

Article

Matthew's Gospel and Jewish-Christian Relations

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Abstract

Matthew's Gospel is a minefield for Jewish-Christian relations, and the issues raised for preachers involve wider questions about reading and interpreting troubling scriptural passages. The article first examines the Gospel in its first century context (reading it historically), and then explores the interpretation of Matthew in today's contexts (reading it theologically). In both halves, it focusses on two specific topics: the depiction of Pharisees, and the so-called 'blood curse' of Matthew 27:25. It argues that Matthew's vilification of the Pharisees is based on their unresponsiveness to the message about Jesus, their refusal to recognise him as the *torah* interpreter par excellence. This raises the question of how we ought to speak of those with whom we disagree. The reappraisal of Christian language about the Pharisees requires more than setting the historical record straight. It involves giving them theological weight, such as taking the Pharisaic habit of questioning, probing, and debating as a positive example. In 27:25, Matthew ties together the significance of Jesus' death and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem with the offer of forgiveness available in Christ, but at the expense of the Jewish people. Rather than trying to rehabilitate the verse, it is suggested that it be allowed to stand in judgement over us, for all the ways in which we have put words into other people's mouths, denied their right to self-definition, and imposed our frameworks of meaning upon them. The article ends with a series of guidelines for avoiding anti-Judaism.

Keywords

Matthew's Gospel, Jewish-Christian Relations, Pharisees, anti-Judaism, deicide charge

We are in Revised Common Lectionary Year A, when most Sunday Gospel readings come from Matthew. Matthew's Gospel is a minefield for Jewish-Christian relations, and the issues raised for preachers involve wider questions about reading and interpreting troubling scriptural passages. The first half of this article examines Matthew's Gospel in its first century context—in other words, reads it historically. The scholarly understanding of that context has changed dramatically in the last few decades,

not least because of the involvement of Jewish New Testament scholars, who have challenged all sorts of Christian stereotypes and misunderstandings. The second half explores the interpretation of Matthew's Gospel in today's contexts, as we look to the Bible for inspiration

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Sunday by Sunday, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit to uncover new meanings for our time—in other words, reads it theologically. Here, historical scholarship is not enough. We need to take into account the theological reception of Matthew, which, whether we realise it or not, informs our personal and communal relationships with the text. The question becomes: how do we proclaim our Christian beliefs in a world of many faiths, having learnt the lessons of the disastrous history of Jewish–Christian relations since the first century, and treat those who look on life differently with respect? Each half focusses on two specific topics: the depiction of Pharisees, and the so-called ‘blood curse’ of Matthew 27:25, as these represent the most disturbing aspects of Matthew’s Gospel for Jewish–Christian relations.

Matthew’s Gospel and Jewish–Christian Relations Then: Reading Matthew Historically

Most scholars agree that Matthew’s Gospel was written towards the end of the first century, after the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE. Like all New Testament books, it was written in Greek. So, although the Gospel narrates the life of Jesus, the context of its writing is not the rural Aramaic-speaking Galilean setting of Jesus’ ministry, but, broadly speaking, the urban Greek-speaking context of diaspora synagogues and their gentile sympathisers spread across the Eastern Roman Empire.

Matthew tells of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who was Jewish; and proclaims him to be the Messiah—a concept which only makes sense within a Jewish framework. Jesus is understood as the fulfilment of hopes expressed in the Jewish scriptures. Matthew differs from the other Gospels not by that reliance on scripture, but in its presentation of the links. Whereas Mark opens by quoting Malachi and Isaiah, Luke gives words to Mary reminiscent of Hannah’s prayer (1 Sam 2:1–10), and John alludes to the beginning of Genesis, Matthew punctuates his infancy narrative

with five fulfilment citations—‘All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet’.¹ And just as all the Gospels depend on Israel’s scriptures to make sense of Jesus’ mission, so they all malign those Jews (the majority) who are unresponsive to the idea of Jesus as Messiah. The polemic is particularly strong in John and Matthew. Whereas John obscures Jesus’ Jewishness, characterising ‘the Jews’ as Jesus’ opponents, on the side of darkness and death; in Matthew, the fiercest vituperation is reserved for the Pharisees.² Most scholars agree that the tone of the rhetoric reflects Matthew’s context rather more than Jesus’ encounters with Pharisees—a context of competition with non-Christ-believing Jews.

