



## Matthew's Gospel and Judaism

| Lee, Dorothy A.

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### **Matthew's Gospel and Judaism**

**By Dorothy A. Lee**

#### **Introduction**

The issue of Matthew's Gospel and Judaism is a complex one, and the picture that emerges is ambiguous and not easy to interpret. In the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue, the basic question is whether or not Matthew's Gospel is itself antisemitic. Whether or not such antisemitism exists in the text of the Gospel, it is undeniable that Matthew has been interpreted, in many Christian quarters, in an antisemitic way. Sometimes such interpretations have been unconscious; as when Christians

assume that "Pharisee" is synonymous with self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

I am presupposing in the discussion that follows a number of tenets of modern biblical study: that Matthew most likely, is the second, rather than the first Gospel; that he was dependent on Mark's Gospel and a collection of Sayings of Jesus, shared also by Luke; that Matthew carefully edited these sources to address his own community; that his Gospel is not a biography of Jesus' life, but rather a narrative and theological interpretation, written from the perspective of Easter; and that the Gospel was written somewhere between 80 and 90 C.E., possibly in Antioch in Syria, by an unknown author.

### **Pro-Jewish Features of Matthew's Gospel**

In raising awareness of the problems of Christian

antisemitism, we need to be wary of the danger of rushing too quickly to the anti-Jewish features of the biblical text. Matthew's Gospel, like other texts in the New Testament, is larger and more ambivalent than we might imagine. And so we begin our study of Matthew's Gospel and Judaism by setting out the pro-Jewish elements of the Gospel: those aspects that present the Jewish people and Judaism in a positive and favourable light. There are at least five features of the Gospel which present Jews and Judaism in these terms.

First, and most obviously, the major characters, the heroes, of the Gospel are Jews. The most important of these is Jesus, but the same is true for the twelve apostles, particularly Peter who plays an important role in Matthew's story. The crowds are Jews; the other disciples, wider than just the twelve, are also

Jews, including the Galilean women disciples. In other words, almost all the positive characters, with one or two notable exceptions, are Jewish people, who never deny their Jewishness; indeed it is part of their identity for Matthew.

Secondly, Matthew's theology is grounded in his interpretation of the Old Testament. These are the Scriptures of his community, and a major source of revelation. Matthew quotes regularly from the Old Testament. In the birth narratives there are five quotations, mostly from the prophetic writings, with which Matthew punctuates his narrative of Jesus' birth and infancy (Matt 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23). His interpretative principle is one of promise and fulfillment: that which is promised in the Scriptures is fulfilled in the advent of Jesus of Nazareth. But behind this view is the belief that the Old Testament is the source-book for Christian

pedagogy; it is the lens by which Matthew develops his teaching of Jesus and the Church.

Thirdly, we find a strong focus on the concept of "Israel" in Matthew's Gospel. For example, after a summary statement of Jesus' healings, the narrator tells us that the crowds "praised the God of Israel" (Matt. 15:31). For Matthew, God is fundamentally the God of Israel. Similarly, in the great mission discourse, Jesus and the apostles' mission is directed to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; the disciples are not to enter into Gentile or Samaritan territory but to go only to Israel (Matt 10:5-6). Matthew's Jesus uses the same phrase in response to the Canaanite woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). Only in Matthew's Gospel do we find such a focus on the mission to Israel (cf. John 4:1-42, 12:20-26).

But what about the

Gentiles who are also important in Matthew's understanding of mission (Matt 28:16-20)? Certainly there is an openness to Gentiles in Matthew's community, but we ought not to assume Matthew shares a Pauline perspective on Gentile Christians. The priority of mission for Matthew — the ordering of divine salvation — begins foundationally with Israel because God is, first and foremost, the God of Israel. The inclusion of the Gentiles does not deny the foundations on which the good news is built; the Gentile entry into the kingdom of heaven, for Matthew — and we do not know on what terms they entered the community — is predicated on the rejection of Israel's leaders, a rejection that intensifies throughout the narrative of the Gospel.

Fourthly, there are significant elements of Jewish theology throughout Matthew's Gospel:

that is, a theology that derives both from the Old Testament and from the Judaism of Jesus" and Matthew's day. Take, for example, Matthew's understanding of the law. We know that the early Church had long and sometimes acrimonious debates on the place of Torah within Christian experience. But we find a positive view of the law in Matthew that is very different from that of Paul; it may even be that Matthew shares a perspective similar to some of Paul's Jewish-Christian opponents.

