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THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW
IN CURRENT STUDY

Studies in Memory of
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Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism

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As the 20th century ends, both thematic words in the title of this study, "reading" and "anti-Semitism" have become loaded, multivalent terms in biblical studies. When I began to read Matthew in Greek more than 35 years ago, I read it in the language of the New Testament, understanding the words and sentences as best I could. As I learned about 1st-century Judaism and Christianity, I read Matthew as the 1st-century audience would have done so. When I learned the Christian theological tradition, I read Matthew as it was received in the Christian community through its worship, teaching, prayer, and theology. Now in a period of critical theory, postmodernism, and deconstruction, I read the Gospel of Matthew against the grain in order to correct its defects and uncover the hidden potentialities of the text. Most cogently and starkly for me, in the ecumenical and post-Holocaust era, I read Matthew in my Christian, Catholic Church, but always with Jews by my side — occasionally physically present, but always in my mind and heart. So I necessarily read Matthew against the dominant supersessionist theological tradition and against the inner Jewish polemics of the text. As a Christian, I also read to affirm Matthew's teaching about God and Jesus Christ apart from the author's bitter disputes with his opponents in the Jewish community.

Reading Matthew without anti-Semitism seems easy at first because Matthew is not anti-Semitic in relation to the 19th-century term "anti-Semitism," which was based on now discredited racial theories. New Testa-

ment scholars usually refer to polemics as anti-Jewish rather than anti-Semitic. Fair enough, but in my interpretation Matthew is not even anti-Jewish, since I see him as a Jewish teacher in conflict with other Jewish teachers in the broadly diverse Jewish community of the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the 1st century.¹ That historical reconstruction hardly takes care of the problem, however. In our world Matthew is still used in an anti-Jewish way in Christian theology. The traditional interpretation of Matthew has contributed substantially to the anti-Semitism which led to the Holocaust. So let the terms "anti-Semitism" and "anti-Judaism" stand.²

How shall we read Matthew today? How shall we educate Christian clergy and teachers not to use the Pharisees as paradigms of hypocrisy or legalism since their listeners will hear slanders against Jews in our community today? How shall we affirm the salvific teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus without denigrating the Jewish community's faithful commitment to God's covenant and varied observance of God's law enshrined in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud?

The Gospel of Matthew in the Late First Century

Let us begin with a quick review of what Matthew's narrative says about Jews. Though many treatments of the Gospel of Matthew refer facetiously to Matthew's attacks on and rejection of Judaism or Jews, in fact the *leaders* of Israel are the only groups unequivocally attacked and rejected by Matthew.³ The Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, elders of the people, who appear frequently, and the Sadducees (16:1; 22:23) and Herodians (22:16) function in special ways within Matthew's narrative.⁴ The Pharisees and

1. See Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

2. The recent Vatican document, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," written by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, speciously tries to separate theological anti-Judaism from neo-pagan Nazi anti-Semitism (sections II and IV). Historians had uncovered the links between these traditions well before the commission tried to minimize them.

3. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, ch. 3. Hostility to the leadership within the Jewish community is common in Jewish literature. See J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 19-23, 141-47.

4. For the leaders as a corporate character in the plot, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Mat-*

scribes appear in both Galilee and Jerusalem and dog Jesus' footsteps everywhere. They argue with Jesus over sabbath observance, food laws, ritual purity, blasphemy, the signs of his ministry, and his authority.⁵ In Jerusalem the national leadership, the chief priests, elders, and (high-ranking) scribes seek to blunt Jesus' influence on the crowds. All are members of the ruling classes who oppose Jesus' popular authority with the people. Matthew views them as evil and hypocritical blind guides (23:13-36) who have misled the crowds, who are "sheep without a shepherd" (10:6). Matthew and his group in the late 1st century, like Jesus and his disciples, competed with Jewish community leaders for the hearts of the Jewish community. Matthew sought to tear down the effective authority of the community leaders and to exercise his own leadership in order to bring about the reforms which Jesus taught and to turn the Jewish community toward a recognition of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man sent by God to Israel and the Gentiles. Matthew failed to convince most of his fellow Jews, but his Gospel succeeded with Gentiles in the next generation beyond his wildest dream.

Despite Matthew's highly negative view of the Jewish leaders, their behavior, analyzed according to conventional social norms, was neither unusual nor evil. Though the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus hostile questions and bring negative charges against him, they never engage in extended vilification of Jesus (in contrast to Jesus' polemics against them in Matthew).⁶ Matthew raises questions and controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes which are normal and legitimate matters for discussion in 1st-century Judaism. They raise questions about proper sabbath observance (12:2, 10), divorce (19:3), association with sinners (9:11), blasphemy (9:3), handwashing (15:2), the signs of Jesus' authority (12:38;

Matthew as Story, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 17-23. See also his study, "The Developing Conflict Between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew's Gospel: A Literary-Critical Study," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 57-73. I have not seen Mark Allan Powell, *The Religious Leaders in Matthew: A Literary Critical Approach* (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1988).

