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Hard Sayings

Difficult New Testament Texts for Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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we have noted, vilifying the other seems to be part of defining the self in New Testament times.²⁸ We may not agree with his methods, but at least we can understand his point of view. Second, it reminds us that John expresses time-bound prejudices against the Jews of his own age and locality, not global anti-Judaism. Since he was reacting to a specific situation, his words must not be taken out of context and applied to Jews generally. Third, it demonstrates that the views of Judaism put forward here are not representative of Jesus and do not reflect his attitude to the Jews of his day. It helps the reader to appreciate that the gospel does not necessarily contain the exact words of Jesus but the meditations of a devoted disciple on the Jesus tradition, and the application of that tradition to his own community. If Christian exegetes over the past two millennia had been able to take such considerations into account with reference to 8:44, the fate of the Jews might have been very different.

2.2 *The Charge of Deicide*

In 1942 a Slovak rabbi asked the local Roman Catholic archbishop to intervene to stop the deportations to the concentration camps. Since the rabbi knew nothing of gas chambers, he stressed the danger of hunger and disease for women, the children and the elderly. The archbishop replied, 'It is not just a matter of deportation. You will not die there of hunger and disease. They will slaughter all of you, old and young alike, women and children at once. It is the punishment you deserve for the death of our Lord and Redeemer.'²⁹ It seems that the appropriate punishment for deicide was genocide. The Jews of the twentieth century were to be regarded as cursed and rejected by God because a small group of their ancestors aided and abetted the crucifixion, and in so doing killed God, whether intentionally or in ignorance.

The archbishop's reaction demonstrates that the deicide charge has persisted well into our own era. Even in 1965, during Vatican Council II, the view that the Jews should still bear the collective guilt for killing God was very much alive. The Council Fathers encountered considerable opposition when they advocated that the crucifixion should not be

²⁸ See S. Frayne and A.Y. Collins, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Quoted by I. Greenberg, 'Judaism and Christianity after the Holocaust', *JES* 12, 1975, p.525.

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charged against all Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today'.³⁰

The link between the death of Christ and the plight of Jews not yet born at the time of the crucifixion is made quite explicitly by the Church Fathers. Addressing the Jews of his own day, early in the fifth century, Augustine writes, 'You, in the person of your parents, have killed Christ'.³¹ His contemporary, Jerome, commenting on Psalm 108, claims that the Jews have become vagabonds because they crucified God and our Lord.³² These are the words of two of the most authoritative theologians of the Western Church, men whose works were widely disseminated. In the East, Melito of Sardis, a second century bishop, has the doubtful distinction of being 'the first poet of deicide' because of an elegant Easter homily in which he ascribes the crucifixion directly and exclusively to Jews.³³ In each case, the argument is grounded in the teaching of Holy Scripture, albeit indirectly.

2.2.1 The Voice of the People

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". And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children". (Matthew 27:24-25)

Although there is no New Testament text which charges the Jews with deicide in so many words, Mt 27:24f. is invariably quoted in connection with the imputed crime of murdering God. This passage has haunted Jewish-Christian relations for almost sixteen hundred years. It has probably done more to fan the flames of anti-Judaism than any other biblical text because of the frequency with which it has been used and because it has been regarded as proof, not only that the Jews of the first

³⁰ J.M. Oesterreicher, 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, New York, 1967-69, Vol.3, pp.38-40, 80, 107, 113f. Eng. trans. In *Answer to the Jews*, 7:10 and 8:11, Fathers of the Church: Washington, 1975, Vol.27, pp.405, 407.

³² See D.G. Morin, *Anecdota Maredsolana*, 1897, Vol.3, pt.2, p.191, lines 12-15.

³³ E. Werner, 'Melito of Sardis: the First Poet of Deicide', *HUCA* 37, 1966, pp.191ff.