Matthew's community is clearly a community that keeps the law. Indeed, Matthew believes it is only possible to be a Christian if one adheres, in both heart and lifestyle, to law (5:1 7-20). In chapter 23, Matthew is not in the least critical of those who carefully tithe the smallest herbs from their garden; rather he is concerned with the corresponding neglect of those values —"justice

and mercy and faithfulness" — that lie at the heart of the law (Matt 23:23). Matthew admires a love of the law that incorporates the small things as well as the great. So, for him, it is not a question of law or letter versus spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:6), but rather an authentic adherence to the law that is internal and external: merciful and compassionate as well as scrupulous, sincere and heartfelt as well as ethical. On this, Matthew is probably reacting as much against Christian anti-nomianism (which believes the law is irrelevant) as to forms of Jewish or Christian legalism. Jesus, as Matthew presents him, is the definitive interpreter of the law, giving the law for Christians its true and abiding value.

The Jewish texture of Matthew's theology also becomes apparent in his picture of Jesus. The basic titles for Jesus are thoroughly Jewish in their understanding: Messiah, Son of



God, King, Son of David. Matthew develops these, and other titles, in specifically Christian ways, but their milieu is Jewish and can only be understood within a Jewish-Christian framework. The same is true for the notion of Sophia — Lady Wisdom — that emerges in parts of the Old Testament and intertestamental writings. This too is a very Jewish and fundamental dimension of Matthew's Christology (e.g. Matt 11:28-30).

Another Jewish aspect of Matthew's theology is his use of apocalyptic imagery. Increasingly, New Testament scholarship is perceiving how central apocalyptic thinking is to much of New Testament, if not biblical, theology. Matthew understands Jesus, particularly his death and resurrection, as an apocalyptic event, signifying the turn of the ages. This perspective is particularly influenced by the Book of Daniel. The

Church sits on a volcano, caught in the tension between the old and the new, already experiencing the final sufferings, already waging the final battle, waiting in hope for the final triumph of God at the end of history. Matthew's final discourse (chapters 24-25), which is an expansion of Mark's apocalyptic discourse (Mark 13), culminates in the apocalyptic vision of the glorious Son of Man on his throne (cf. Daniel 7:13), judging the nations of the world. Here, and elsewhere, Matthew intensifies the apocalyptic worldview already established in the Gospel of Mark.

Fifthly, there is evidence that Matthew used material in common with the Judaism of his own day: perhaps directly influenced by it, or perhaps sharing the same worldview. Texts such as Hosea 6:6 — "I desire mercy and not sacrifice"— are also found in Rabbinic writings (Matt 9:13). Also important for

Matthew is the community's power of "binding and loosing", a perplexing phrase that is also found in Rabbinic texts (Matt 16:19, 18:18). It is interesting that Matthew speaks in one place of sages, scribes and prophets (Matt 23:34), three categories of leadership within the community also recognised in Rabbinic sources. Further scholarly work is being done in this area. What is revealed more and more is the coherence of thought between Matthew and his Rabbinic "opponents".

The evidence of the pro-Jewish dimensions of Matthew's Gospel suggests that "Matthew" himself —whoever he was — may have been a Christian scribe (Matt 13:52). It also suggests that Matthew's is a Jewish-Christian community. The openness to the Gentiles, and the obvious presence of Gentile Christians within the community, seems to entail no significant loss of Jewish identity. Despite its

complexity, the perspective of this Gospel is fundamentally Jewish-Christian.

## **Anti-Jewish Elements in Matthew's Gospel**

As against the strongly Jewish nature of this Gospel, there are a number of elements that may suggest an anti-Jewish reading of Matthew's Gospel. These elements cannot be ignored in the interests of "saving" the Christian canon. We can detect five elements that reflect hostility to, or distance from, the Judaism out of which the Gospel emerged.

We might begin with the strange use, for example, of the phrase "their synagogues" or "your synagogues", an odd expression for a Jew to use of other Jews (e.g. Matt 4:23, 12:9, 13:54). Here we note a sense of distance between Matthew's community and the Jewish synagogue, reflecting already the post-70 CE split

between Judaism and Christianity.