5. For a complete account of their characterization in Matthew, their agendas, and the historicity of Matthew's account, see Anthony J. Sالدarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Matthew: A Literary Critical Approach* (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1988).

6. The restricting of the Pharisaic polemics against Jesus may be part of Matthew's narrative technique which emphasizes the charges against the Jewish leaders and minimizes any objections to Jesus.

16:1), and taxes (22:15-22). The one explicitly hostile charge against Jesus is a "witchcraft accusation," i.e., a claim that he is demon possessed (9:34; 12:24), to which Jesus provides a lengthy defense in ch. 12.⁷ All of these disputes over Jewish law and the disputants' status and authority in the community are normal conflicts found in any society. The laws and customs discussed by Jesus and the leaders are part of the standard fare found in other Jewish literature in late antiquity. The disagreements and conflicts are legitimate and normal. Similarly, the disputes over Jesus' authority in Jerusalem (chs. 21-22), involving the chief priests and elders, are to be expected when a popular teacher with no official standing gains a following in the capital city. Thus the common Christian interpretation of the Jewish leaders as corrupt monsters or willful rebels against God does not accord with history.

What is Matthew doing with his polemics? The author of Matthew seeks specifically to delegitimize the traditional, established leadership of the Jewish community and thus legitimate his own group and its authority.⁸ The origin, structure, and tone of the attack on the Pharisees and scribes strongly support the thesis that the author of Matthew is engaged in lively and serious controversy with his fellow late 1st-century Jews and that he is specifically attacking the leaders of the Jewish community through Jesus' polemic against the scribes and Pharisees.⁹ Clearly the author of Matthew is dissatisfied with the Jewish community in his city or

7. Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1988), chs. 1-2, esp. ch. 1, analyze the traditional nature of this type of attack in detail and its desired effects. For the legal disputes, see Sالدarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, ch. 6.

8. A similar approach to these materials has been taken by Benedict T. Viviano, "Social World and Community Leadership: The Case of Matthew 23:1-12, 34," *JSNT* 39 (1990): 3-21.

9. In reality scribes were found at every level of society and did not form a cohesive group. Some of them were surely officials and teachers and thus had contact and conflict with Jesus. The Pharisees had a program for reform of Jewish society and had won influence and sometimes power in society since the Hasmonean period. Neither group was in control of society; the Roman government, the chief priests and families in Jerusalem, and Herod Antipas in Galilee had that role. The author of Matthew describes the scribes and Pharisees as lower level officials, i.e., as just the type of Jewish leader who would have interacted with Jesus and the small, new Christian-Jewish group. Scribes, Pharisees, and the leaders of the Jewish community in Matthew's day had recognized power and status in the community and sought to preserve it by receiving public honor and titles and by controlling the interpretation of community custom and justice. See Sالدarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*.

area. As is true in other parts of the Gospel, he does not deny the fundamental legitimacy of Israel, its law, and its community structures. To do so would be to destroy the basis for his own group which was so closely tied to Israel. Rather, he attacks the legitimacy of the leaders' rule over the Jewish community by attacking their personal integrity and the accuracy of their interpretation of Jewish law and the divine will.

Replacement Theology and Salvation History

Throughout Christian history interpreters have imposed upon the Gospel of Matthew a variety of theological schemes of salvation history unraveled by the text. These supposed expressions of God's plan for humanity and God's Church have reduced the Jewish community and its covenant with God to irrelevance by claiming that the new covenant superseded the old or that the Church replaced Israel as a true or new Israel. These theories, from the mid-2nd century on, have done incalculable harm to the Jewish community and caused the deaths of many Jews. They have also biased the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew. The parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard (21:33-46) is perhaps the most egregious and enduring case of eisegesis. The tenants refuse to pay their rent to the owner, abusing agents sent to collect, and eventually killing the owner's son. According to the standard interpretation, the tenants represent Israel refusing to obey God and killing God's son Jesus. As a result "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation (*ethnos*) producing the fruits of it" (21:43). Most commentators understand this *ethnos* as the gentile Church replacing Israel.