In Matthew, Jesus is presented as envisaging his mission being ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (10:6; 15:24). The Gospel contains sayings which portray gentiles disparagingly (5:46–7; 6:7–8; 6:31–32; 18:17). But it also tells of Jesus’ encounters with righteous gentiles, notably the centurion of Capernaum (8:5–13), and the Canaanite woman (15:21–28), and praises them for their faith. Matthew opens with Jesus being described as ‘son of David, son of Abraham’ (1:1) and closes with the ‘great commission’, sending the disciples to ‘all nations’ (28:19), together evoking God’s promise that all the families of the earth will bless themselves by Abraham (Gen 12:3; 18:18). Depicting the turn to the gentiles as taking place after Jesus’ death reflects the historical reality. Only once the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah spread beyond Galilee and Judea into diaspora Jewish communities did Christian envoys come across gentiles in any significant numbers. And gentile interest in the new

¹ Mt 1:22–3; 2:5–6, 14–15, 17–18, 23. See also 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15; 13:35; 21:4–5; 26:56; 27:9–10.

² For John’s Gospel, see Adele Reinhartz, *Cast out of the Covenant: Jews and anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham: Fortress Academic, 2018).

³ See Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 140–3.

movement seems to have taken Jesus followers by surprise.³ Paul's letters inform us that one of the most controversial issues in the early church was the terms on which non-Jews should join. Were they to become Jewish? Were men to be circumcised? Paul said 'no'—as the end-time was fast approaching, they should worship the God of Israel as gentiles, thus confirming Isaiah's prophecy of all nations flowing to the mountain of the Lord (2:2–3).⁴ On the issue of gentile circumcision, Matthew's Gospel is silent. 'Disciples of all nations' are to be baptised, and taught to obey everything that Jesus has commanded (28:19–20); but that leaves many unanswered questions. All we know is the importance Matthew attaches to the law, *torah*: 'For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (5:18).

Christian misunderstanding about the law in first century Judaism is commonplace. Preachers talk as though there were fixed rules, and therefore that obeying the law, or not, was a simple binary—either one did or one didn't. By the first century, the Torah (the five books of Moses) was scripture and thus more or less fixed. But determining the practical details of the behaviour required—*halakhah*—was a matter of interpretation and endless debate. Keeping the Sabbath day holy is one of the ten commandments (Ex 20:8). But exactly what does that entail? Jesus did not 'break the rules'; he interpreted them differently to some others in his community, as Orthodox and Progressive Jews do today. By joining debates over *halakhah*, he was not rebelling against Judaism, but being quintessentially Jewish. Matthew presents him 'as not only torah observant but the torah interpreter par excellence'—the new Moses.⁵ This love and respect

for *torah*, and the friction with those who understood it differently (such as not recognising Jesus as its definitive interpreter), fit within the Jewish world. The non-Jews who joined the Jesus movement knew that it had started out as a Jewish group. It seems likely that they were mostly recruited from among the gentile admirers of diaspora synagogues, sometimes referred to as 'god-fearers'.⁶ The ancient scriptures and Jewish ethical values may have been among the aspects of Judaism that attracted them, along with the fervour of apocalyptic expectation. Paul argued that male gentile Jesus followers need not be circumcised, but still expected his gentile converts to abandon their ancestral gods (pagan idols in Paul's eyes) and behave morally—cornerstones of *torah*. It is plausible to think of some gentile converts to Judaism, whether or not to the Christ-believing variety, as being more scrupulous over obeying the *mitzvot*, the commandments, than some Jews by birth. Thus, we cannot make any simplistic equation between ethnicity and law observance in the Matthean community. Adela Yarbro Collins considers the range of Matthew's audience:

At one end of the spectrum we may place those who observe the law in a way that includes circumcision; tithing practices, even of vegetables and herbs; the various kosher and purity regulations; and strict Sabbath observance. At the other end of the spectrum are those who observe it in a primarily ethical way, that is, in accordance with a Hellenistic understanding of ethics.⁷

She argues that the Gospel aims to promote unity between those with different understandings of what the law entails. One of the ways in which it does so, however, is by creating a common enemy in the Pharisees.

⁴ See Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 96–8.

⁵ James G. Crossley, 'Matthew and the Torah: Jesus as Legal Interpreter', in Anders Runesson and Daniel M. Gurtner (eds), *Matthew within Judaism: Israel and the Nations in the First Gospel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2020), 30.

⁶ See Paula Fredriksen, "'If It Looks like a Duck, and It Quacks like a Duck ...': On Not Giving Up the Godfearers", in Susan Ashbrook Harvey, et al. (eds), *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer* (Providence: Brown, 2015), 25–33.

⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins, 'Polemic against the Pharisees in Matthew 23', in Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (eds), *The Pharisees* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 155.