Christian century had Jesus crucified, but also that their descendants deserve punishment in perpetuity for the sins of their fathers. With reference to 27:25, Origen wrote in the second century, 'The blood of Jesus was not only on those who were present at the time, but also on every succeeding generation of Jews until the end of the world'.³⁴ If we adopt this interpretation, then clearly Matthew has a lot to answer for in terms of Christian persecution. But the essential question is: to what extent is the evangelist, rather than his interpreters, responsible for a theological anti-Judaism which was later translated into social antisemitism? Is there another way of interpreting Matthew which will make this text less of an embarrassment for Christians engaged in inter-faith dialogue with Jews? In answer to this question, the following considerations may be applicable.³⁵

2.2.1. a Historicity When Paul Winter, quoting Bultmann, describes Mt 27:24-25 as 'legendary accretions', he represents a point of view espoused by many commentators.³⁶ There are several reasons why these two verses strain historical probability. First, they are unique to Matthew. They constitute an addition to the Passion Narrative in which the author intensifies the anti-Judaism of his sources by stressing Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. While this fact alone does not make them unhistorical, placed within the context of Matthew's pronounced anti-Judaism, it is possible to see why they have been regarded as later editorial embellishments. Second, while Pilate may have washed his hands to symbolise his non-complicity in the crucifixion, it is hardly likely that he would have done so in public. To abandon responsibility for the case and hand the prisoner over to the mob would have been tantamount to declaring the Roman Empire impotent in the face of insurrection. Third, it is difficult to believe that the crowd would have taken the responsibility for Jesus' death upon itself by pronouncing an ancient curse, and, furthermore, implicating all future generations of Jews in its crime. These are cogent arguments for believing that what we have here is not a record of events but a literary composition inserted for a specific purpose.

³⁴ Quoted by P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, Berlin, 1961, p. 1.

³⁵ The following paragraphs draw on standard redaction-critical studies of Matthew, e.g., W. Trilling, *Das Wahre Israel*, 3rd rev. ed. Munchen, 1964; D. Senior, *The Passion narrative according to Matthew*, Leuven, 1975.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 55. See also N.A. Beck, *op. cit.*, p. 159; G.M. Smiga, *Pain and Polemic: Anti-Judaism in the Gospels*, New York, 1992, p. 60.

2.2.1. b Vocabulary Two words in v. 25 warrant special attention, namely 'people' and 'children'. In v. 24 Pilate washed his hands in full view of 'the crowd' (Gk. *ochlos*), whereas in the following verse, 'the people' (*laos*) invokes guilt on itself. In Mark and Luke *laos* normally means 'people' in the generic sense of a group of individuals or a crowd (Lk 1:10; 9:13), but in Matthew it frequently, though not invariably (see e.g. 4:23; 27:64), has an ethnic connotation, as in the phrase 'the elders of the people' (21:23; 26:3) where it refers to the Jewish nation (cf. 1:21). This is the sense in which it is used also in the Septuagint, the Greek Version of the Hebrew Bible. 'All the people' has therefore been taken by later Christian theologians to indicate that 'the whole Jewish nation' caused Jesus to be crucified. But this is not the only possible interpretation. The phrase could be understood as 'all the people standing before Pilate'. (See Mt 4:23 and 9:35 for *laos* in this generic sense.) If the words are interpreted in this limiting way, then they cannot be used to charge 'the Jews' with deicide, for the crowd did not represent the Jewish nation as a whole and could not speak in its name. The NEB, though it obscures the difference between *ochlos* and *laos* in these verses, offers a less ambiguous translation: 'and with one voice the people cried.' The phrase need not have the comprehensive meaning it is assumed to have.

According to Matthew, the fateful choice made by the people will affect their children (*tekna*) as well. Here we find echoes of a principle found in the Hebrew Bible where punishment for murder is decreed for an individual and his descendants 'for ever' (1 Kg 2:33). But how all-inclusive is *tekna* meant to be in this context? Does the word indicate children in the sense of one generation, as in the reference to taking 'the children's bread' and throwing it to the dogs (Mt 15:26), or does it signify 'descendants', in the sense of physical or spiritual progeny, as in the claim that God can make 'children for Abraham' out of stones (Mt 3:9)? Christian tradition, witness Origen, has taken the latter to be the correct interpretation and has regarded the word as referring to every succeeding generation. But equally it could refer to the generation between the crucifixion and the fall of Jerusalem. In other words, it is possible to understand the blood curse as extending only until 70 CE. It is perhaps noteworthy that Matthew does not insert the words 'for ever' in this context. Assuming that the gospel was finally edited during the penultimate decade of the first century, then the author could 'predict' with confidence that the children would indeed suffer for the sins of the fathers. The destruction of the city was regarded by many Christian writers as punishment for the death of Christ. It is not unlikely that Matthew is here prophesying after the event and confining the guilt to

two generations of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This is easier to believe than that a group of first century Jews deliberately transmitted guilt to future generations of their own nation.