Numerous problems beset this interpretation and the supersessionist replacement theology which motivates it. First, the addressees of the parable are unclear. Those who respond to Jesus in 21:41 are identified only as "they"; in the Gospel context the closest antecedent is the chief priests and elders of the people in v. 23. In the narrative following the parable, the chief priests and Pharisees realize that Jesus is speaking about them (21:45). So the parable addresses and speaks about the leaders of the Jewish community. Consequently, the group from whom the kingdom is taken away is not Israel, but the leaders of Israel who, in Matthew's view, have failed in their responsibilities to God by opposing Jesus. Second, the symbolic use of the vineyard in the Gospel parable clearly derives from the He-

brew Bible. However, the parallel is less with the famous vineyard parable in Isa. 5:1-5 than with Isa. 3:13-15. In Isa. 5 the vineyard, which symbolizes Israel, fails to produce good fruit and is uprooted. However, in Matthew the vineyard is faultlessly fruitful and only its tenants are unsatisfactory. In contrast, both Matthew and Isa. 3 blame the community leaders for misappropriation of the vineyard. Isaiah says:

The Lord rises to argue his case;
he stands to judge the peoples.
The Lord enters into judgment
with the elders and princes of his people:
It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?
says the Lord God of hosts.

(Isa. 3:13-15)

The leaders do not respond to and obey God, but rather oppress and mislead the people. Thus the judgment in Isa. 3 as in Matthew's parable rests upon the leaders of Israel who oppose the teachings of Isaiah and Matthew.

What of the *ethnos*, the so-called "nation"? First, contrary to many careless formulations, the text does not refer to a *new* nation or *new*, *true* Israel (a 2nd-century Christian category). Nor does the singular form refer to "the nations," i.e., the Gentiles or non-Jews, as it does in the Greek translation of the Bible. The word *ethnos* has a variety of meanings in Greek. In Homer *ethnos* may mean a number of people living together, a (often military) company or body of men, and a band of comrades. It is also used of a large number of people (an *ethnos* of people) and of an ethnic group or tribe with its own proper name. After Homer *ethnos* acquired the common meanings "people" and "nation," referring to a group of people with cultural, linguistic, geographical, or political unity.¹⁰ In the Roman period the Latin word *provincia* ("province") was translated into Greek as *ethnos*; it referred to a somewhat coherent body of people, at least

10. The subdivision of an *ethnos* was often designated a *genos*, i.e., a clan (Lat. *gens*). In the Aphrodisias reliefs of the various *ethne* conquered by the Romans, each relief is identified by an inscription using the word *ethnos*, e.g., *ethnos Ioudaion*. See R. R. Smith, "Simulacra Gentium: The *Ethne* from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *JRS* 78 (1988): 50-77.

bureaucratically speaking. The Greeks had ethnocentric usages for the plural *ethne* as a designation for non-Greek nations or peoples and for rural folk in contrast to city people.

More germane to its use in Matthew, *ethnos* is also used in the Hellenistic-Roman period to refer to a variety of specialized groups such as guilds and trade associations.¹¹ A social class of people can be referred to as an *ethnos*, as can a caste or other political subdivision. For example, Plato used *ethne* for the various groups who have different functions and stations in his ideal city (*Republic* 421c). Finally, orders of priests can be referred to as holy *ethne*.

This variety of Greek usage makes it far from inevitable that the statement, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to an *ethnei* [dative case] producing the fruits of it" (21:43), refers to a new nation of Gentiles to replace the old, rejected nation, Israel.¹² *Ethnos* should not be translated in 21:43 as "nation" because the followers of Jesus were not a nation or ethnic group. The *ethnos* which produces fruit certainly refers to a group which believes in Jesus, but what group and what kind of group? The author of Matthew does not say that these believers-in-Jesus are a new or true Israel, nor a replacement for Israel. Commentators who claim that Matthew implies this are reading in 2nd-century Christian theology. Rather, the author of Matthew almost certainly refers to his own group of Jews who follow Jesus as the *ethnos* which produces the fruit of

11. H. G. Liddell-Robert Scott-H. S. Jones-Roderick Mackenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), 682a, citing the Ptolemy papyrus of the 3rd century B.C.E. For the classic study of these associations, see Franz Poland, *Geschichte der griechischen Vereinswesen* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909), who traces a wide variety of terms and types of association. The best recent collection of essays on this topic is John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996).

12. Douglas R. A. Hare, "The Rejection of the Jews in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts," in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan Davies (New York: Paulist, 1979), 27-47, takes this verse as a rejection of "Israel according to the flesh" (38-39). Note his use of Pauline language (1 Cor. 10:18), which is not appropriate to Matthew's categories. Hare also holds (153) that the kingdom of God is being transferred to another people (*ethnos*), not to a new or true Israel. Wolfgang Trilling earlier had argued that Matthew's community saw itself as a true Israel, but still associated with unfaithful Israel (*Die wahre Israel: Studien zur Theologie des Matthäusevangeliums*, 3rd ed. SAKT 10 [Munich: Kosel, 1964], 95, 224, passim). See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* (Lewisiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988), 206-11, for a discussion of the passage and references to other authors.