The Synoptic Gospels use the Pharisees to represent those who question Jesus' authority and lifestyle. In all three, they ask why he eats with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30, 15:2). Comparing Matthew with Mark, however, we find that the anti-Pharisaic rhetoric is heightened. In Mark, a scribe asks Jesus 'Which commandment is the first of all?', and the story ends with Jesus commending him, saying, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God' (12:28–34). In Matthew, it is a lawyer from among the Pharisees who asks, and there is no commendation (22:34–40). In Mark, scribes from Jerusalem accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the ruler of demons (3:22); in Matthew it is Pharisees, twice (9:34; 12:24). Matthew has an undercurrent of harsh judgement. Six times, for example, people are described as being thrown into outer darkness, or the fire, 'where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), an expression which does not occur in Mark. The hostility to the Pharisees comes to a head with the vituperation of chapter 23, where they are accused of being hypocrites; of seeking the place of honour at banquets; of being like white-washed tombs, full of all kinds of filth; and of being descendants of those who murdered the prophets. The litany of condemnation ends with 'all the righteous blood shed on earth' being called down upon them (23:35). As Luke Timothy Johnson points out, the rhetoric of slander was widespread in the Hellenistic world—Matthew's Gospel is by no means unique in the language it uses to castigate rival teachers.⁸ Describing opponents as hypocrites, or blind, or possessed by demons, was commonplace. 'Matthew lays on the slander and vilification as well as any other author in antiquity'.⁹ This is not to excuse such language, or mitigate the difficulties of its presence in our scriptures; but to recognise its

rhetorical function, and not imagine that the invective provides accurate information about the Pharisees. Ostensibly directed at outsiders, polemic functions to strengthen the identity of insiders. Matthew's Gospel was not being read by Pharisees, but by Christ-believers for whom the Pharisees' supposed behaviour served as a warning.¹⁰

Who then were the Pharisees? The main historical finding of the recent book *The Pharisees*, edited by Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, is how little we know about them!¹¹ The few sources are biased, and contradict each other. Luke describes the Pharisees as 'lovers of money' (16:14); Josephus writes that they 'simplify their standard of living, making no concession to luxury'.¹² The Pharisees' legal rulings are criticised as too lenient by the Sadducees (according to the Mishnah), Josephus, the Qumran community, and indeed Matthew's Jesus, who, in the Sermon on the Mount, condemns not only murder and adultery, but anger and lust; gives stricter rules for divorce; advocates love of enemies as well as neighbours, and tells his disciples to be perfect (5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 43–44, 48).¹³ Elsewhere in Matthew, however, the Pharisees are castigated for imposing burdens that are too hard to bear (23:4). Current scholarship undermines the widespread assumption that the Pharisees were direct precursors of the rabbinic movement. The early

¹⁰ See Seán Freyne, 'Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self: Matthew's and John's Anti-Jewish Polemic in Focus', in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds), *"To See Ourselves As Others See Us": Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 138, 142, for denunciations of scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 directed at disciples elsewhere.

¹¹ Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (eds), *The Pharisees* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

¹² *Jewish Antiquities* 18.12. Translations of Josephus are taken from H. St. J. Thackeray, Ralph Marcus, and Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus*, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1926–65).

¹³ *M. Yad.* 4:6–8; *Jewish Antiquities* 13.294; Damascus Document CD-A I, 18–19 (4Q266 2 I, 21–23). See Yair Furstenberg, 'The Shared Image of Pharisaic Law in the Gospels and Rabbinic Tradition', in Sievers and Levine (eds), *The Pharisees*, 199–219.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108: 3 (1989), 419–41.

⁹ Anthony J. Saldarini, 'Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism', in David E. Aune (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 175–6.

rabbis did not identify themselves as Pharisees (the one exception being the Gamalielite family).¹⁴ They did, however, have ‘a natural affinity to the Pharisaic interpretation of the Torah’, and therefore, with care, some of their legal positions can be deduced from rabbinic literature.¹⁵ The historical Pharisees emerge as a small group reputed for precision in legal interpretation, who relied on extra-biblical ancestral traditions, were popular with the common people, and, unlike the Sadducees, believed in resurrection.

So why Matthew’s hostility to the Pharisees? It has been argued that the animosity reveals more about the circumstances of the Gospel’s composition than about Jesus’ attitude towards his fellow Jews.¹⁶ A rift seems to have developed between the Matthean group and the majority of the Jewish community, as indicated by the Gospel’s use of ‘their synagogue(s)’ (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; 23:34), portrayed as places of hypocrisy, rejection and persecution (6:2–6, 23:6; 12:14, 13:57; 10:17, 23:34).¹⁷ However, as Judy Yates Siker explains:

Historians are developing a more sensitive attitude to ancient texts, and their “reconstruction” of the ancient world is not so much a search for the “reality” of that world as an entrance into the *imaginaire* of the world of the ancient writers.¹⁸