2.2.1. c Theology If the above interpretation of 'all the people' is unconvincing, as it has been to many, an attempt must be made to explain why the evangelist deliberately substituted 'the people' for 'the crowd'. Furthermore, why did he include the word 'all'? Was it his intention to indicate that it was not simply the mob but the Jewish people as a whole (in contrast to the Christians) which was responsible for the crucifixion? Commenting on Matthew's engagement with Judaism, W.D. Davies maintains that the central question 'is whether this engagement took place *intra muros*, that is, a dialogue however crucial, within Judaism, or *extra muros*, an appeal or apologetic to the Synagogue from a church that was already outside it'.³⁷ In other words, Matthean anti-Judaism is regarded by some as symptomatic of an internal Jewish quarrel in which Jewish-Christians dispute with Jews, but by others as evidence of dissension between Gentile-Christians and the Jewish authorities. It is a topic which has a bearing on Matthew's intention but on which there is no consensus among scholars.

For centuries the dominant view has been that the final editor and his readers were Jewish-Christians still closely linked to Judaism. G. Bornkamm expresses this conviction by claiming that 'Matthew's Gospel confirms throughout that the congregation which he represented had not yet separated from Judaism. ... The struggle with Judaism is still a struggle within its own walls'.³⁸ If so, the author's scathing attack on Judaism may be explained as an attempt to show Jewish-Christians why the Gentiles are to inherit the kingdom of God (see 21:43).³⁹ In wrestling with Israel's rejection by God in favour of the nations, Matthew does not theorise, as Paul does. He uses traditional material, in the shape of sayings of Jesus and stories about him, to show how he was refused by his own people. The climax of this history of rejection comes when 'all the people' (*laos* in the ethnic sense) rather than 'the crowd', call down on themselves an ancient curse.

³⁷ *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, Cambridge, 1966, p.290.

³⁸ 'End-Expectation and Church in Matthew', in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, London, 1963, German original 1960, p.39.

³⁹ J. Fitzmyer, 'Anti-Semitism and the Cry of "All the People"', *JS* 26, 1965, pp.670f.

The evangelist's theological purpose becomes clearer when we look more closely at the verses in question. Pilate's words and actions allude to the ritual of handwashing mentioned in Dt 21:1-9. According to Hebrew law, the shedding of innocent blood defiles the land and its inhabitants. The blood guilt remains as long as the murderer goes unpunished. If the perpetrator is never found, the elders of the village nearest the spot where the corpse was discovered must kill a heifer in the murderer's place, wash their hands over it and say, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, neither did our eyes see it shed.' In this way the guilt was forgiven. The ritual in the praetorium is meant to express Pilate's religious innocence; in God's eyes he is not culpable. The cry of 'all the people' then provides the antithesis to the governor's protestations. Those present call down the blood of an innocent victim, of which Pilate has washed his hands, on themselves and their children. These words also are reminiscent of the Hebrew Scriptures. 'To let blood come over someone's head' was an ancient expression of guilt (2 Sam 1:16), which, in its developed form had collective implications (Jer 26:15) - all suffered for the sins of the few. The origin of this guilt formula has been traced to Israelite worship, a fact which suggests that God himself is being addressed in it.⁴⁰ This makes the parallel with Pilate all the more significant: while the Gentile proclaims his innocence before God by practising an ancient ritual well-known to Jews, the holy people proclaim their guilt before the same God by using an equally familiar cultic formula. By replacing 'the crowd' with 'the people' Matthew therefore makes a dogmatic statement about a crucial event within the history of salvation. His concern is theological rather than historical.

The theory that what we have here is an internal dispute has a bearing on the polemical nature of the language, for as sociological studies have demonstrated, 'the closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict'.⁴¹ The fighting is fiercest in a civil war. But intense conflict, couched in violent polemic, must not be taken to imply a hatred which leads to persecution and eternal damnation.