the kingdom.¹³ He uses the term *ethnos* of his own group with the less usual, but still ordinary, meaning of a voluntary organization or small social group. The Matthean *ethnos* is a sub-group within the larger Jewish community which seeks to lead the members of the Jewish community to Jesus. Thus the narrative criticizes the Jewish leadership for rejecting God's message, brought by his accredited messenger, Jesus. The parable assumes that the vineyard (Israel), though it has been badly managed, can be given to other tenants (leaders) who will make it bear fruit (21:41). Thus the *ethnos* bearing (lit., "making") fruit (21:43) is a new group of tenants who will lead Israel and give the owner, God, his share of the fruits at the appropriate time (v. 41). Those who are rejected, the previous leaders, are a group who do not act appropriately by producing fruit for the owner.¹⁴ The vineyard, Israel, remains the same; sub-groups of leaders within Israel are blamed or praised.¹⁵ The *ethnos* of leaders which can lead Israel well is, of course, Matthew and his community of followers of Jesus.

Matthean Polemics

The preceding analysis of just one parable shows that careful attention to both the text and the world behind the text can dispel traditional but inaccurate

13. See Graham N. Stanton, "The Gospel of Matthew and Judaism," *BJRL* 66 (1984): 269, for the suggestion that the stone which is rejected (21:42) refers to the rejection of the Matthean group by the leaders of the Jewish community.

14. In 1 Macc. 1:29-40 the Mithradates sent by Antiochus IV plundered Jerusalem and built the Akra (a citadel). In it he stationed a "sinful *ethnos*, lawless (*paranomos*) men" (1:34) who kept Jerusalem subjugated. This *ethnos* is a group of people left in charge of Seleucid interests. They are judged by the author of 1 Maccabees to be an evil leadership group, much like the group condemned in Matt. 21. Commentators identify this "sinful *ethnos* (variously translated as "breed, race, people") as Jews loyal to the Seleucids. This interpretation also fits biblical usage. See Jonathan A. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*. AB 41 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 123-24, 219-20.

15. Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, ed. W. Schnauh, 2nd ed. KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), 315, argues that *ethnos* refers to a portion of the historical people Israel. He suggests that it refers to a community living among the Jewish people and knowing itself as the true eschatological Israel. For a similar usage of *ethnos*, see Acts 21. Paul brings aims to the Jewish community of believers-in-Jesus and offers sacrifices at the temple. Defending his actions after his arrest, he says that he was bringing aims and sacrificial gifts to his *ethnos* in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17). His *ethnos* is both the whole Judean Jewish community and a subgroup of those Jews, the followers of Jesus.

rate anti-Jewish interpretations of Matthew and, more importantly, expose the theological paradigms we modern commentators bring to the text. However, such laborious analyses still do not explain the presence of such virulent attacks against Matthew's opponents in the Gospel nor what to do with them. Even granting that the author of Matthew attacks only the Jewish leaders, his polemics against his opponents hardly accord with his instruction to love your enemies (5:44). He conforms, rather, to the norms of Second Temple polemics among Jewish sects and the Greco-Roman practices of rhetorical vituperation and blame against philosophical and political opponents.¹⁶ Further, polemical language fills the Hebrew Bible and serves as a model for later Jewish and Christian writing. From the prophetic attacks on idolaters, to the postexilic struggles between competing Jewish groups, on to the civil strife of the Maccabean period, and the claims and counterclaims of Jewish sects during the Roman period, both inner Jewish arguments and attacks on outsiders abound. Divisions among competing groups of priests seeking to guide the Jewish community in Judea appear from the 5th century on. They disagreed about how the sacrifices were to be done, what calendar was to be followed, how priestly purity was to be maintained, how sabbath was to be observed, what relationships were to be maintained with the nations, and a host of other practical and theoretical matters. In such a political, social, religious context groups which passionately believed in their outlooks, positions, and ways of life created modes of speech to articulate their experience, argued for their own views, and attacked their opponents as wrong-headed and evil. The priests and people who were out of power protested against political and economic oppression of the powerless and the poor. With a sectarian outlook which proclaimed their own justice and their opponents' wickedness, such groups urged faithfulness until God would intervene apocalyptically to reward the good and destroy the evil. This faithful minority, as always, was looked upon as deviant by the majority who controlled society. Apocalyptic literature is especially polemical against the powerful on behalf of groups who are weak. Divine intervention, final judgment, and punishment of the evil derives from these concerns. The threat of Hellenization, the Maccabean uprising, Hasmonean civil conflict, unrest during Herod's reign, and finally the two wars against Rome encouraged polemics against those inside and outside Israel.

