diversity in first-century Judaism. These are meant for the discussion period. Here I will only state the main points I make in the theses.

1. I question the adequacy of using the categories "conventional rhetoric," "prophetic critique," and "inner-Jewish polemic" to explain Matthew's polemic, and argue that there is some value in using the category "anti-Judaism."
2. I argue that once it is acknowledged that Matthew's community can be fruitfully compared to Jewish texts and communities from antiquity to the present, there is little to be gained in insisting or denying that it should be labeled a form of Judaism.
3. I point out that the fact that first-century Judaism was diverse is not the important issue, but how to describe and understand the nature of the diversity. Rejection of the idea of a monolithic "normative" Judaism should not become an excuse for not taking into full account the evidence from the wide range of Rabbinic literature.

## THESES

### Matthew and Anti-Judaism

1. The Pharisees in the gospel are to be identified with the authorities in the synagogue(s) with which Matthew=s group has come into conflict. Some of these synagogue authorities might well have identified themselves as Pharisees in Matthew=s time; 23:7 is evidence that ARabbi@ was an important title in such communities. Both Matthew=s community and that represented by the Pharisees (with allowances made for polemical caricature) share a number of features with what is often called emerging Rabbinic Judaism.
2. Whatever the influence or degree of dominance of Rabbinic Judaism in other times or places, it is the leaders and followers of this form of Judaism that Matthew attacks by identifying it with Jesus' opponents whom he characterizes as hypocrites and murderers. He thereby extends the blame for the rejection and murder of Jesus to this form of Judaism in another generation. It is thus not a "misreading" of the gospel narrative and its social impact to see it as an attack on a Rabbinic Judaism from a later period. One of the main reasons the gospel has served as such a powerful vehicle for Christian anti-Judaism is that the form of Judaism Christianity has encountered from at the latest the second century to the present has been a Judaism characterized by rabbinic authorities interpreting Oral Torah.
3. The thesis that Matthew=s polemic is less anti-Jewish because it attacks the leaders rather than the people is questionable. Mt 27:25 depicts Aall the people@ accepting bloodguilt. Like Judas, they were persuaded by their leaders to contribute to Jesus= death; unlike him (27:4), however, they willingly called down innocent blood upon themselves and their children (cf. 23:36) The point here, as in all the references to the destruction of the multitudes in Jerusalem, is that the members of the group are led to their destruction by wicked leaders, a standard charge of one group against another. The attack on the leaders does not make the anti-Judaism any less harsh, since the Pharisees/rabbis represent the institutional authority structure that defines this kind of Judaism. It is not directed at specific individuals. An attack on a particular high priest (or rabbi) for being corrupt is different from an attack on the institution of the high priesthood (or rabbinate). Only in the latter case does the polemic function to delegitimize a particular form of Judaism.
4. Too much of the discussion of anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism in Matthew has focused on whether or not the Jews as a people should no longer be the objects of a Christian mission (28:19). This assumes that Mt was either reflecting or responding to a position holding that all Jews, whether or not they accept Jesus, are forever condemned and that the church should never seek to gain them as converts. Such a position is extremely rare in Christian anti-Judaism. It is difficult to imagine that Matthew=s church would not have attempted to witness to members of the synagogue across the street whenever the opportunity would have arisen. It is also not uncommon in the history of Christian anti-Judaism to hold both that the entire people is cursed and to call vigorously on individual Jews to become believers.<sup>7</sup> Note that belief in the end to a special mission to the Jews can only be considered anti-Jewish by Christians. (Non-Christian) Jews then and now would regard such a mission itself as anti-Jewish.
5. Attempts to minimize the impact of this polemic by claiming that it is Aconventional,@ reflecting Graeco-Roman rhetorical practice and Jewish prophetic traditions, does not mean that it was not taken seriously and could not have had serious social and political effects. AConventional@ invective relying on traditional themes then and now is used to promote specific actions. The claims that Matthew's polemic "is just about the way all opponents talked about each other back then" or that its rhetoric is typical of the way "early Judaism robustly attacks opponents" betray an Orientalist perspective that underestimates the frequency, intensity and political effect of polemical language in our

