

# New Insights into Matthew 27: 24–25

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Matthew's gospel contains passages difficult for Jewish Christian relations for the final text, as we have it, seems to contain passages hostile to Jews which irritate Jewish Christian dialogue. History, however, may show these so called 'anti semitic' passages of this gospel in a new, and quite different light.

The key text which today causes perhaps the greatest agony for those involved in Jewish Christian dialogue is the verse in the passion narrative of Matthew's gospel: Mt. 27: 25 'His blood be upon us and upon our children'. For these commentators, the idiom 'his blood be upon' means 'the responsibility of the death of Jesus is on our heads'. The action of Pilate washing his hands, seems to be drawing a contrast between Pilate and the people: Pilate seems to be declaring his innocence of the death of Jesus and says 'My hands are clean of this man's blood . . .' By contrast the people seem to be accepting responsibility for the death of Jesus. Pilate is not guilty, but the 'people' are guilty. By this saying, they also incriminate their heirs in this guilt. Some try to get round these 'anti-semitisms' (Matt. 23: 32–36, 7: 21–23, 8:11–12, 23: 33–46, 27: 25) by saying that 'anti-semitic montages' are only a secondary element introduced to the text added at a later, Greek, stage of the development of the gospels.

There is, of course, at present a fairly strong lobby, even among some Christians, who want to find 'antisemitisms' within the new Testament, for reasons which are sometimes distant from the academic interests of biblical criticism. It is necessary I think to examine these texts anew, both in the interest of the historical evidence available and in the interests of integrity within Jewish Christian relations.

## Transformation of Judaism

There is evidence, in tradition within the gospel as a whole, and within the historical context, to indicate that Matthew was a Jew and understood himself to be a Jew. The question then is: can we find a more authentically Jewish understanding of the passage in Matthew 27: 24–25 which preserves the integrity of the gospel as a Jewish document in its historical Jewish context?

The whole thrust of Matthew's gospel is to show that the only path for a faithful Jew was to follow the way of Jesus. The genealogy, the

infancy narratives, the temptations of Jesus, and the citing of scripture quotations in Matthew, prompt this conclusion.

There are many indications that Matthew was writing for readers who were standing at a point in history where Judaism itself had not yet chosen which path to follow. During the life time of Jesus there certainly was this choice:<sup>1</sup> the whole historical theme of all the gospels is that Jesus challenged his hearers to make that choice. In the first years of the Apostolic age, leaders in Palestine (Gamaliel) and in the diaspora, were aware of this possibility.

We have in recent decades become aware of the evidence for a vigorous Jewish church flourishing in Palestine, in the diaspora and even in Rome, which followed Jesus teaching in a full Jewish context.<sup>2</sup> In such a context and within such a community there was the conviction that to be unfaithful to Jesus was to be unfaithful to Judaism. Later Judaism moved away from the pluralism of the time of Jesus to a distinctively rabbinical Judaism which was hostile to this Jewish Church, the Church of the circumcision.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty is to locate within the time scale of that transformation the placing of Matthew's gospel.<sup>4</sup> If we place Matthew at the far end of that time scale, when Judaism excluded the Judeo-Christian presence, or if we read Matthew today, we tend to open up the possibility of interpreting Matthew with hindsight and reading into the text the hostility of a later age.

I would like to suggest that Matthew's gospel was written in the historical context of a community where the struggle for the soul of Judaism was as yet unresolved. Matthew seems to assume a milieu of Judaism in which the followers of Jesus could be at home. His whole gospel seems to be aimed at resolving such a struggle in favour of Jesus.

### **The Test of Matthew 27: 25**

We shall now consider this text which has given such offence to later Jews and Christians in its historical context.

In writing up the Passion narrative Matthew had to face the anomaly that Jesus, the authentic Jew, had been rejected by the authorities, the elders of the nation, the chief priests. (Mt. 27–1) The Scribes, and the Roman Governor in their different ways reject Jesus. The problem is then how can a faithful Jew follow Jesus after such an official rejection, by the nation, the temple, the intelligentsia and the civil authority?

I think we can see that Matthew in the Passion narratives uses the theology of the Passover to get round this problem, just as in the Temptation narratives he had used the 'shema' to get round the problem of a political messiah.<sup>5</sup> In particular Matthew seems to use the Jewish

symbolism of the blood of the lamb of the Passover. At the first Passover the doors and lintels of the houses of the Hebrews were to be smeared with the blood of the lamb and the destroying angel would pass over these houses and save them from the death of the first born.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind we can now read the Passion narratives as a unity and note Matthew's use of this concept and of the word 'blood' and arrive at an understanding of Matthew 27: 24–25.

The word 'blood' occurs four times, in 26: 28, 27: 4, 6 and in 27: 25. In the first use of the word blood Matthew seems to define what he sees as the significance of the word. He shows Jesus as speaking of the 'blood of the covenant'. In this he is using Jesus' authority to spell out the link with Exodus 12: 13, 23 where the blood of the lamb on the head of the door brings salvation. The words 'for the forgiveness of sins' confirm this idea (See Exodus 13: 14 'redeem') of salvation. The blood of Jesus is thus identified with the original blood of the Passover, the very heart of Judaism. In the Church of the Circumcision there arose an elaborate liturgical symbolism which regarded the Hebrew houses marked with the blood of the lamb as a type of the soul of the Christian marked with the sign of the cross at Baptism.<sup>7</sup>

The second mention of 'blood' is in the complex passage (Mt. 27: 3–10) about Judas. There are two points in this passage that appear to be significant for our study, one a narrative and the other a textual one. The narrative suggests that the Temple authorities wanted nothing to do with the money, because it might taint them. This is a symbolic rejection by officials of anything to do with Jesus. The second is a textual one: the phrase 'see to that yourself' (v 24) is also a rejection. It is noteworthy that Judas when thus told to make up his own mind, rejected Jesus.