16. See Luke T. Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *JBL* 108 (1989): 419-41.

The Qumran *peshtarim*, commentaries on scripture, from the 1st century B.C.E. and C.E. exemplify this genre. They reflect a later generation's perception of the Qumran group's history and its evaluation of its early struggles and enemies. A passage from the Habakkuk *pesher* is typical:

"For the violence to Lebanon will cover you and the assault of beasts will destroy you on account of human bloodshed and violence (done to) the land, the town and all who inhabit it;" (Hab. 2:17)

The interpretation of the passage concerns the *Wicked Priest* to pay him his due inasmuch as he dealt wickedly with the poor ones;

• for "Lebanon" is the council of the community, and
• the "beasts" are the simple ones of Judah, those who observe the Law

• [It is the Wicked Priest] whom God will sentence to complete destruction because he plotted to destroy completely the poor ones. And when it says "on account of the bloodshed of the town and violence (done to) the land" (Hab. 2:17b)

the interpretation of it:

• the "town" is Jerusalem, where the *Wicked Priest* committed abominable deeds and defiled God's sanctuary.

• And "violence (done to) the land" (refers to) the cities of Judah, where he stole the wealth of the poor ones.

(1QpHab 11:17-12:10)

All the conflicting players in this interpretation are from governing and priestly classes in Jerusalem and the people in Judean villages. All accept the same Bible from the same God and profess to follow the same commandments and way of life. But they differ to the death, as do many groups today.

In Greco-Roman literature too, epideictic rhetoric or the encomium honors people with praises for their powers, status, virtue, and accomplishments. The same genre turned on its head shames and blames others with crass and ruthless vituperation for their misdeeds and failures as well as their low status and weakness. Though Matthew reverses Greco-Roman and Jewish values by praising Jesus "dishonorable" death and valuing his lowly disciples, he does so using the polemical genres of Greek and Jewish literature.¹⁷ Matthew lays on the slander and vilification as well as any

17. Sean Freyne, "Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self: Matthew's and John's

other author in antiquity. His unjust characterization of the Pharisees as hypocrites (ch. 23) has become, with the help of Christian tradition, a normative usage in the English dictionary.

So maybe polemics are all right. Matthew's all-out attacks did meet the cultural expectations of his Greek-speaking Jewish audience for a vigorous attack on the practices and outlooks of their opponents in the Jewish community. Regrettably, as admirable as much of Matthew's teaching has been and is for the Christian Church, we must part company with him here. Even if his polemics were within in the 1st-century Jewish community and thus not anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish, inner-cultural polemics can kill. Even though polemics against enemies are as old as writing, even though everyone does it, even though polemical tirades have a long and "respectable" history and seem to be a permanent aspect of human society and religion, we cannot accept these conflicts as normal any more than we can accept the Holocaust as inevitable. In antiquity Jew killed Jew in the East and in the West. In the past few years in Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, Christian has killed Christian. Words easily turn into deeds. Especially in a world of mass media, rhetorical demonization of others easily turns speakers and audiences into beasts capable of ruthless violence and cruelty.

But why does Matthew engage so extensively in attacks on his opponents, the leaders of the Jewish community? In terms of the sociology of knowledge, as synthesized and developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann,¹⁸ society is created and experienced as an objective reality through processes of institutionalization. The objective and necessary nature of these institutions is justified, explained, and passed on to new generations by the processes of legitimation.¹⁹ The meanings attached to disparate social institutions are integrated into a symbolic universe which is a coherent and comprehensive explanation for all of life in a given society. "Legitimation" explains the institutional order by ascribing cognitive va-

Anti-Jewish Polemic in Focus," in "To See Ourselves as Others See Us": *Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest Frerichs (Chico: Scholars, 1985), 117-43.

18. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 92-128.

19. Berger and Luckmann, 61-62, 93. Berger and Luckmann effectively describe the social processes of legitimation at a very abstract level. The neo-Kantian presuppositions of their epistemology are not being utilized or espoused here.

lidity to its objectivated meanings. Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives."²⁰ Note that knowledge and values are inextricably linked. First we become convinced of the way things are, and then we affirm certain values appropriate to reality as we perceive it.

When two groups conflict with one another, usually their irreconcilable symbolic universes and institutional structures come into conflict. When a large group is faced with a dissident small group (a sect or heresy in the religious sphere), it responds by rearranging its legitimations in order to reaffirm its symbolic universe and institutions.²¹ It also attacks the other group by a process called nibilation and rejects it by assigning it a lower ontological status. The established group may also try to explain away the dissident group through apologetics which account for its deviance through the cognitive terms of the larger group's symbolic universe and by ascribing the disagreement to the misunderstandings and bad faith of the smaller group.

