“His Blood be upon Us”: A Textual Exegesis for Popes and Filmmakers

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Synopsis

In light of the mid-2007 edict of Pope Benedict reinstating an old mass that contains references to “Jewish blindness,” it is appropriate to revisit key passages in the New Testament Gospels, especially the passion narrative, with an eye toward examining the text not only for anti-Jewish/ anti-Semitic content, but for sound exegesis that might to some extent “attenuate” its otherwise vexing implications. An understandable tide of opprobrium has called into question Pope Benedict’s judgment in leading the church at least “one small step” backward, but whether enough scholarly attention has been brought to bear on persistent and underlying issues vis-à-vis anti-Semitism/ anti-Judaism in the Gospels themselves is another matter. Ever since the release of The passion of the Christ*, directed by another Catholic of traditional bent, there has been renewed interest in understanding the nature of the most grievous of anti-Semitic charges, namely, “deicide” – the “murder of God.” This research will attempt to provide some serious answers to such problems imbedded in the synoptic tradition and even “mitigate” to some extent the anti-Jewish attitudes fostered in the Gospels, particularly by the account of Jesus’ trial and execution. Of particular focus will be what is perhaps the most troublesome verse in the Matthean account, “Then answered all the people, and said, his blood be on us, and on our children” (Matthew 27:25). An attempt will be made to understand the “evolution of blame” in the “triple tradition” and to reach some helpful conclusions that may effectuate inter-faith dialogue and hopefully, healing.*

1. Introduction

It is recounted that a learned man once came to the Buddha and said, "The things you teach, sir, are not to be found in the Holy Scriptures." "Then put them in the Scriptures," said the Buddha. After an embarrassed pause, the man went on to say, "May I be so bold as to suggest, sir, that some of the things you teach actually contradict the Holy Scriptures?" "Then amend the Scriptures," said the Buddha.[1]

It might be refreshing if Western ecclesiastical leaders were as open-minded in their approach to sacred text as Siddhartha Gautama, but the pursuit of "enlightenment" has hardly been as important in the whole scheme of theological "correctness" as pursuing an inviolate "canon." So it was, that when the pope issued in mid-2007 an edict reinstating an old mass that contains references to Jewish blindness, traditional church authorities did not bat an eye. And so it is, that certain equally offensive passages in the New Testament itself continue to go unchallenged by the Christian church, worldwide. The Jews are "perfidious," declares the sixteenth-century Tridentine Mass, recited in Catholic practice every Good Friday. They are in such darkness that God must "take the veil from their hearts" so that they come to acknowledge Jesus Christ.[2] From what source did such ideas originate, and to what extent are they rooted in the Gospels themselves?

Ever since the release of the film *The passion of the Christ*, directed by another Catholic of traditional bent, there has been renewed interest in understanding the nature of what may well be called "the mother of all anti-Semitic charges," namely, "deicide" – the "murder of God."[3] To be sure, a good deal of probing criticism has scrutinized Mel Gibson's art of filmmaking, and an understandable tide of opprobrium has called into question Pope Benedict's judgment in leading the church at least "one small step" backward, toward a darker age. But whether enough scholarly attention has been brought to bear on the persistent and underlying question of anti-Semitism/ anti-Judaism in the Gospels themselves, is

1 Anthony De Mello, *The song of the bird* (1982, New York: Doubleday), 48. See also James Green, trans., *The recorded sayings of Zen Master Joshu* (1998, London: Altamira Press), 139.

2 For an insightful examination of resistance to alterations in the Tridentine liturgy, see William D. Dinges, Ritual conflict as social conflict: Liturgical reform in the Roman Catholic Church, *Sociological analysis*, 48:2 (1987): 138-57.

3 For a scholarly overview of the implications of the Gibson film, see Zev Garber, *Mel Gibson's Passion: The film, the controversy, and it's implications* (2006, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press).

another matter. John Dominick Crossan and Marcus Borg, in responding to *The passion of the Christ*, have argued convincingly that the gospel texts as we have them need reinterpretation.[4] It might additionally be argued, however, that certain passages are beyond reinterpretation. This may well be the case when it comes to the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. The author will in this article attempt to provide some serious answers to such problems imbedded in the synoptic tradition and even "mitigate" at least to some extent the anti-Jewish attitudes fostered in the Gospels, particularly by the "passion" narrative.

The most grievous verse in this narrative is the so-called "blood curse," uttered by a mass of Jerusalemites who had hastily assembled themselves before Pontius Pilate: "Then answered all the people, and said, his blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:25).[5] Various literary explications of this troublesome verse have of course been offered.