Using this approach, Matthew’s Gospel is seen not as reflecting a hypothetical community, but as

constructing an identity by drawing boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In Amy-Jill Levine’s words, ‘a text is not a community; rather, a text constructs its own world’.¹⁹ Matthew portrays all Jewish leaders—Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, scribes, elders, Herodians—negatively, drawing no clear distinctions between them. ‘A careful examination of these ostensibly diverse groups. . . reveals an apparent randomness of the author’s choice of terminology and the interchangeability of the charges against the groups.’²⁰ Among New Testament writings, only Matthew brings Pharisees and Sadducees together in apparent cooperation, disregarding their mutual dislike.²¹ The Gospel’s worst vituperation, however, is reserved for the Pharisees, and the heart of Matthew’s attack is their failure to interpret the scriptures correctly. It accuses them of wilful blindness (15:14; 23:16–26), of having ‘an evil disposition that refuses to see God’s presence in the ministry of Jesus or His wisdom in Jesus’ teaching’.²² Matthew’s condemnation of the Pharisees is not based on a factual description of their views and activities, but on their unresponsiveness to the message about Jesus, their refusal to recognise him as the *torah* interpreter par excellence. And its vilification of them jars disturbingly with its own injunction to ‘love your enemies’ (5:44).

The most disastrous New Testament verse for the history of Jewish–Christian relations is Matthew 27:25, where ‘the people as a whole’ (πᾶς ὁ λαός) are said to take upon themselves the guilt of Jesus’ death: ‘His blood be on us and on our children’. It fed into the accusation that all Jews everywhere, and down the generations, were ‘Christ-killers’, which can be documented

¹⁴ See Günter Stemberger, ‘The Pharisees and the Rabbis’, in Sievers and Levine (eds), *The Pharisees*, 242–3; or Shaye J. D. Cohen, ‘The Forgotten Pharisees’, in Sievers and Levine (eds), *The Pharisees*, 284–5.

¹⁵ Martin Goodman, *A History of Judaism* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 122.

¹⁶ See, for example, Saldarini, ‘Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism’, 169–70.

¹⁷ Mark uses ‘their synagogue(s)’ twice (1:23, 39), and Luke once (4:15).

¹⁸ Judy Yates Siker, ‘Unmasking the Enemy: Deconstructing the ‘Other’ in the Gospel of Matthew’, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 32: 2 (2005), 113.

¹⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, ‘Matthew’s Portrayal of the Synagogue and Its Leaders’, in Donald Senior (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew at the Crossroads of Early Christianity* (Leuven: Peters, 2011), 178.

²⁰ Siker, ‘Unmasking the Enemy’, 116.

²¹ See Henry Pattarumadathil, ‘Pharisees and Sadducees Together in Matthew’, in Sievers and Levine (eds), *The Pharisees*, 136–47.

²² Freyne, ‘Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self’, 133.

from the mid-second century, and later fused with modern racial antisemitism, featuring, for example, in the Nazi school curriculum.²³ When the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* directed that ‘what happened in (Christ’s) passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today’, it did so because such instruction was necessary.²⁴ And that paragraph’s wording was hotly contested. ‘Some bishops claimed that it was not permitted to revise a doctrine explicitly articulated in the Scriptures.’²⁵

We begin by focussing on the historical context and meaning of Matthew 27:25. The saying features only in Matthew, and is preceded by another Matthean addition to Mark—the scene of Pilate washing his hands. Crucifixion was part of the Roman imperial machinery for terrorising conquered peoples into submission. It did not take much in the first century for a peasant or slave, including many Jews, to be crucified. Yet Matthew presents Pilate, the one holding the reins of power, the one who ‘handed (Jesus) over to be crucified’ (27:26), as denying responsibility and ritually proclaiming his innocence. And it depicts the Jerusalem crowd, swayed by their leaders, offering ‘to bear the consequences should there be any repercussions for Jesus’ death’.²⁶ In verse 25, Matthew switches from talking about the ‘crowd’ (ὄχλος) to using the ‘people’ (λαός). This would seem to indicate a shift from the narrative world of

the assembled gathering to a theological statement, in which ‘the people’ could be understood as the nation of Israel. The words put into their mouths are multi-layered, creating several biblical allusions:

Firstly, Matthew links Jesus’ death with the innocent death of the prophets, a theme featuring in the condemnation of the Pharisees (23:29–35). In fact, the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures are not, with one exception, murdered. Jeremiah is persecuted, but he survives. The exception is a certain Zechariah, whose stoning to death is very briefly told in 2 Chronicles (24:20–22).²⁷ Only in postbiblical literature are the prophets assigned violent deaths, and it is debateable whether the stories are pre-Christian.²⁸

Secondly, the verse keys into the prophetic rhetoric of responsibility—the idea that the disasters which befell the Israelites and Judeans were a consequence of their sins. As Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrestled with the reasons for the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, they debated which generation was responsible—were the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children (e.g. Jer 32:18; Ez 18:2, both alluding to Ex 20:5–6)?²⁹ After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE, this prophetic rhetoric of covenantal theodicy was revived. Josephus writes,

Even God himself, for loathing of their impiety, turned away from our city and, because he deemed the temple to be no longer a clean

²³ See Mary C. Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2013), 80–2 (second century), 126–7 (Nazi school curriculum).