Matthew and his small deviant group of Jews who follow Jesus seek to break up the symbolic universe of their opponents and the theories which legitimate their various institutions. In short, Matthew seeks to "delegitimize" his opponents.²² He is not denying the whole Jewish symbolic universe and system and replacing it with Christianity, as many hold. Rather, the author of Matthew proposes from within the Jewish symbolic world an alternative understanding and actualization of life as a faithful response to God. He seeks to delegitimize his opponents' interpretation of Judaism.²³ Consequently he reduces the plausibility of his opponents' symbolic universe by creating contradictions in it as well as conflicts in values, a different symbolic center (Jesus), and a modified understanding of God's will (the kingdom of heaven). In addition, he de-emphasizes certain sectarian practices and values (purity and tithes) and stresses alternative practices and values. Finally, just as the larger body accounts for the deviance of the smaller body by attributing to it error and bad faith, Matthew delegitimizes the Jewish leaders and their interpretation of the Jewish symbolic universe and institutions by accusing them (the leaders, not the

20. Berger and Luckmann, 86.

21. Berger and Luckmann, 106-9.

22. Berger and Luckmann, 94-95.

23. For a more extended treatment of Matt. 23, see Anthony J. Saldarini, "Delegitimation of Leaders in Matthew 23," *CBQ* 54 (1992): 659-80.

people whom he hopes to attract) of bad faith, misunderstanding of scripture, and malfeasance in their duties.

The rearrangement of the Jewish symbolic world according to the teachings of Jesus which was proposed by Matthew did not attract the majority of Jews in the late 1st century. Rather, it led in the next generation to further changes and separation of the Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus from the Jewish community. Yet 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 polemics 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.

The intensity of conflict between related groups and the delegitimation of the Jewish leaders reach a climax in Matthew's seven "woes" or curses in ch. 23. The author of Matthew begins by acknowledging the authority of the scribes and Pharisees and then undercutting it with attacks on their titles, laws, and intentions and by proposing an alternative model of community leadership.²⁴ His introductory acknowledgment of the authority of the scribes and Pharisees is strikingly contradictory to the argument of the chapter and has long troubled New Testament commentators: "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but do not practice"²⁵ (23:2-3).²⁵ Even if this saying is a pre-Matthean, Jewish-Christian tradition,²⁶ its use by Matthew must be explained. In citing this affirmation of the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, Matthew admits either the official positions of his opponents in the Jewish community or their

24. The attack on the scribes and Pharisees is made by Jesus in Jerusalem as a climax to his attack on the Jerusalem authorities in chs. 21-22. The narrative place, Jerusalem, and the time of the attack, just before Jesus' arrest, indicate that Matthew is opposing the highest Jewish authorities in their entirety.

25. Note that at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus teaches authoritatively, he sits.

26. Commentators typically assign these verses to the Jewish-Christian stratum of tradition and then depict Matthew as preserving but disagreeing with them. In these types of interpretations commentators have difficulty showing why Matthew would preserve them and what use he makes of them. See Joachim Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, HTKNT (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 2:271-72, for sharply differing views on the tradition history of 23:1-12.

influence on those in power. The emerging coalitions seeking power after the destruction of the temple in 70 c.e. contained elements of the Second Temple Pharisaic and scribal groups. It seems that these groups had attained some power or important influence in Matthew's area. Matthew, facing with this kind of competition, and especially with a wholesale rejection of Jesus and his interpretation of scripture and law, attacks the rival leaders and those who have followed them. In the same sentence in which he acknowledges their de facto power, he attacks their conduct of office. He levels against them the usual charge of hypocrisy (23:4-7) and introduces the discussion of a new model of leadership (vv. 8-12), which he supports with an attack on the traditional, institutional forms of Jewish leadership and its interpretation of community norms. He attacks the scribes and Pharisees for failing to practice Judaism sincerely, to guide others to live Judaism correctly, to interpret the Bible adequately, and to attend to the major principles of the law and Jewish way of life. The scribes and Pharisees are used as negative examples for how a community leader should act (23:4-7) and contrasted with proper community leaders who should not use titles such as "rabbi" and "master" but should rather be notable for their lowliness (vv. 8-12).²⁷

Matthew uses the scribes and Pharisees as negative examples to define true leadership. He also denounces them in order to legitimate the authority of his new group against the more established authorities in the Jewish community. The powers and status of the established authorities are graphically portrayed (23:4-7): they impose burdens, wear special insignia, claim privileged positions, and seek public honor. Against this common Near Eastern social hierarchy, Matthew forbids the use of titles and the exercise of highly authoritative roles (23:8-12). The followers of Jesus must avoid honorific titles because Jesus is the one leader and all his followers are brethren who are to be "servants" to one another. This resistance to hierarchically structured roles plus the emphasis on equality is typical of sects and reform movements.²⁸ All the members have begun a new life together and are to participate fully and equally in the emerging

27. David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23*, NovTSup 52 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 53-54.