The next mention 'of blood' is in the Pilate scene (v 24–26). Pilate too washing his hands said: 'I have no part in the death of this innocent man' (Knox) He also added an echo of the Temple's rejection, by saying to the people 'see to it yourselves'. Thus putting the onus upon the people—the real dilemma for Mathews's readers too. Matthew then uses words which are of special significance. The people do not follow the Temple authorities, nor Pilate's example of rejection. Astonishingly they respond 'with one voice' (27: 25) as they spoke the famous text 'His blood be upon us and upon our children'.

Matthew's theme of the passover then makes us look back to the passage in Exodus 24 where the covenant is presented to the people. Here too the people responded 'with one voice' and accepted the covenant. Then Moses took the blood and 'Moses sprinkled it upon the people, and said 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you' (Ex. 24: 8). It seems therefore that within his

authentically Jewish understanding of the passover Matthew is here echoing the sealing of the first passover and the covenant. By voicing these words the Jewish people, as distinct from the authorities, are voicing a similar acceptance of the covenant in the blood of Jesus. By that prophetic insight so frequent in the gospels the voice of the people is, albeit unwittingly, proclaiming the commitment of the whole people: the people are thereby numbering themselves as a people among those signed into the redeeming covenant of Jesus' death. So the text in verse 24 for the Jewish writer, using a Jewish idiom carries a sense which is the very opposite to the sense as understood by many later commentators.

The verse, 25, far from meaning that the people were guilty<sup>8</sup> means that, prophetically the people were asking for that forgiveness which would make them members of the very kingdom which Jesus preached. This interpretation seems almost prompted by Matthew himself in the actual literary structure of opposition he uses in verse 23 and verse 25. In a kind of parataxis,<sup>9</sup> beloved of semitic writers, he seems to draw a distinction, and contrast between two acclamations of the 'multitude' (v 23) and the 'whole people' (v. 25).

In the acclamation of verse 23 the multitude were speaking with divided tongue, and under persecution of the chief priests and elders, but not expressing the will of the people.

In the acclamation of verse 25, by contrast, the 'whole people were speaking with one voice'. In semitic idiom the parataxis would be obvious: in modern English we would have to introduce extra words to express the opposition: 'On the one hand, the multitude, persuaded by the chief priests asked for Barabbas (v 23). On the other hand, the multitude now speaking with one voice answered 'His blood be upon us. . . '(v 25). This interpretation is neatly confirmed by that passage in Acts, quoted only with embarrassment these days, where Peter makes a similar point.

In Acts 5 (v. 27–39) Peter expresses the same insights: In verse 3. he said God raised Jesus up 'to give repentance and forgiveness of sins through him to Israel'. Peter of course prefaces this with the statement 'It was you who ha him executed'. Peter's witness, however, is not to the guilt of the people to whom he is speaking, but to the forgiveness of all their sins, brought by the the death of Jesus. I maintain that to accuse Peter (of all people) of preaching guilt is contrary to the text: he was preaching forgiveness for all (himself included) and was witnessing to the redeeming effects of Jesus's life death and resurrection.

Matthew is trying to show that the following of Jesus is truly authentic Judaism. The covenant itself is present in the cup and the

blood at the last supper. The authorities may reject the benefits of the covenant. But the people in a prophetic way acclaimed their commitment to this covenant. Far from being anti-Jewish or anti-semitic, therefore, Matthew is showing that only in Jesus is the fullness of Judaism realised.

It was, of course, in a later age when the rest of the world, following the Antioch fashion, applied the name Christian not only to Gentile Christians (Acts 11: 26) but even to the Church of the Circumcision. The meaning of these texts changed with this separation of Jesus' teaching from Judaism. That separation would then classify Matthew as a Christian text, and in the fashion of those later days, such a Christian text could not be understood in a Jewish way, with all the tragedies which such a false separation brings.<sup>10</sup>

Matthew's thesis is then that the Jewish people have really committed themselves and their children to the covenant in Jesus and it is therefore unthinkable that Matthew's readers go back on such a commitment. Far from being anti-semitic<sup>11</sup> Matthew is being a faithful Jew reinforcing his commitment to Jesus which is the heart and soul of his gospel and therefore of Judaism.

- 1 *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, J Riches (DLT 1980) p. 68.
- 2 Some sources indicate the vigour of the 'Judaeo Christian' Church.  
*L'Archéologie Judeo-chrétienne* by I Mancini OFM — Franciscan Press Jerusalem (Italian 1968, English 1970, French 1977).  
*Theologie du Judéo-christianisme* — J Daniélou. Tournai 1958 (English 1976 DLT).  
*The Archaeology of the New Testament*, Jack Finnegan, (Princeton 1969).  
*The House of St Peter at Capharnaum*, V Corbo, (Franciscan Press, Jerusalem 1972).  
*The Origins of Latin Christianity* — J Daniélou (DLT 1977).  
*Antioch and Rome* — R E Brown and John P Meier — (G Chapman 1983).
- 3 *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* p. 175.
- 4 *Redating the New Testament*, J A T Robinson. (Philadelphia 1976).
- 5 J Murphy O'Connor OP, (Lectures, École Biblique Jerusalem).
- 6 *Exodus 12: 21—42*.
- 7 *Bible et Liturgie*, J Daniélou pp 219–227.
- 8 *The Biblical Foundation for Mission*, D Senior and C Stuhlmüller SCM 1983 p. 245–6
- 9 *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. G B Caird (Duckworth 1980 (p. 117 ff).
- 10 *Jews and Christians in Antioch*, W Meeks and R Wilken (Scholars Press 1978).
- 11 *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, R E Brown. G Chapman 1979 footnote on page 42.