The author of Matthew may well have been echoing Exodus 24:8, wherein Moses sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice on the people as a means of affirming the covenant. The words might thus represent an unintentional desire for the ratification of a "New Covenant".[6] A second possibility is that the "blood curse" amounts to a contrast with the pagan sailors who threw the prophet Jonah overboard, declaring, "O Lord, we beg You, let us not perish for this man's life, and do not lay on us innocent blood" (Jonah 1:14).[7] A third option is that Matthew's author considered the words as an ironic reflection of the Deuteronomic Code, which requires the elders of a town closest to which an unknown murder victim is discovered to assert:

> Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen. Be merciful, O Lord, to Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed, and do not lay innocent blood to the charge of Your people Israel. And the blood shall be forgiven them (Deut. 21:7-8).

In Matthew, however, the elders leave to "all the people" the matter of expiation, and "all the people" accept (with a dose of irony) communal

4 See Marcus Borg and John Dominick Crossan, *The last week: What the Gospels really teach about Jesus's final days in Jerusalem* (2006, San Francisco: Harper Collins), 137-64. The Jesus introduced by Borg and Crossan is this new moral hero, a more dangerous Jesus than the one enshrined in the church's traditional teachings.

5 kai apokriqeij paj o laoj eipen: to aima autou ef hmaj kai epi ta tekna hmwn.

6 It has been observed that at least one early Christian, the author of Hebrews, explained the covenant with Jesus as a renewal of Exodus 24:8. See Scot McKnight, *Jesus and his death: Historiography, the historical Jesus, and atonement theory* (2005, Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press), 288.

7 See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Anti-Semitism and the cry of 'All the People' (Mt 27:25), *TS* 26 (1965): 667-71

guilt for Jesus' execution. The "blood curse" might thus be seen as the precise converse of the Deuteronomic Code.[8] But does any of this mitigate its obvious ramifications in fostering anti-Jewish attitudes? Moreover, what can we say about this "blood curse" vis-à-vis the interrelationship among the synoptic writers themselves?

2. The dubious "trial"

At the outset it is worth noting the obvious – that an "accurate" picture of the last days of Jesus of Nazareth is virtually impossible to assemble and is certainly more complicated than either an outdated Catholic mass or the Gibson film would suggest.[9] Modern scholarship has asserted that the so-called "trial" of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin was no trial at all, that the Gospels embellish the account to depict Jewish culpability for Jesus' execution, and that the only responsible party was the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.[10] There are in any case those (Mr. Gibson and the pope among them) who look for a degree of historicity in the traditional narratives, and we should not necessarily jump to the conclusion that all historical "fact" is beyond recovery. We might ask, for example, whether the Lukan account (22:66) is in any sense accurate when it speaks of a gathering of the elders of the people, the chief priests and scribes, referred to by the dubious title "Sanhedrin." David Flusser and Dan Barag jointly proposed that there may in fact have been such a gathering, but that it was not the Sanhedrin per-se that met, but rather a "Temple Committee," composed of elders of the Temple and Temple secretaries, i.e. "scribes," in addition to the priests.

It is worth pointing out that popular sentiments in the Second Jewish Commonwealth were clearly not with the priesthood but with the Pharisee party, and it is equally significant that there were no Pharisees involved with this "committee," for the egalitarian Pharisees had no dealings with this aristocratic breed. Instead Flusser and Barag suggested that a single

8 See Simon Schoon, 'Zijn bloed over ons en over onze kinderen': *Een tekst en zign uitwerking*. Kampen, *Verkenning en bezinning* 16/4, Kampen (1983): 6.

9 In Mr. Gibson's defense, he might be seen as producing a cinematic "counterbalance" to the unintentional "diminishment" of the suffering of crucifixion. Some have poignantly noted that there are many subtle ways in which the gravity of Jesus' suffering is unintentionally diminished. See John W. Ehman, "Luke 23:1-49, (New Testament)," (1998, *Interpretation* 52: 74).

10 Weddig Fricke, *The court-martial of Jesus* (1987, New York: Grove Weidenfeld), declares that there was no trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin at all and that Pilate alone was responsible.

priestly family is represented here, that of Annas, Caiaphas, John and Alexander.[11] How, then, could the whole Jewish people have been broad-brushed (by popes and filmmakers alike) with culpability in Jesus' execution? In Luke 22:67 Jesus is asked pointedly, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." It is notable that Jesus scrupulously avoids using the word "Messiah." It is the Temple Committee that uses/ employs the term in order to get him to "level" with them. In response Jesus behaves as though he himself were a Pharisee in a rabbinical debate, the rules of which allow the one questioned to answer with a question in return. The "Temple Committee", however, is not part of the Pharisee camp and will not play by its rules.