²⁴ ‘Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*’ (1965), §4: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

²⁵ Karma Ben-Johanan, *Jacob’s Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2022), 30.

²⁶ Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 134.

²⁷ See Catherine Sider Hamilton, “‘His Blood Be upon Us’: Innocent Blood and the Death of Jesus in Matthew”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 70: 1 (2008), 86–9, for the legend of Zechariah’s blood and Mt 23:35.

²⁸ The work usually cited is *The Lives of the Prophets*, assumed to be a Jewish work of the late Second Temple period. David Satran, however, has argued that *The Lives of the Prophets* is Byzantine. David Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

²⁹ See Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Voices from the Ruins: Theodicy and the Fall of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 344–421.

dwelling place for Him, brought the Romans upon us and purification by fire upon the city. . .for He wished to chasten us by these calamities.³⁰

He is not blaming the Jewish people as a whole, but the ‘brigands’ who have fomented civil strife and defiled the temple by committing murder there. He does not consider the relationship between God and Israel ruptured, and undoubtedly expects the temple once again to be rebuilt.³¹ Matthew links the fall of the city to the killing of Jesus. Its parable of the wedding banquet ends with the king whose invitation has been turned down becoming enraged. ‘He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city’ (Mt 22:7). When Matthew 27:25 talks of ‘our children’, it is not referring to all Jews down the generations, but specifically to the subsequent generation from the crowd outside Pilate’s headquarters, which would experience the siege of Jerusalem. The prophetic rhetoric of responsibility—equivalent to seeing the Russian invasion as divine retribution for Ukrainian sin—raises many questions. Whether in 586 BCE or 70 CE, Jerusalem stood no chance against the armies of the regional superpower. And while a people blaming themselves is perhaps understandable as a way of regaining a sense of control, it is quite another thing when an outside third party says ‘yes, God was indeed punishing you’, which is how Christians have interpreted Jewish history.³² When Matthew places words on the lips of the people, it is not equivalent to the agonised

reflections of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, because it is not self-criticism, but lays the blame on a group from which the Gospel is distancing itself. And rather than being an affirmation of the ongoing covenant between God and Israel, it implies the ending of that covenant for those who do not transfer their allegiance to the Jesus-believing group.

Timothy Cargal characterises Matthew 27:25 as a ‘double entendre’:

One level of meaning that Matthew does intend to assert is that the Jewish nation must accept at least partial responsibility for the execution of Jesus. But at a second level of meaning, he also relates the words of the cry of ‘all the people’ to the possibility of forgiveness opened to the Jewish people and others by Jesus’ shed blood.³³

Thirdly, therefore, there are echoes of the covenant ceremony held on Sinai following the giving of the ten commandments (Ex 24:3–8). The people make a commitment—‘All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do’ (Ex 24:3)—and sacrificial blood is dashed over them. Moses declares ‘See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you’ (Ex 24:8).³⁴

And fourthly, Moses’ words are echoed by Jesus at the Last Supper: ‘this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mt 26:28). Matthew presents Jesus as the solution to the cessation of the temple’s sacrificial cult—from now on, Jesus will provide atonement of sin. Anders Runesson suggests that the tearing of the temple veil (27:51) signals that ‘God is leaving the temple, and Jesus’s sacrifice is acknowledged as taking the place of the sacrifices offered

³⁰ *Jewish Antiquities* 20.166.

³¹ See Goodman, *A History of Judaism*, 241–4; or Jonathan Klawans, ‘Josephus, the Rabbis, and Responses to Catastrophes Ancient and Modern’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 100: 2 (2010), 290–3.

³² Kathleen O’Connor, who approaches prophetic rhetoric through the lens of trauma and disaster studies, argues that ‘when Jeremiah places responsibility upon the people of Judah for the nation’s collapse, he helps them survive because he finds cause and effect in a world that has come unhinged’. Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 44.

³³ Timothy B. Cargal, “‘His Blood be Upon Us and Upon our Children’: A Matthean Double Entendre?”, *New Testament Studies*, 37: 1 (1991), 109–10.