28. Classically, sects have been contrasted with Church, e.g., by Ernst Troeltsch. For a modern, broad typology of sects and their characteristics, see Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest Among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), Introduction and chs. 1-2.

community. The Matthean group, which is being rejected by a broad constituency in the Jewish community, is being forced into the role of a sect which defines itself by differing from the traditional mode of community organization. Usually, the elders of established families and officials appointed by the government oversaw the application of community laws and customs, adjudicated disputes, and maintained public order. The members of Matthew's community have been cut off from their network of family and friends and begun a new, nontraditional association. Matthew's attack on the established authorities intends to weaken their legitimacy and to establish the authority of his group and its claim to be the genuine leaders of Judaism.

Matthew's attack on his opponents in ch. 23 is part of an ongoing confrontation throughout the Gospel. Here and in many other polemical passages Matthew exhibits the characteristics of a sectarian group protecting itself from the dominant social institution and from rival sects. Matthew attacks the community norms proposed by rival leaders, including several cited in ch. 23, and modifies many points of law and practice to conform to the teachings of Jesus and the way of life which derives from his teaching. Like any good sectarian leader, the author of Matthew claims to have the only legitimate interpretation of the practice of many Jewish customs, all of which he interprets in relationship to Jesus.

Matthew's attack on the Jewish community leadership is contained in seven woe oracles,²⁹ in which Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees (23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29).³⁰ His opening formula, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (used six times), drives home the contrast between inner attitudes and outward behavior, a contrast found also in the

29. Woe oracles are found frequently in prophetic literature, either individually (Amos 5:18; 6:1; Isa. 1:4; 3:11; 10:5) or in series (5:8-24). The woe is usually followed by a participle describing the criticized action or by a noun giving a negative characterization of the person. Appended to the woe may be a variety of forms, such as rhetorical questions, threats, etc. A woe oracle is a mild form of curse which functions as a public denunciation. Woes may have been adapted from wisdom literature. Lief E. Vaage relates the woes to Greek rhetorical contrasts between appearances and reality and shows how this type of critique of human blindness and untempered zeal has been transformed into a polemic which serves to justify Matthew's group. "The Woes in Q (and Matthew and Luke): Deciphering the Rhetoric of Criticism," *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers*, SBLASP 27 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 603, 605.

30. The "woe" in 23:14 is rejected by most textual critics. It is missing from many manuscripts, interrupts the topical arrangement of the woes, and increases the number of woes from seven to eight.

Sermon on the Mount.³¹ The central charge that the Jewish leaders are insincere and of ill will and the image of blindness, repeated five times, underscores their leadership authority (see also 15:14).³² The woe oracles are not a random selection of complaints, but a structured series of charges aimed at key aspects of the leadership roles exercised in the Jewish community. The first two woes concern rival interpretations of community identity. According to Matthew, the Jewish leaders prevent their members from following Jesus' teachings and attract Gentiles to their way of life in the Jewish community, thus frustrating the major goal of Matthew's community, teaching all nations to observe Jesus' commands (28:20). Matthew charges that his rivals' teachings frustrate God's purpose embodied in Jesus' message of the kingdom of heaven. The next three woes, concerned with oaths, tithes, and purity, attack prevailing interpretations of the law, economy, and customs which hold the Jewish community together and

31. The Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7) and the woes against the scribes and Pharisees are respectively the first and last lengthy public teachings of Jesus. For the correlation of eschatological blessings and curses, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1:432-33. In both Jesus is said to teach both the crowds and disciples (5:1; 23:1). The Beatitudes, like the woes, stress the inner attitudes of the group and the patterns of its behavior. Its members should be merciful, meek, pure of heart, and peacemakers; they mourn and seek justice; they know suffering for they are poor in spirit and persecuted (the beginning and end of the series). The sense one has of this group is that it is neither powerful nor established. It seeks to make the best of its minority, deviant status. The reward offered both at the beginning and end of the Beatitudes (5:3, 10) to those who adhere to this code is the kingdom of heaven, i.e., life under the rule of God rather than the unreliable Jewish authorities excoriated in chs. 6, 23, and elsewhere in the Gospel. They will see God, possess the land, and enjoy justice, mercy, peace, and comfort. This is in direct contradiction to the society promoted by the scribes and Pharisees which, according to Matthew's tendentious view, neglects justice and mercy (23:23), places burdens on people (v. 4), keeps cups and dishes pure, but not hearts (v. 25), appears just, but is hypocritical (v. 28), and kills God's messengers (vv. 30-31) rather than creating peace and harmony. Thus Matthew brackets his account of Jesus' deeds and teaching with a vision of a new society (chs. 5-7) and an attack on an alternate program (ch. 23). It should be noted that both have succeeded quite well for almost 2000 years.