2.2.1. d Persecution During the past fifty years the view that Matthew's gospel was produced by and for a minority group within Judaism has been challenged, initially in a brief study by K.W. Clark,

⁴⁰ H. Reventlow, 'Sein Blut komme über sein Haupt', *VT* 10, 1960, pp.311ff.

⁴¹ B. Przybylski, 'The Setting of Matthean Anti-Judaism', in P. Richardson and K. Granskou (eds), *Anti-judaism in Early Christianity*, Waterloo, 1986, Vol.1, p.198.

but later in detailed studies by W. Trilling and G. Strecker.⁴² While recognising the Jewishness of Matthew, as evidenced in his genealogy of Jesus, his five blocks of teaching material analogous to the Five Books of Moses, his frequent quotations from the Hebrew Bible and his stress on Jewish particularism, these scholars claim that the final redaction of the gospel was made by a Gentile author for Gentile Christians. Clark considers the Gentile bias, observed in verses such as 8:12, 12:21 and 21:43, to be the primary theme in Matthew. If this is its setting, the gospel's anti-Judaism must be seen as a symptom of the dispute between Gentile and Jew and not of internal Jewish tensions. The polemic may be regarded as the young Gentile Church's reaction to the theological and physical threat posed to her existence by the synagogue across the street.⁴³ The derogatory language may be explained as the reaction of a beleaguered group persecuted by the Jewish authorities. Polemic is often the response of a minority community at odds with a dominant neighbour.⁴⁴

It is clear that many issues must be taken into account when considering this crucial text. But whatever view one takes of Matthew's origins and intention, these verses cannot be used to argue that the entire Jewish nation was responsible for the crucifixion and that every succeeding generation of Jews should pay the penalty.

2.2.2 Christ Crucified

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know - this Jesus, delivered up according to the plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ... Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:22-23, 36)

⁴² K.W. Clark, 'Gentile Bias in Matthew', *JBL* 66, 1947, pp.165ff; W. Trilling, *op.cit.*, G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit*, 3rd rev.ed. Göttingen, 1971.

⁴³ See further D.R.A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St Matthew*, Cambridge, 1967.

⁴⁴ G.N. Stanton, 'The Gospel of Matthew and Judaism', *BjRL* 66, 1983-84, p.218.

According to the prevailing opinion, the Acts of the Apostles is the second volume of Luke's work. Though separated in our Bible by the Gospel of John, these two books should be read as a single whole. Acts continues the story of the development of Christianity by telling how the first missionaries took the Faith from Jerusalem to Rome. The book is presented, not as a factual account of what transpired during the first century CE, but as a 'theological and political literary drama.' This definition does not deny a historical basis for the work, but it does suggest that the events recorded are seen through the eyes of faith; in other words, the author's comments on and interpretation of the events are included in the finished product.

One of the main features of the book is the missionary preaching of the early Christians with its constant refrain that the Jews as a whole were directly responsible for the crucifixion. Peter's Pentecost sermon, quoted above, opens with the words 'Men of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem' (2:14). This form of address implies the complicity of all Jews, even those normally resident outside Palestine, in the death of Jesus, for as Luke records, at that time 'there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven' (2:5). Even the pious Diaspora Jews are tarred with the same brush as the indigenous population of Jerusalem and Judea and specifically charged with guilt. Like the author of the Fourth Gospel, Luke makes constant use of the all-inclusive term 'the Jews' with no apparent regard for the impression it might convey to the reader. The Jews are accused of condemning, betraying, killing, murdering, crucifying and hanging Jesus. (See e.g. 3:13-18; 4:10, 27-28; 5:30; 7:52; 10:39-40 and 13:27-30) The real culprits were the Jews; the Gentiles, the 'lawless men' of the quotation, were merely instruments. The essential message is couched in 'finger pointing theology' of the most direct kind: 'God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.' (The original Greek is emphatic.)