Jesus declares, "If I ask you, you will not answer" (v. 68). When Jesus responds with his classic declaration, equating himself with the "son of man" who will "sit at the right hand of the power of God" (v. 69), the "Temple Committee" responds, exclaiming, "What need do we have for any witnesses? For we ourselves have heard it from his own mouth" (v. 71). Notably, the charge of "blasphemy," present in both Mark and Matthew, is absent in the Lukan account. It might well be argued that Luke is, in this important recounting of the "trial" of Jesus, more evenhanded and less inflammatory than the other two Synoptic Gospels, which could have significant implications in understanding the genesis of the deicide charge. Certainly, Catholic liturgy (as well as Mr. Gibson) would have been better served to avoid the hyperbole of Mark and Matthew. Sadly, however, synoptic study is of little consequence to popes and filmmakers.

3. Words of lamentation: "For Your children" vs. "Upon our children"

The leading implication of such textual details is potentially groundbreaking, namely, that Luke's version of the entire trial and crucifixion sequence is arguably more "authentic" and certainly more "Jewish" in tone than the other Gospels.[12] Not only does it not record a "Jewish conspiracy" to put Jesus to death, it instead reflects genuine grief and solidarity with Jesus on the part of the Judeans. Specifically, we find traditional Jewish mourning practices in evidence among the Jerusalemite women:

11 David Flusser and Dan Barag, (1986, *IEJ* 36: 39-44).

12 See Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A new paradigm* (1989, *JSNT* Supplement Series 20; Sheffield: Academic Press).

> And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!'"(Luk. 23:27-29).[13]

While the traditional Catholic theology (embodied in the controversial mass) has envisioned such passages in terms of divine punishment on the Jewish people for rejecting their messiah, we should in fact compare these verses with traditional *Jewish* lamentation recorded after the destruction of the Temple:

> Blessed is he who was not born
> Or he, who having been born, has died.
> But as for us who live, woe unto us,
> Because we see the afflictions of Zion,
> And what has befallen Jerusalem…
> And let not the brides adorn themselves with garlands;
> And, ye women, pray not that ye may bear…
> Or why, again, should mankind have sons?
> Or why should the seed of their kind again be named,
> Where this mother is desolate,
> And her sons are led into captivity?
> (Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch 10:6-7; 9-10-13-16).

It is noteworthy that in Luke, the words "for your children" form part of a tonally Jewish lamentation, whereas in Matthew the words "*upon* our children" are imbedded in a different and much more sinister context. The remarks of Jesus to the women making lamentation are conspicuously absent in Matthew as well as Mark, along with mention of the sympathetic "multitude." This accords well with the later tendency to blame "the Jews" for their "blindness." Moreover, it could well be that Luke's mention of weeping "for your children" gave the author of Matthew (who must have written after Luke) the right to place in the mouths of "all the people" what is perhaps the most troublesome single statement in the entire passion narrative (slavishly reproduced in the original Aramaic of the Gibson film though deliberately excised from the English subtitles) – "His blood be on us and *upon* our children!"(Matthew 27:25).[14]

13 Traditional commentary on this narration often neglects the underlying Jewish context, focusing instead on a more "universal" message. Ehman simply points out that the 'onlookers' are, in Jesus's view, in an even worse predicament than he. See J.W. Ehman, "Luke 23:1-49," 74.

14 The idea that Matthew essentially re-wrote certain passages in Luke is argued by a number of scholars, including David Flusser, Brad Young and Shmuel Safrai. See

4. The blood theme

Matthew's "blood theme" is in fact expressed earlier, in the so-called "Olivet discourse" (Mat. 23-25) wherein Jesus looks out upon the city of Jerusalem and declares that some kind of divine judgment is about to befall its inhabitants (and perhaps by extension the whole Jewish nation). Interestingly, David Flusser pointed out that Matthew appears to have altered the object of Jesus' harangue, as recorded in the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel, namely "this generation":

> The blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, *may be required of this generatio*n; from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the temple. Truly I say to you, It shall be required of this generation (Luke 11:50-51).

In Matthew, however, the guilt of the present generation is specifically transferred to the Pharisees.

> Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge *in your synagogues* and persecute from town to town, that *upon you may come all the righteous blood* shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar (Mat. 23:34-35).[15]

Flusser suspected Matthew of altering Luke's wording, from: "the blood of all the prophets … *may be required from this generation"* to: " *upon you may come all the righteous blood* …" He saw this as a reflection of the statement that appears only in Matthew 27:25, "His blood be upon us

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Jesus' last week, R. Steven Notley, Marc Turnage, and Brian Becker, eds. Vol. 1 (2006, Leiden: Brill). See also Ronald V. Huggins, "Matthean posteriority: A preliminary proposal" (1992, *NT* 34: 1-22).

15 Compare Luk. 11:49-51: "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute, that *the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation,* from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary.' Yes, I tell you, it shall be required of this generation." The Matthean version is arguably a redaction of Luke, intensifying the language and personalizing it. The power of this "blood theme" is well expressed by H.G.L. Peels, who comments that this passage represents a concrete depiction of the long tradition of prophetic blood, spilt from the beginning of the world. In Jewish thought, the blood of the prophets will not go unavenged, and Jesus appeals to this tradition by evoking the names of Abel and Zechariah. The phrase, "from Abel to Zechariah" (Mat. 23:35; Luk. 11:51) energize the words which precede – "the blood of all the prophets" – with a strong dynamic. See H.G.L. Peels, "The blood 'from Abel to Zechariah' (Matthew 23,35; Luke 11,50f.) and the Canon of the Old Testament," 2001, *Zeitschrift fèur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft,* 113(4): 583-601.

…" Flusser viewed Matthew in the role of transforming the passage into a harsh condemnation of the Pharisees and by extension of the entire Jewish people.[16]

T.B. Cargal suggests that the incendiary words of "all the people" at Jesus's trial may be seen as Matthew's literary counterbalance of Jesus's judgment on the Israelites.[17] "His blood be upon us" echoes the prophetic pronouncement from the Mount of Olives, the people accepting the verdict and adding, as it were, their own "amen."[18] Pilate by contrast performs an elaborate hand washing ritual – present only in Matthew – in which he exonerates himself and by extension the empire he represents[19]:

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves' (Mat. 27:24).

In declaring that he is "innocent of the blood of this person," the author of Matthew informs us that the terrifying verdict of blood has been lifted from the representative of Rome and placed upon the Jewish people collectively.[20]

It might well be asserted that Matthew is in general torn between Mark and Luke, which of course assumes that Matthew wrote last. In the verse

16 David Flusser, *Judaism and the origins of Christianity* (1988, Jerusalem: Magnes Press), 554. A similar alteration is that, whereas Luke speaks of "Zechariah who perished," Matthew mentions Zechariah "whom you murdered."

17 T. B. Cargal points out that the supposed curse under which the Jewish nation is placed is frequently connected with the crowd accepting responsibility for shedding the blood of an innocent man. He observes that it is too striking to miss the link between Jesus' prophecy in Mat. 23:29-36 and the cry of the people, "His blood be upon us." Moreover, the two passages in question appear to bracket a specific section in Matthew which gives special attention to the blood theme. Timothy B. Cargal, 'His blood be upon us and upon our Children': A Matthean Double Entendre?, (1991, *NTS,* 37:109).

18 As Cargal points out, many Christian commentators agree that Matthew is viciously attacking the Jewish people in verse 25. Some have gone as far as to suggest that this verse was fabricated by the author of Matthew in a scurrilous anti-Jewish polemic, the intent of which was to show that Israel – thanks to this murderous cry – will eternally be beyond the hope of redemption. Cargal, His blood be upon us, 102.

19 Fitzmeyer notes Dominic M. Crossan's conclusion that the New Testament texts need reinterpretation and states that Mat. 27:24-25 is a typical Matthean emendation of the Synoptic Passion Narrative. Significantly, neither Mark nor Luke (not to mention John's Gospel) contains a parallel to Matthew's details concerning Pilate's washing of hands or the cry of all the people. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Anti-Semitism and the cry of 'All the People', 1965, *TS* 26(4): 667-71.

20 Patte suggests that the cry of the people indicates that they have willingly (if blindly) put themselves under the same curse as Judas. Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A structural commentary on Matthew's faith* (1996, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International), 380.

in question (Mat. 27:25) Matthew arguably picks up Jesus' Lukan words to the "daughters of Jerusalem" from Luke 23, fuses them with the "blood theme" from his version of the "Olivet discourse" (Mat. 23:34-35), and creates a new context for both, wherein the Jewish people as a whole tempt the Deity, as it were, to judge them.