³⁴ See Claudia Setzer, ‘Sinai, Covenant, and Innocent Blood Traditions in Matthew’s Blood Cry (Matt 27:25)’, in Lori Baron, Jill Hicks-Keeton, and Matthew Thiessen (eds), *The Ways That Often Parted: Essays in Honor of Joel Marcus* (Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 175–6.

there until the end of time and the final judgement'.³⁵ Catherine Hamilton writes,

Jesus' blood, as Matthew describes it, is poured out not only for the destruction of the covenant people and the temple but for their restoration. This restoration of Israel, however, happens in Jesus. . . . The authority that belonged to the temple resides now in him and in the community gathered around him. There, 'where two or three are gathered in my name,' is now the place of the presence of the Lord.³⁶

Matthew ties together the significance of Jesus' death and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem with the offer of forgiveness available in Christ, but at the expense of the Jewish people. Only those 'who join or relate positively to the movement Jesus has initiated, accepting his teaching of the law . . . will have a share of the salvation that results from this atoning sacrifice'.³⁷ Here we see at its starkest how Matthew draws creatively upon the Jewish biblical heritage whilst at the same time condemning those who understand that heritage differently. How might Christian sermons creatively draw upon Matthew without maligning the life and faith of the Jewish community?

Matthew's Gospel and Jewish-Christian Relations

Now: Reading Matthew Theologically

In *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations*, the Church of England Faith and Order Commission calls on lay and ordained teachers and preachers 'to correct untrue negative images of Judaism in their interpretation

and exposition of biblical texts'.³⁸ How do we do that whilst proclaiming the Christian Gospel? It's not that we must preach sermons with which Jews will agree. How we define and discuss the Incarnation or the Trinity is up to us. The challenge is to talk about Jews and Judaism with respect and nuance. After discussing the issues raised by Matthew's treatment of the Pharisees, and by Matthew 27:25, I will conclude with some general guidelines for avoiding anti-Judaism.

Anthony Saldarini writes that, although 'the rearrangement of the Jewish symbolic world' proposed by Matthew did not attract most Jews in the late 1st century,

Both then and today the Jewish and Christian symbolic universes overlap substantially, sharing language, metaphors, texts, affirmations about God and the world, and commitments to God and community. Paradoxically, this shared life world has intensified polemic and persecution. How would I say nasty things about Advaita-Vedanta Hindus? I don't know enough to attack them effectively. But in the case of Jews, our shared world places both love and hate close at hand.³⁹

Jesus shared in the Jewish world, and entered into typically robust discussions over accomplishing God's will. Matthew's Gospel also shares in the Jewish world, but defines its convictions in sharp opposition to non-Christ-believing Jews, and dates from a time when the Jesus movement is becoming increasingly gentile. Fast forward two thousand years, and Judaism and Christianity are separate religions, whose relationship is tainted by the long history of Christians persecuting Jews. Preachers must negotiate not only the gap between Jesus' time and the writing of Matthew's Gospel, but also

³⁵ Anders Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 302.

³⁶ Hamilton, "'His Blood Be upon Us': Innocent Blood and the Death of Jesus in Matthew", 100.

³⁷ Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew*, 305.

³⁸ Faith and Order Commission, *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* (London: Church House Publishing, 2019), 63.

³⁹ Saldarini, 'Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism', 178.

the far bigger gap between the first century context and ours. More than that, we are challenged by finding the misrepresentation and vilification of ‘opponents’ in texts held to be scripture.

As we read scripture, meaning does not jump off the page. The task of interpretation involves making choices, which have ethical consequences. We wrestle with the text in the light of biblical scholarship, Christian theological commitments, and the current concerns of our congregations. Might I suggest that it is important to ‘show our working’ to the congregation—not providing ready-made pat answers, but offering a model of engagement with scripture which tackles the difficulties. What Matthew was trying to prove in its own time, discussed above, need not dictate the lessons we take from it today. The Holy Spirit works to bring out new meanings in new contexts. Preachers are called to use their God-given imaginations to find creative ways of using biblical passages. This might involve reading against the grain—learning from the text what not to say or do, being prepared to challenge inappropriate language and to question the historicity of certain episodes. As Mary Boys writes, there are times to admit frankly ‘that biblical texts and their interpreters bear the limitations and wounds of human finitude’.⁴⁰