Given the prominence of such negative polemic, it is hardly surprising that the traditional interpretation of Acts has emphasised its portrayal of the radical discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity.⁴⁵ For their heinous crime the Jewish people have been rejected by God and replaced by the Christian Church. As Paul says in his final sermon to the Jews of Rome, 'this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles;

⁴⁵ See e.g. E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, Oxford, 1971; J.T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts*, Philadelphia, 1987, ch.3.

they will listen (28:28). (In the original Greek both subject and verb are emphasised.) The Jewish people are determined at all costs to oppose the Christian message; the attempt to convert them was a failure. Although there was a successful mission to Jews during the early days, by the author's time those who were pro-Christian were Gentiles and those who were anti-Christian were Jews. And while Luke gives prominence to the Jewish roots of Christianity, in the last analysis he refuses to recognise the Jews as God's people. In the words of Haenchen, Luke has written the Jews off: 'Those who regard this negative polemic as the primary message of the book consider Acts to be the main seed-bed of later anti-Judaism. N.A. Beck concludes that it is 'the most devastating and the most destructive of Judaism' among all the New Testament documents because it portrays the Jews' final rejection of and by God.⁴⁶

While this view of Acts commends itself to many commentators, the Scandinavian scholar Jervell proposes a radically different interpretation.⁴⁷ He finds evidence not for the rejection of Israel but for its continued existence, a thesis which he supports with three main arguments. First, he claims that the preaching of the Gospel has divided Israel into two groups: repentant and unrepentant, (i.e. Jews who accept Christ and those who reject him). He sees repentant Israel in the frequent successes reported by the Christian missionaries (e.g. 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1) and unrepentant Israel in the condemnatory references to 'the Jews'. Secondly, this repentant Israel remains for Luke the Jewish people, which is why the earliest Christians live as pious Jews. It is because of its link with this repentant Israel that the Church can claim to be the people of God. Luke is not aware of a break in salvation history. Finally, the Gentiles share in the promises made to Israel; they are saved only through their relationship with her. Salvation therefore proceeds from a restored Israel to the Gentiles.

The sharp disagreement between these two standpoints underlines the complexity of this particular issue. Jervell's theory has appealed to many, and for our purposes it is important because it affects our understanding of Luke's evaluation of the Jews in two ways. First, it presents Acts as one of the most pro-Jewish parts of the New Testament, for salvation comes to the Gentiles only through repentant Jews. Second,

⁴⁶ *Op.cit.*, p.207.

⁴⁷ *Luke and the People of God*, Minneapolis, 1972.

it restricts the polemic to unrepentant Israel. The texts which condemn the Jews for the crucifixion were never intended to be understood in an all-inclusive sense. However, the argument seems to have a basic flaw in it. The restored Israel, which is crucial to the thesis, is an Israel which non-Christian Jews would fail to recognise, for it is an Israel which is defined by its faith in Jesus. It has broken away from the parent body, a body for which there is no hope, and become a Christian Israel.

We may well be persuaded that the traditional view of Acts is the correct one - that despite its Jewish roots and thousands of Jewish converts, the Church turned its back on Judaism and preached Jewish culpability. Even so, two mitigating factors within the book which lighten Israel's responsibility should be borne in mind.⁴⁸ The one is the conviction that the death of Jesus was part of God's *predetermined* plan, as foretold by the prophets, for the salvation of mankind (2:22; 3:18; 4:28; 7:52). This stress on divine determinism is just as conspicuous as that on Jewish guilt. The other is that the Jews demanded the death of Jesus in *their ignorance* (3:17; 13:27). They, like the disciples in Mark's gospel, had consistently failed to comprehend God's purpose. In this context it may be significant that Jesus' words from the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' are recorded only in Luke's gospel (23:34).

2.3 A Theology of Rejection

When the Balfour Declaration stated in 1917 that the British government 'viewed with favour' the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine, the Jesuit newspaper *La Civiltà Cattolica* rejected the notion out of hand. It responded by condemning the prospective settlers for having forgotten that 'more than 1800 years have passed since their fathers, smitten by the divine malediction, were expelled and dispersed over the whole earth'.⁴⁹ Contemporary Jews were God's rejected people, the inheritors of an ancient curse, the objects of divine wrath.

As the newspaper states, such a view has a long history in the Christian Church. Luther declared that though he had once helped Jews, he

⁴⁸ See S.G. Wilson, 'The Jews and the Death of Jesus in Acts', in P. Richardson and D. Granskov (eds), *op.cit.*, Vol.1, p.158.

⁴⁹ Quoted by C. Klein, 'The Theological Dimensions of the State of Israel', *JES* 10, 1973, p.702.