5. Jewish attitudes toward capital punishment

We must still come to grips on a literary level with the question of the ages: Who was in fact responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth? Those who experience the Tridentine Mass as well as those who have viewed *The passion of the Christ* are well aware of the blame that is frequently laid squarely on the Jewish people. Most modern scholarship of course points an accusatory finger directly at the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the woeful disregard of this fact by popes and filmmakers sadly treads the same ground as the Jew-baiters of the Middle Ages, who shouted "Christ-killers!"

In any case, it is clear that the evangelists themselves were more than a trifle confused and befuddled when it came to laying blame. Mark, commonly assumed to have written first, impugns the Pharisees in conspiratorial conjunction with the ill-defined "Herodians" in a passage dealing with the healing of a man with a withered hand:

> And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him (Mar. 3:6).

This identification of the Pharisees, as vicious conspirators, is notably absent in the parallel passage in Luke:

> But they (the scribes and the Pharisees) were filled with fury and discussed with one another *what they might do* to Jesus (Luk. 6:11).

One is reminded by the Lukan account of the ancient Hasidic miracle-worker, Honi ha-Me'agel, who was accused by a revered Pharisaic sage of insolently invoking divine power:

> Simeon ben Shetach sent to him this message, "Were it not that you are Honi I would have placed you under the ban, but *what can I do unto you* who importune God and He accedes to your request as a son importunes his father and he accedes to his request?"[21]

The clear implication in the Talmudic passage is that *nothing* will be done to the offending individual. After all, the Pharisees boasted that they had

21 *Mishnah Taanit* 3:8; see David Flusser, *Jewish sources in early Christianity* (1987, New York: Adama Books), 33-4.

to all intents and purposes abolished capital punishment in the land of Israel. The Mishnah dutifully records the following Pharisaic dictum, which, though it was likely not a universally held opinion, was nonetheless characteristic of the liberal and progressive mindset of the Pharisee party:

> A sanhedrin which imposes the death penalty once in seven years is called murderous. R. Eleazar b. Azariah says, "Once in seventy years." R. Tarfon and R. Aqiba say, "If we were on a sanhedrin, no one would ever be put to death" (Mak. 1:10).

Elsewhere we find the following:

> In property cases they begin (argument) with the case either for acquittal or for conviction, while in capital cases they begin only with the case for acquittal, and not with the case for conviction (Sanh. iv. 1).

Yet another passage declares, regarding one sentenced to be executed by stoning:

> (If) one of the judges said, "I have something to say in favor of acquittal," the one at the door waves the flags, and the horseman races off and stops (the execution). And even if [the convicted party] says, "I have something to say in favor of my own acquittal," they bring him back, even four or five times, so long as there is substance in what he has to say. (If) they then found him innocent, they dismiss him (Sanh. vi. 1).

Significantly, Matthew, in his version of the same "triple tradition" pericope about the man with a withered hand, appears to copy Mark's depiction of the Pharisees as murderously conspiratorial:

> But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him (Mat. 12:14).

Elsewhere, Mark continues his depiction of a grand conspiracy:

> And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to entrap him in his talk (Mar. 12:13).

This of course conveniently ignores the enmity between the two camps, in the same way that the Gibson film and the Catholic mass blur the distinctions between Jesus' Jewish opponents.

Luke, by contrast, implicates not the Pharisees, but the "scribes and chief priests" – the "Temple Committee" – throughout:

> The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them. So they watched him, and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor (Luk. 20:19-20).

> And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death; for they feared the people (Luk. 22:2).

In other words they recognized that the majority of the common people disliked them and favored Jesus. The Galilean preacher, who challenged their authority, was consequently perceived as a mortal threat.

In Luke's account not only is the murderous conspiracy of the Pharisees absent, but we are specifically told that the voices demanding crucifixion were those of the crowd and of "the chief priests". Clearly, Luke intends to castigate the Sadducean priesthood in a manner not unlike the Pharisee party, which went so far as to mount a revolt in the second century B.C.E. against the Sadducee-dominated monarchy of the house of Hashmon. The Talmud records the general attitude of the Pharisees toward the priesthood as follows:

> Woe is me because of the house of Beothus;
> Woe is me because of their staves! …
> For they are high priests
> And their sons are (Temple) treasurers
> And their sons-in-law are trustees
> And their servants beat the people with staves
> (Pesachim 57a).