Secondly, Matthew believes that the interpretation given by Jesus is the only adequate understanding of the law. The interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees is presented by Matthew as an inadequate, if not dangerous, understanding; for example, on the question of divorce (Matt 19:3-11) or on the place of the oral Torah (Matt 15:1 -20) Matthew's notion of the "better righteousness" is found throughout the Gospel, and is tied to the following of Jesus; the "better righteousness" is that which not only keeps Torah, but follows Jesus' interpretation and spirituality in the way of discipleship (Matt 5:20).

A third anti-Jewish element in Matthew's Gospel is the rejection by God of Israel. It is difficult to know whether Matthew sees this as a total or only temporary rejection, but certainly he interprets the destruction of the

Temple as God's judgement on Israel for its rejection of Jesus as Messiah. "See your house is left to you, desolate", says Matthew's Jesus in his lament over Jerusalem (23:38). Similarly, the Parable of the Wedding Feast depicts the king as destroying the city of those who have murdered his servants (Matt 22:7), a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. Matthew sees this as divine rejection of those who have themselves rejected the Christian mission.

Fourthly, in editing the traditions that have come down to him, Matthew has increased the polemic against the scribes and Pharisees. One example is the scribe who comes to Jesus during Passion week (Matt 22:34-40) who, in Mark's account, is impressed by Jesus' answers to his attackers and who ends up in agreement with Jesus (Mark 12:28-34). But Mark's story of the friendly scribe, in Matthew's hands becomes another

example of scribal hostility and trickery. For Matthew, this man is very far indeed from the kingdom of God.

But the most difficult example of this intensification of polemic is in Matthew 23, which is the crux interpretum of antisemitism in the Gospel. Matthew 23 is a lengthy denouncement of the scribes and Pharisees based on a very short passage in Mark's Gospel (Mark 12:38-40) and some scattered sayings found also in Luke (Luke 20:45-46, 11:42-48, 13:34-35). It divides into three sections: first, a series of general criticisms and instructions to Matthew's community (verses 1-12), then the central series of seven woes, which are an expression of both lament and judgement (verses 13-36), and lastly, Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (verses 37 to 39). The seven woes articulate the devastating critique aimed at the scribes and Pharisees: they are accused of

hypocrisy (teaching one thing, while practicing another), legalism (concern only with the minutiae of the law), self-aggrandizement at the expense of others, bad leadership (pastoral abuse) and finally even murder (the killing of all the righteous throughout salvation history). The ferocity and bitterness of this chapter — contradicting, incidentally, the basic precepts laid down in the Sermon on the Mount — present a major problem from the perspective of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The fifth anti-Jewish element of the Gospel is found in the Passion Narrative. There the Jewish crowds are politically manipulated by their Jewish leaders, so that they call for the release of "Jesus Barabbas", who is basically a terrorist, and for the crucifixion of "Jesus who is called the Messiah" (Matt 27:15-23). Most chilling of all — in contrast to Pilate's pitiful and



ineffective  
attempts to  
exonerate himself  
— the crowds  
naively take  
responsibility for  
the death of Jesus:  
"His blood be on us  
and on our  
children", they cry  
at the instigation of  
those who are  
controlling them  
(Matt 27:25). Here  
again is probably  
another allusion to  
the destruction of  
Jerusalem.

Having set out  
some of the anti-  
Jewish elements of  
the Gospel, we  
need now to  
attempt to  
understand them.  
This is important  
for historical, as  
well as  
contemporary  
reasons, because  
what we know of  
the Pharisees  
historically —  
particularly in the  
period following 70  
CE, where they  
created a new  
sense of identity  
and direction for  
Judaism —  
suggests a very  
different picture  
from what we find  
in Matthew's  
Gospel. This means  
that we have to  
understand  
Matthew's Gospel  
within a broader  
historical and  
ideological context.  
Much damage has  
been done by

taking texts — such as those quoted above — out of context.