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<sup>7</sup> The experience of the Matthean community and/or their predecessors= (Q?) experience of (sometimes violent) rejection by the vast majority of Jews called for explanations, one of which was probably that the vast majority of Jews have not accepted the gospel because they have been blinded by their leaders and/or have followed their ancestors= practice of rejecting God=s messengers. In these circumstances, it would have made social/psychological sense to claim both that, because of their disobedience to the will of God, there was no longer to be a special mission to the Jews (otherwise Jesus and/or God would have commanded a mission doomed to failure) and that (given God=s infinite mercy) individual Jews should be encouraged to find salvation in Jesus.

own time and culture. The suggestion that it is "remarkably mild" by Hellenistic standards (Johnson, 441) seems hardly appropriate for an invective that identifies its opponents as murderers and triumphantly interprets their recent (70 CE) and future punishment as just divine punishment.<sup>8</sup>

6. Classifying Matthew's anti-Jewish polemics as prophetic critique is useful to the extent that it points toward many of its direct and indirect literary and oral sources in biblical and in early Jewish and early Christian prophetic tradition. Such a classification also places it in the context of other groups using prophetic materials to denounce their opponents. It is misleading, however, if prophetic critique is understood as warning from an individual from within a group calling the other members of the group to repentance. It is rather a prophetic voice (or interpreter of prophetic traditions) representing one group cursing another. Even if he considers himself part of the larger Jewish community, however, his anti-Jewish polemic is directed toward another group which he seeks to delegitimize and whose suffering is interpreted as punishment which confirms his group's world view. It is certainly not a prophetic critique in the popular sense of an individual chastising his or her own community to which s/he feels an ongoing loyalty and commitment (though this might be appropriate for the earliest stage of the Q materials). Prophetic critique in this sense is found in the Gospel's warnings to other Christians that those not living righteous lives will be judged (e.g. 7:21-27; 25:31-46). The attacks on the Jewish leaders and their followers draws more on the ancient Israelite prophetic traditions that vilified their opponents and celebrated their destruction.

7. Understanding Matthew's polemics as inner-Jewish polemics has the advantage of distinguishing it, on the one hand, from attacks on Jews and Judaism emanating from individual and communities who do not accept the claims of the Jewish scriptures as authoritative and regard the Jewish ethnos as culturally barbaric (Manetho, Apion, Tacitus, etc) and, on the other hand, from Jewish and Christian attacks on those who worship other gods. It also suggests the importance of comparing the language and its social context with other examples of Jewish groups attacking one another. Simply labeling such rhetoric harsh and citing some similarities,<sup>9</sup> however, has very little value unless there is an attempt to place it within the larger context of inner-Jewish polemics by a comparative analysis, pointing out both similarities and differences. Comparisons could be made, not only with ancient phenomena (Dead Sea Scrolls, Psalms of Solomon, 4 Ezra, Josephus), but also with later examples of intra-Jewish polemics (Karaites, followers of Shabbetai Tzvi, Hasidim) where there is more evidence for the function of the polemics within a specific context.

8. The frequently used argument that Matthew cannot be anti-Jewish because he is Jewish or that anti-Judaism cannot be present in the gospel because his group represents one of many varieties of first-century Judaism is not compelling. The terms anti-Jewish or anti-Judaism as applied to Matthew make sense in the context of the study of Christian anti-Judaism where it is important both to understand the influence of Matthew's text on later Christian anti-Judaism and to compare the literary, theological, political and sociological dimensions of Matthew's anti-Jewish discourse with that of other (including earlier) manifestations of Christian anti-Judaism. While differences are frequently emphasized in summary statements to the effect that NT views of Jews are radically different from that in later periods<sup>10</sup>, real comparisons with specific cases (taking into account both similarities and

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<sup>8</sup> Freyne's judgment (A Vilifying the Other, 135) seems to me closer to the mark: "The rhetoric of *vituperatio* as practiced in the schools was not wholly adequate to the task... Only a rhetoric that is inspired by apocalyptic hatred could achieve the desired effect, and Matthew certainly has his own highly developed repertoire to meet the panic laden demands of the situation. The language of annihilation not denigration is called for as the community seeks to establish its exclusive claims on the inheritance that its opponents also claim."