Such subtleties are lost sight of in Hollywood films and in certain liturgical formulas, though the same can in fact be said of the Gospel of Matthew. Mel Gibson, in responding to his detractors, made much of saying, "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film; they have a problem with the four Gospels."[22] So be it. It is evident that there was a good deal of anti-Jewish polemicizing in the Greco-Roman world; but arguably, it is the Gospels themselves which have generated more anti-Semitism than all other anti-Jewish writings ever produced. Furthermore, the verse in question (Mat. 27:25) has, according to Gerald O'Collins, "done more than any other sentence in the New Testament to feed the fires of anti-Semitism".[23] Perhaps the issue is actually about seeing the internal tensions and contradictions within Matthew, and between Matthew and the other synoptic accounts. While there has been a long-held tradition of harmonizing the gospels, perhaps the most interesting possibilities arise when they are not harmonized, but are held in tension, as on-the-ground accounts of people who had their own interests, limits, and opinions.

22 Dianne Sawyer interview, 20/20, ABC television, 2004, March.
23 Gerald O'Collins, Anti-Semitism in the Gospel, 1965, *TS,* 26: 663-6.

6. The author of Matthew

The author of Matthew is, to be sure, a study in contradiction. It is a matter of supreme irony that the same evangelist who unleashes a stunning condemnation of Pharisaic Judaism (e.g. Mat. 23) also advocates adherence to Mosaic Law (Mat. 5:17-20). He likewise commends an assortment of halakhic practices, from almsgiving (Mat. 6:2) to regular prayer (Mat. 6:5-6) to fasting (Mat. 6:16-18) to offering up sacrifices (Mat. 5:23). Even Jewish purity laws regarding food are to be adhered to by the Matthean community; for whereas both Matthew and Mark report Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over hand washing, Matthew omits Mark's conclusion that all foods are now declared clean. Some passages in Matthew reflect a message respectful of Jews and specifically directed toward them, such as Jesus' directive that his disciples should not enter areas inhabited by Gentiles, since his words are only for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mat. 10:5-6). Why, then, the harsh words of censure and the calling down of blood upon the people and the nation?[24]

One plausible explanation is that the Matthean community, resembled another ancient sectarian group, the Dead Sea sect, in considering themselves to be the "true Israel." Everyone else is doomed. The evangelist, in a manner not unlike that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, writes with a pronounced "exclusivism" that restricts divine blessing to the Judeo-Christian "Nazarene" sect alone. It is commonly theorized that Matthew may have originated in Antioch, in a church composed of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. It is charged that the evidence does not support any suggestion that Matthew is the translation of an Aramaic original.[25]

However, it has also been suggested, based on linguistic features of the Greek in the Gospel that seem to parrot Aramaic, that the final redactor of the Gospel was a member of an Aramaic-speaking group who, as "Nazarene" Christians, now held that the previous people of God had been

24 G. Baum notes that a number of Jewish researchers of Matthew 27:25 find a link to the phrase in the Hebrew Bible, "His blood be on his head." Gregory Baum, *Is the New Testament anti-Semitic?* (1965, New York: Paulist Press), 104. T. B. Cargal observes that such a formula was utilized to express guilt on the part of an accused person. Some Jewish interpreters have argued that the crowd is not calling for Jesus' execution, but maintaining his innocence. Baum, on the other hand, admits that within the context of Matthew this understanding is unsupported. The crowd clearly demands Jesus' crucifixion, and no change of attitude resulting from Pilate's symbolic hand-washing is indicated. Cargal, His blood be upon us, 105.

25 Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student's commentary* (1987, Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 7.

condemned.[26] In either case, the implications of this early "replacement theology" are that a New Israel had been created, a true Israel, comprised exclusively of the followers – or their version of the followers – of Jesus of Nazareth. They alone are inheritors of the Abrahamic covenant. All others, including piously observant Israelites, are excluded, cut off and separated from divine inheritance and blessing.[27]

7. "The People" vs. the Nazarene

The author of this Gospel paints with broad strokes the Jewish people, whom he sees as directly culpable for Jesus's execution. For Matthew it is "all the people" who utter the stinging words of condemnation, "His blood be upon us." But who exactly are "the people" in the context of the synoptic "triple tradition"? For Luke they are linked as one "term" in a tripartate collusion with "the chief priests and the rulers" – the "Temple committee" proposed by Flusser and Barag – as though we have an *ad hoc* assemblage to whom Pilate felt administratively obliged:

> (Pilate) called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people … (Luk. 23:13).

For Matthew "the people" as a term is broadened through the course of several verses, from "the multitude" (27:20), who are persuaded by the priesthood to release Barabbas and "destroy Jesus," to "all the people," who utter the "blood curse".[28]

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26 The use of the word ||| Σ ("then") may indicate that the writer of Matthew was trained to write in Aramaic and wrote Greek with similar features.