The reasons for Matthew's bitterness, particularly in Chapter 23, arises from the unique situation in which Judaism and Christianity find themselves after the Jewish War. Both communities are trying to forge a new identity. This is certainly true of Matthew's Gospel, which bears all the marks of trauma. It would appear that, possibly in the aftermath of the War, Matthew's community has split from the Jewish synagogue. This has led to a situation of intense hostility between Church and synagogue, in which Matthew's community feels angry and orphaned, bereft of the mother who gave it life, yet needing to find a new identity apart from the parent-body. Thus we find, at least in Matthew's community, a sense of rivalry between two groups: both rivals for the same religious traditions, the same Bible, the

same identity as "Israel", the same ethics. Ironically, this is why in reading Matthew's Gospel, we have a sense, not only of anger and trauma, but also of threat and fragility. It is why Matthew is concerned for the "little ones" (e.g. Matt 18:6-7), why he wants to build a strong and self-sufficient community. In this Gospel, we are witnessing a vulnerable group of people struggling with a sense of threatened persecution and the loss of the parent faith in Judaism — forging a new identity on the anvil of the past. Moreover, this belief in the threat of danger and persecution derives from the Gentile world, as well as the Jewish. There are a number of anti-Gentile sayings in Matthew's Gospel that suggest an equally negative attitude to the Graeco-Roman world (e.g. Matt 10:17-23; 20:18, 25). Matthew expects persecution as much from the Gentile world as he does from the

Jewish synagogue across the road. The role of Pilate and the Roman soldiers in the Passion Narrative reinforces this point and reveals the complexity of Matthew's social and religious world. What we see in Matthew's Gospel is a sectarian community, which believes itself to be *contra mundum*: a beleaguered, fearful, unprotected group trying to find identity — a small island in a sea of hostility.

At the same time, we need to note that Matthew — the most "judgement-prone" of all the New Testament writings, apart from the Book of Revelation — is capable of turning the same invective against the Church and its leaders. Matthew's Gospel, which is the Gospel of the Church, does not have an idealised picture of the Church. The Church is a place of "wheat and tares", epitomised in the characterisation of Peter (Matt 14:22-33, 16:13-23). Matthew believes that the Church itself

stands under judgement. This is obvious in the Parable of the Wedding Feast and the final added scene of the guest without a wedding garment (Matt 22:14), and also in the portrait of the Wicked Slave (Matt 24:45-51). Here too we need to remember that the Gospel is written for Matthew's own community, not for outsiders. Thus in Matthew 23, the "scribes and Pharisees" act as a literary foil to the leaders of Matthew's community. It challenges Christian leadership and is not just polemic against a common enemy. Judgement is a weapon that, for Matthew, can be turned against insiders, as well as outsiders — and especially against those who lead them.

### **Conclusion**

Matthew's Gospel presents us with a complex situation. On the one hand, we find strongly pro-Jewish elements, essential to the identity of both Gospel and community. On the

other hand, Matthew's Gospel contains anti-Jewish elements, particularly the extraordinary invective of Chapter 23. Both aspects, as we have seen, arise from Matthew's context: a small, sectarian community, recently separated from the synagogue, living in fear of persecution, struggling to forge identity from a ruptured past, trying to hold to its Jewishness, while affirming its Christian commitment and openness to Gentiles.

We need to become more sensitive to the historical and sociological context out of which this text and other New Testament texts, have come. God is not revealed in a vacuum but in the context of human experience and struggle. We need also to broaden our understanding of the Judaism of Jesus" and Matthew's day, and to realise how varied and changing the emerging picture

is. We need to re-appropriate the Jewishness, both of Jesus himself and of Matthew and Matthew's community: their reverence for Torah, their indebtedness to Judaism, their hope and love for Israel. We need to be more sensitive to how we use the term "Pharisee", expunging it from our vocabulary of insults and understanding the limitations of its metaphorical use in Matthew's Gospel.

I would argue that in the final analysis Matthew's Gospel is not antisemitic - certainly not as we would understand that term today. Sometimes we have interpreted Matthew in an antisemitic way, and continue to do so unthinkingly. But Matthew's Gospel is not racially prejudiced against Jews. Its anti-Jewish sentiments arise from a very specific context that cannot be universalised and ought not to be imitated. In the end, the message of the Gospel challenges any kind of prejudice,

hatred or fear of others — even, perhaps especially, of those to whom our lives are most closely bound.

**Suggested Further Reading**

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Dorothy A. Lee. Rev. Lee is Professor of New Testament at the United Faculty of Theology and Dean of Chapel at Queens College.  
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