32. The term "hypocrite" originally referred to a mask used in the theater. It then became used for insincerity and pretense. It also is used of the misplaced and mistaken zeal of the scribes and Pharisees; see Garland, 96-116. This kind of an attack on the hypocrisy of Jewish leaders is found in Pss. Sol. 4. Hypocrisy makes it difficult to know the actual commitment of a person to a culture, religion, or system and so it inhibits strong relationships among people. Hence it is despised. See Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred: A Sketch for a New Social-Scientific Theory of Religion* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 216-17.

give it identity and boundaries. Matthew suggests an alternative understanding and practice of Jewish law. Finally, the last two woes oracles bring to a climax the attack against the personal ethics and intentions of the leaders with the charges of lawlessness and murder.

Blunting Matthew's Polemics

How then shall we read Matthew in this post-Holocaust world? Every line and every word should be read and explained so that, if a Jewish friend were sitting next to you in church or a lecture, you would not feel embarrassed or need to apologize. Matthean anti-Jewish texts have been deadly and still retain their potential for harm. They misrepresent Jewish leaders and the 1st-century Jewish commitment to God. The real cure for traditional Christian anti-Semitic interpretations of Matthew is to know one another and each other's traditions concretely, in all their particularities and peculiarities. Despite living side by side for centuries, Jews and Christians do not know one another very well. If we speak of "them" or "Jews" or "Judaism" with no sense of the diversity in Jewish communities and nuances in their traditions, then we paint all Jews with a broad brush and no individual detail. If we can speak with sophistication, dispute stereotypes, debate things we "always knew" about others, then we can change, slowly, communally, institutionally, fundamentally, deeply, spiritually.

In recognition of the pastoral nature of this conference, let me give six concrete rules for preaching and teaching about Judaism and about Jews.

1. Never talk about Jews and Judaism as a whole. Distinguish which Jews, which type of Judaism. According to 28:15, the story that Jesus' body was stolen by his disciples is still told among the Jews "to this day." Which Jews? Jews who are misled by false leaders? Some Judeans?
2. Never talk about the Pharisees or Sadducees or high priests or any other Jewish group without a thorough and fair historical understanding of the origins, goals, outlooks, behavior, accomplishments, and failures of each group.
3. Interpret authoritative statements concretely within the narrative, not according to some predetermined theological scheme. The

crowds/people in Matthew cry, "His blood be upon us and our children" (27:25). Which people, which crowds? Not the whole Jewish people. "People" in Matthew is not a technical theological term weighted with salvation history, but a concrete group of people in the early 1st century.

4. Read loaded, "anti-Jewish" texts briefly and carefully and preach about them extensively. Matt. 23 has seven powerful curses against the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. Matthew has been so successful that in English "pharisaic" means "hypocritical." Read just two of the curses, to show the pattern involved. Then explain this polemical attack in great detail and correct it by an empathetic and fair assessment of the Pharisees. In general, we do not read boring genealogies, nor shocking, violent scenes, nor (for Christians) the laws of sacrifice from the pulpit. We should accord the same treatment to polemically dangerous, obnoxious, or (for Christians today) meaningless anti-Jewish texts. Polemical texts have killed people. All texts read have an effect. All texts do things; they are, in the argot of literary criticism, performative. If they function in an anti-social way in our society, they contradict the purposes of the Bible and should not be read.
5. Change the translations of generic words for Jews into more specific terms. Not "Jews," but Jewish leaders, or Judeans, or a specific crowd or group within Judaism. Not "Jews" who can easily and unconsciously be identified with Jews today, but the actual narrative characters in the Bible.
6. Avoid artificial salvation history schemes which proclaim the end of Judaism as a viable, legitimate religion. Judaism in all its lively and creative forms is still a living religion with more than 1900 years of history since Jesus. Affirm that and the mystery of Israel's relation with God as it is found in Rom. 9-11.³³

One final theological note. During the last 35 years many Christian churches have affirmed the authenticity, legitimacy, and integrity of the Jewish community as the people of God. After 19 centuries of denial, such admissions are a relief. However, Christian theology has not caught up with its social and pastoral practice. The standard model of Christian salvation — that God created humans, humans sinned, God called Israel

33. See Anthony J. Saldarini, "Demonization and Polemics," *JES* 34 (1997): 339-40.

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through whom God sent Jesus his Son, and Jesus saves all human beings, Jew and Gentile, through his death and resurrection — tends to nullify any continuing role for Israel in God's world and implicitly supports some kind of Christian supersessionist, replacement theology. In popular theology, preaching, and religious education simplistic schemes of how God saves humans in history exalt the Christian Church and subordinate all other religions, Judaism included. The complexity of God's world and the profundity of God's will to save all humans, including the four and a half billion who are not members of the Christian Church and will not become so in our lifetimes, require a new Christian theology of how God works through Jesus Christ and his Church in the world today.

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