<sup>9</sup> Cf. McKnight (55): "The rhetoric of early Judaism robustly attacks opponents and heartily defends its truthfulness" or Johnson (441): "By the measure of Hellenistic conventions, and certainly by the measure of contemporary Jewish polemic, the NT's slander against fellow Jews is remarkably mild."

<sup>10</sup> Usually not designated specifically; cf. Evans, "In my judgment viewing the New Testament and the first two generations of early Christianity as anti-Semitic is hopelessly anachronistic. It is not only anachronistic in that second- to twentieth-century categories and definitions are imposed upon the writings of the New Testament; it is also fundamentally erroneous. Early Christians did not view themselves as belonging to a religion that was distinct from Judaism. New Testament Christianity was Judaism -- that is, what was believed to be the true expression of

differences/continuity and discontinuity) are rarely made. Such comparative analyses might perhaps contribute as much to an understanding of Matthew=s rhetoric and social context as to that of the other manifestations of the phenomenon. How, for example, do Matthew=s rhetorical strategies compare with John Chrysostom=s, who wrote in a different social and political context, but faced significant competition from the local synagogue(s)?

9. The intensity of the polemics of a Jewish-Christian community against other Jews and institutional Judaism should not be surprising. Although theoretically possible, there are rare instances of Jewish-Christians serving as bridges between the two communities. The special need to define itself over the "near other" and the experience of exclusion and sometimes persecution from both communities, which tend to regard them as either apostates or heretics, can often result in a dualistic worldview. To the extent that they actively proselytize within the Jewish community, they are often regarded as a threat by the larger Jewish community, whose hostile response continues the cycle of verbal and sometimes physical violence. Both reports of the persecution of Jewish-Christians and the fear of the attraction of Judaism for Christians ("Judaizing") have been significant factors in the development of Christian Anti-Judaism.

### **Matthew, Judaism and Christianity**

10. While Matthew's community probably did not think of itself as "Jewish," since it refers to "the Jews" as other (28:15), for purposes of historical, sociological and theological analysis, it is still possible for us to speak of it phenomenologically as Jewish or part of Judaism. To avoid conceptual confusion, this should be done only in contexts when the reason for using these terms is made clear. The main reason to employ such categories is to do comparative analysis with other similar phenomena. Thus the reason for us to call Matthew's community Jewish is to compare it with other Jewish groups<sup>11</sup> and with other Christian groups with fewer Jewish features. The historian's task is to make sure that as many such phenomena as possible are described and analyzed, not to make normative judgments about who should be considered "authentically" Jewish then or now. The question of community boundaries is worked out by each community for itself. For some communities, historical information about past practices and beliefs might be relevant for such questions; for others it might not be.

11. Jewish Christianity is a more appropriate designation for Matthew's community than Christian Judaism. Matthew=s community shares many more significant and *distinctive* features (e.g. Lord=s supper, baptism, use of ekklesia,) with other groups of Jesus believers than with any other Jewish group. In addition to distinctive beliefs and practices, the shared experience of (or tradition of) suffering for the sake of Christ must have been very significant in identity formation.

12. All forms of Christianity share many characteristics with all forms of Judaism, beginning with the worship of the God of the ancient Israelites and the belief that scriptures considered sacred by ancient Jewish communities contain revelation from that God to humanity. It is also the case that common features extend beyond a shared God and sacred scripture to many beliefs, symbols, institutions and practices that arose after the period in which the books of the Jewish Bible were composed. Hence, when asking the question of whether first-century Christianity in general or Matthew's community in particular represented one form of Judaism, the question is often really in what sense were they closer to various Jewish phenomena than were later groups of those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was Messiah, Lord and Son of God, the fulfillment or completion of the Jewish scriptures, and the focus of piety in general and of specific religious practices such as the baptism and the Lord's supper.