When it comes to the Pharisees, how do we navigate the historical uncertainty, along with nearly two millennia of Christian prejudice? That prejudice is enshrined in the English language, with the OED definition of ‘pharisaic’ including ‘legalistic, self-righteous, hypocritical’.⁴¹ Today’s Jews, by contrast, look back to the Pharisees as moderate, creative and humane religious leaders—saintly exemplars of Jewish spiritual attainment. Fortunately, Matthew 23 does not feature in the Sunday lectionary, and so we are not faced with the worst of Matthew’s vituperation. However, on the second Sunday of Advent we have John the Baptist calling

the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him for baptism a ‘brood of vipers’ (Mt 3:7). There is no equivalent in Mark; Luke has the insult, but addressed to ‘the crowds’ (Luke 3:7). The Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday does not mention Pharisees, but roundly condemns ‘hypocrites’, an epithet Matthew applies elsewhere to Pharisees (15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). And there are seven other occasions in lectionary year A when the reading involves Pharisees.⁴² In those readings, the Pharisees take a different point of view from Jesus and/or Matthew. Matthew proclaims Jesus as Messiah; for us, thanks to fourth-century formulations, Jesus is the incarnate Son of God (very God of very God, begotten not made), who in becoming human assumed the burdens of all humanity. Thus, when reading the Gospels, we view Jesus as a walking, talking holy of holies, encapsulating the presence of God. This makes it very difficult to treat both sides of his debates with Pharisees equally. As Son of God, Jesus must be right! Those who disagree with him are presumed to be thwarting the will of God. So, for example, despite most mainline Protestant churches now taking a pragmatic view of divorce, I’ve never heard a Christian preacher commending the Pharisees for asking Jesus the hard question about what to do when a marriage fails (Mt 19:3–9; Mk 10:2–9).

One helpful maxim about scripture is that rather than providing answers, it suggests the questions we ought to be exploring.⁴³ The question placed before us by Matthew’s treatment

⁴⁰ Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 219.

⁴¹ Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Pharisaic, adj.’: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/142219?redirectedFrom=pharisaic>.

⁴² Year A: Advent 2: John the Baptist’s message (Mt 3:1–12); Epiphany 5: Exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 5:13–20); Easter Eve: Guarding of the tomb (Mt 27:57–66); Proper 5: Pharisees question why Jesus eats with tax-collectors and sinners (Mt 9:9–13, 18–26); Proper 22: Parable of the vineyard (Mt 21:33–46); Proper 23: Parable of the marriage feast (Mt 22:1–14); Proper 24: Paying taxes (Mt 22:15–22); Proper 25: The greatest commandment and question about the Messiah (Mt 22:34–46). See also Year B: Proper 4: In the cornfields on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23 – 3:6 // Mt 12:1–14); Proper 17: Eating with defiled hands (Mk 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23 // Mt 15:1–20); Proper 22: A question about divorce (Mk 10:2–16 // Mt 19:3–15).

⁴³ My thanks to The Revd Cecil King.

of the Pharisees is how to speak of those with whom we disagree—highly relevant today, given the growing problem of toxic discourse, particularly online. People take entrenched positions, refusing to recognise the humanity of their ‘opponents’, resorting to abuse, and making no attempt to understand or sympathise with a different point of view. Can we demonstrate more creative ways of engaging with those who view life through different lenses?—such as retrospectively entering into respectful dialogue with Pharisees. Unlike the Gospel writers, can we see their choices as contained within the love and purposes of God? This requires more than setting the historical record straight. It involves giving theological weight to the Pharisees.

The Pharisees engage Jesus in discussion about such topics as how to obey the fourth commandment (Mt 12:2; Mark 2:24; Luke 6:2, 14:3), what to do when marriages break down (Mt 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–9), and what our attitude to money should be (Mt 22:17; Mark 12:14). These are not trivial issues, and there are no straightforward answers. If we strip away the biased way in which these debates are presented in the Gospels, and stop accusing the Pharisees of bad faith—of being more interested in trapping Jesus than in getting to the heart of the matter—then maybe we can take the Pharisaic habit of questioning, probing, and debating as a positive example. Maybe in arguing with Jesus, Pharisees are showing us the way—prompting us to be more combative with Scripture, to ask more questions, to probe the context then and now, and to open up debates about difficult but important issues. The Pharisees provided Jesus with opportunities to speak. Maybe God still needs us to take an active role in seeking out answers to life’s problems.

And so we come to Matthew 27:25, which both assigns guilt to the Jewish people and alludes to forgiveness available through the blood of Jesus. In *Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews*, Ronald Allen and Clark Williamson recommend that rather than resorting to the traditional interpretation of this verse as constituting a curse upon the Jewish people,

preachers ‘recall the blood of Jesus at the Last Supper, “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28)’. ‘Indeed’, they say, ‘that is the gospel’.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, it is not that straightforward. The violence done by Matthew 27:25 to Jews starts by putting into their mouths words that they would never say—then or now. The significance of Jesus’ death, and the symbolism of blood in doctrines of the atonement, is a Christian discussion. Most Jews do not buy into its assumptions. Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, in his Afterword to *God’s Unfailing Word*, talks of the ‘fundamental right to the integrity of Jewish self-definition’.⁴⁵ All the layers of Mt 27:25, whether ‘negative’ or ‘positive’, only make sense within a Christian framework. Repenting of all the violence done by Christians to Jews down the centuries, and renouncing triumphalism, involves recognising that Jewish and Christian frameworks, however intertwined they were in the first century, are now incompatible. We need to become aware of how our theological language can demean the motivations of those who live and pray within a different frame of reference. We now live in a context of interfaith dialogue. And true dialogue respects difference.