27 Fitzmeyer declares that there is a secondary/ subsidiary theme in Matthew, aimed at providing a rationale for a Judeo-Christian audience as to why the non-Jewish nations were now usurping the place of Israel. The author of Matthew is wrestling with the issue of 'the rejection' of Israel in his own manner, just as Paul tried to make sense of it in Romans 9-11. Fitzmeyer, Anti-Semitism, 670.

28 Hans Kosmala tries to mitigate the incendiary nature of the words, noting the formula ubhatrc uns ("his blood be on our heads"), which in warfare (e.g. the perchance killing of Rahab or one of her relatives) means that the entire Israelite army will assume responsibility for a death. In other words, "it is not a private affair and there is no question of simple murder." This, however, ignores the real possibility that Matthew employed what may well have been a formulistic saying, but with a new and sinister intent. Kosmala also argues that the charge against Jesus amounted to a "local affair" and that the LXX usage of the phrase □◊||ע|◊ (in which it clearly references the entire Jewish people) is dissimilar to Matthew 27:25 inasmuch as this particular situation is unlike those of the examples found in the Hebrew Bible. See Hans Kosmala, His blood on us and on our children, 1970, *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute,* 7: 94-126. Nevertheless, Fitzmeyer demonstrates that in the great majority of instances in Matthew's Gospel (11 out of 14 cases), the Greek term ע|◊ in Mat. 27:25, □◊||ע|◊) refers to the entire Jewish people as an ethnic unit. Fitzmeyer, "Anti-Semitism", 669

Indeed, it is as though there is a progression (from Luke to Mark to Matthew), from "the people" being mentioned as a conspiratorial "third party" (as in Luke), to the chief priests "moving the people" (as in Mark), to the chief priests and elders persuading "the multitude" (as in Matthew). One controversial, though intriguing suggestion, advanced by a small minority of researchers, is that Luke, not Mark, was the first Gospel writer – a conclusion which may have enormous impact on the study of the development of early Christian anti-Semitism.[29] Lockton wrote in 1922 that Luke was the earliest of the three, that Mark was fashioned out if it, and that Matthew was formed from both Luke and Mark.[30] In the mind of both David Flusser and Robert Lindsey, Mark rewrote Luke in order to shock readers/ hearers. Flusser also noted that in Luke one finds no mention of either condemnation or the allegation of blasphemy.[31]

We should bear in mind that while Mark is the shortest of the three synoptic Gospels, we repeatedly find that in specific verses which parallel Luke, the Markan version is longer, and appears to the objective eye to be an elaboration. It is of course possible that the Lukan passages are a condensation of their counterparts in Mark, but it makes sense that language more unfavorable to the Jews as a people would be incorporated in subsequent recensions, as the Church increasingly separated itself from its Jewish origins.[32]

29 See Robert Lindsey, *A Hebrew translation of the Gospel of Mark* (1973, Jerusalem: Dugith Publishers); "A modified two-document theory of the synoptic dependence and interdependence," 1963, *NT* 6: 239-63. See also Pierson Parker, "A second look at *The Gospel before Mark"*, 1980, *JBL* 100: 389-413; "The posteriority of Mark" in: Farmer, *New synoptic studies*, 65-142; Harold Riley, *The making of Mark: An exploration* (1989, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press); *The first Gospel* (1992, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press); *Preface to Luke* (1993, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press).

30 Lockton, W., 1922, The origin of the Gospels, *CQR* 94: 216-39; *The three traditions in the Gospels* (1926, London: Longmans, Green); *Certain alleged Gospel sources: A study of Q, Proto-Luke and M*, (1927, London: Longmans, Green).

31 Flusser, D., Foreward, in: Lindsey, *A Hebrew translation*, 6,7. For a discussion of this material, see Harrington, Jay M., The Lukan passion narrative. The Markan material in Luke 22,54-23,25. A historical survey: 1891-1997 (2000, Leiden: Brill): 919.

32 Another view, the so-called Griesbach hypothesis, recently reinvigorated by William Farmer, posits the priority of Matthew and suggests that Mark represents a conflation and abridgment of the other two Gospels. Johan Jakob Griesbach, *Commentatio qua Marci Evangelium totum e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis decerptum esse monstratur* [A dissertation in which the whole Gospel of Mark is shown to be derived from the memoirs of Matthew and Luke], I-II (1789-90, Jena), enlarged ed., in: Velsthusen, J.C. *et al.*, Eds., *Commentationes theologicae*, vol. I (1794, Leipzig): 360-434; reprinted in Griesbach, *Opsuscula academica*, Gabler, J.Ph., Ed., vol. II (1825, Jena): 358-425. Griesbach's conclusion is begged by the fact that in several passages in the triple tradition, Luke and Matthew are in substantial agreement against Mark. See William