13. For purposes of Jewish-Christian relations, the recognition of Christianity's Jewish roots and the many features the two community's share is important for promoting understanding. It is also important to recognize, however, that

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Judaism...Early was one Jewish sect among several.@ (*Antisemitism and Early Christianity*, 11 [a note compares Acts 5:17; 15:5, 26:5 with Acts 24:5; 28:22]). This is not just an issue of canonical vs non-canonical works. It is common in the study of Christian Anti-Judaism for scholars to claim that distinctive later forms of anti-Judaism only appeared in the period immediately after the one they are studying.

<sup>11</sup> Thinking of Matthew's group as part of Judaism would encourage comparison not just with ancient Jewish groups, but with later groups such as the Karaites, followers of Shabbetai Tzvi, Frankists, Hasidim, Reformers and Lubavitchers. Such comparisons would illuminate specific aspects of Matthew's theology and response to other forms of Judaism.

the different interpretation of this shared heritage for purposes of communal self-definition has often been the source of the greatest conflict between the two communities. Minimizing the differences between them can undercut the important task of learning to respect precisely those features which separate one from the other and which have been responsible for the greatest tensions.

14. One of the benefits of using the terms Judaism and Christianity for first-century phenomena is that they provide a convenient vocabulary for comparing them to later communities that see themselves in continuity with them. This is important not just theologically, but also as an essential component of historical and sociological research, where both continuity and discontinuity, similarities and dissimilarities, are an essential part of any analysis. Just because continuity has too often been naively assumed does not mean that we should go to the other extreme and emphasize only difference and discontinuity.

### **Diversity of First Century-Judaism**

15. The use of such terms as "multiform," "diverse," and "Judaisms" for first-century Jewish groups has some value in so far as it counters popular misconceptions that Judaism was monolithic. It has limited value as an analytical tool, however, since virtually all religious traditions exhibit significant diversity, especially those with many individual communities, and scholars have long known that there was a wide variety of groups that could be called Jewish in the first century. Scholars studying ancient Judaism and Christianity have a professional responsibility to study as many phenomena from the ancient Mediterranean world – religious, political, social – as they can. The question, then, is not whether there was diversity, but the nature of the diversity. Differences in theology, for example, do not necessarily indicate differences in religious practice or the existence of different communities. Furthermore, different communities are not always in conflict with each other. Much more work needs to be done imagining (since full data are rarely available) the various points along the spectrum from cooperative co-existence to violent conflict. There is no reason to assume a conflict between Philo and the rabbis or their inability to worship together (the example of Maimonides should give pause to those who want to draw too strong a contrast). We do not fully understand the sociological dimensions of the conflicts between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the first century or the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, but the evidence does not suggest that the existence of one threatened the identity of the other. Apocalyptic and rabbinic texts might seem to us to reflect different world views and communities, but the existence of so many rabbinic apocalyptic texts from late antiquity to the present suggest that the contrast should not be overdrawn. The conflict between the Qumran sectarians and the Jerusalem priesthood should not be the model for all group relations. In any case, the dynamics of that conflict and the immense complexity of the violent conflicts associated with the various revolutionary groups are quite different in nature from each other and from the conflict between the followers of Jesus and proto-Rabbinic Jews.

16. The model of a diverse Judaism is often presented as a contrast to the concept of "normative Judaism" made famous by George Foote Moore. It should be remembered, however, that he developed this concept in reaction to a widespread tendency of many Christian scholars to denigrate and misinterpret rabbinic texts, which they often did not know in context and at first hand. It would be a mistake for reaction to George Foote Moore's project to take the form of a dismissal of the importance of rabbinic literature for understanding first-century Judaism and Christianity. This literature provides an invaluable resource not just to the degree that specific traditions might have influenced first-century texts, but because it offers a wealth of material for phenomenological comparisons.

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