I prefer Boys’ advice to use Holy Week as a time to grieve—showing ‘a willingness to be attentive to disturbing truths about (our) own tradition’, and ‘letting ourselves be affected by the wounds of history that Christianity has inflicted’.⁴⁶ Boys provides plenty of examples of preaching about the cross which stoked up violence against Jews. Rather than blaming Jews for a crime they have not committed, we need to take responsibility for the way in which Matthew 27:25 has been used down the centuries. This involves informing our congregations

⁴⁴ Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 36.

⁴⁵ Faith and Order Commission, *God’s Unfailing Word*, 104.

⁴⁶ Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 215.

of the harm that has been done, and instead of trying to ‘rehabilitate’ the verse, letting it stand in judgement over us, for all the ways in which we have put words into other people’s mouths, denied their right to self-definition, and imposed our frameworks of meaning upon them. Christian triumphalism may have begun vis à vis Jews, but there are plenty of other peoples down Christian history who have been manipulated, shamed, and silenced. Holy Week is a time to remember and repent of ‘the ignorance, the misplaced zeal, the violence and the triumphalism’ that have scarred the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

We have focussed on the difficulties rather than the joys of Matthew’s Gospel! But one of the ways in which we are released into new life is by wrestling with the difficulties of scripture. Preachers are not bound by the methods of historical scholarship—we are empowered in the Spirit to use our imagination and creativity to seek new truths in old texts. Yet taking historical scholarship seriously is essential if we are not to repeat past mistakes, not to reinforce troubling and destructive stereotypes. As Boys says, ‘We desperately need Christians to feel obliged to honor the commandment “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour” when they speak about the religious other’.⁴⁸

Guidelines for Preachers to Avoid Anti-Judaism⁴⁹

- Meaning does not jump off the page. Our task is to interpret the text, which involves making choices, for which we bear responsibility. Sometimes critical distance is an ethical and spiritual imperative.

- Jesus was Jewish. He did not rebel against Judaism, but took part in quintessentially Jewish debates.
- Talk about Jewish people, then and now, as human beings—as varied and complex as all human beings; not about ‘the Jews’ as an abstract and mythological concept.
- Be wary of theological language that describes Jews in ways that they themselves would not recognise. Whereas Christians talk of Jews ‘rejecting’ Christ (and by implication God), Jews themselves speak of remaining faithful to the covenant made with God by their ancestors.
- The law/*torah* is God’s gracious provision for the flourishing of human life in community. ‘The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart’ (Ps 19:8).
- The Gospels are rhetorical narratives written at least 40 years after the events they describe. ‘They are retrospective reflections, not documentaries.’⁵⁰ Be open about this with your congregation. Acknowledge the ways in which each Gospel writer has shaped, and added to, the story. Probe their motivations, good and bad.
- Remember that the dialogue attributed to the characters in the story is refracted through a Christ-believing lens.
- Recognise polemic, and be prepared to challenge it. Use it to discuss how we today should treat those with whom we disagree.
- Acknowledge that language used by a tiny sect establishing its identity over and against its parent body may be unsuitable for today’s interfaith context, where Jews are a minority, especially given the tragic history of Jewish-Christian relations.
- Discuss Judaism with respect and nuance. Do not use it as a foil against which to make Jesus look good. Acknowledge

⁴⁷ Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 261.

⁴⁸ Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 262.

⁴⁹ For more guidance, re the Pharisees see Amy-Jill Levine, ‘Preaching and Teaching the Pharisees’, in Sievers and Levine (eds), *The Pharisees*, 403–27; re Holy Week see Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 221–7.

⁵⁰ Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 222.

instead that his values stemmed from his Jewish heritage.

- Highlight the difficulties in the text, rather than trying to smooth them over or rationalise them. Be honest with your congregation about the complexities and dilemmas.
- Crucifixion was part of the Roman imperial machinery of control. Jesus was one of many Jews to be crucified. Resist the Gospel rhetoric transferring the blame from Roman authorities to Jewish ones.
- Take time over Holy Week to repent of Christian anti-Judaism, and lament the history of Jewish–Christian relations. ‘Be willing to confront the shadow side of Christian history.’⁵¹

- There are no easy answers. Wrestle with each text in the light of biblical scholarship, Christian theological commitments, and the current concerns of your congregation.
- Avoiding anti-Judaism is not enough! Find ways to celebrate both Judaism and Christianity’s common heritage, and the richness of their difference and diversity.

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⁵¹ Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, 223.