A variation of the two-source hypothesis goes so far as to suggest that the Synoptic Gospels, beginning with Luke, are rooted in a Semitic undertext (*grundschrift*) subsequently reordered in two Greek renderings, from which Mark and Matthew subsequently drew. Interestingly, Luke's Greek in particular frequently mimics Hebrew syntax, especially with regard to the "*vav* conversive" verbal form.[33] If it could be established that the Lukan account is *linguistically* closer to first century Roman Palestine than Mark and Matthew, what are the implications regarding the *content* of the Lukan narrative?

What then do we learn from Luke about the murderous voices demanding crucifixion? There is a real sense in Luke that the chief priests and (Sadducean) authorities have stirred up an *ad hoc* crowd whom they have in their collective pocket. In Luke there is only a single mention of "the people" *per se* (23:13), and thereafter the term drops out. We simply read that "the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed" (23:23).

In Mark it appears as though the chief priests, having "moved the people" (15:11), thereafter take a back seat to the crowd, with whom Pilate continues his dialogue. "The people" take center stage. When Mark narrates, "They cried out" (15:13), we assume that we are hearing the voice of "the people" in unison; there is no longer any mention (as in Luke) of the chief priests. In verse 15, Pilate is said to be willing to "content the people" (not the priests) a detail not found in the Lukan account. Only then is Barabbas released and Jesus sent away to be crucified.[34]

When it comes to Matthew's Gospel, the language is even more incendiary. The chief priests "persuade the multitude," who, even more than in Mark, drive the narrative thereafter. The jarring reality of the Matthean narrative is that the chief priests fall silent after 27:20 and, as

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R. Farmer, *The synoptic problem: A critical analysis* (1964, New York: Macmillan; 1976, 2nd ed., Dillsboro, N.C.: Western North Carolina Press).

33 In the trial narrative at hand, we find such expressions as 'And Pilate … said unto them' (23:13-14), 'And they cried out' (23:18), 'And he said unto them' (23:22), 'And they were instant'/ 'And the voices … prevailed' (23:23), 'And Pilate gave sentence' (23:24), 'And he released' (23:25). There are fewer such instances in Mark's parallel passages and almost none in Matthew's. The Greek of Matthew seems more influenced by Aramaic syntax than by Hebrew, which accords well with the idea that the author of Matthew came from an Aramaic speaking community.

34 Maccoby goes as far as to suggest that Jesus and Barabbas are in fact the same person and that the Gospels were written to 'shift the blame for the crucifixion on to the Jewish people as a whole'. See Maccoby, H.Z., 1969, NTS, 16: 55-60. The author contends that this shifting of blame is evident regardless of wether Jesus and Barabbas are the same.

noted, the incendiary statement "his blood be upon us" is in the mouth of "all the people."[35] Matthew furthermore implies that it was "the people" who had delivered Jesus to Pilate at the outset (Mat. 27:18), as against Mark's statement (consistent with Luke 23:13-14) that "the chief priests had delivered him".

8. King of the Jews?

We should also consider the designation "King of the Jews," which Mark places in Pilate's mouth, but which is notably absent in the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel. (In Luke Pilate had earlier asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" – 23:3[36]) Mark characteristically intensifies the drama by having Pilate correctly identify what the Gospel writer deems is Jesus' true office (even though he equivocates, saying "whom *you* call the King of the Jews") while "the people" are now blindly and ironically oblivious. Matthew, the author suggests, follows Mark in this detail, unflattering to Jews, and has Pilate make no equivocation as he refers to "Jesus who is called Christ". For Matthew "the multitude" has missed "the Christ" and chosen instead Barabbas, which means (with appropriate irony, by no means lost on Aramaic speakers) "son of the father".[37]

In Matthew's narrative Pilate is even further removed from the onus of guilt by an additional element which appears only in this Gospel – the message sent from Pilate's wife, warning him "to have nothing to do with that just man" due to a nightmare she had experienced. This passage, like other material present only in Matthew and known by the scholarly designation "M", amplifies the "Jewish rejection" of Jesus, emphasizing the irony that (in John's words) "He came unto his own and his own

35 Flusser discussed the question of the extent to which the final redactor of Matthew accentuated the sinister images of Jesus' trial and execution, having already received them from his sources, most notably from Mark. He suggested that the Matthean redactor must have understood the so-called Jewish guilt in the death of Jesus as a climax of the murder of the prophets by their own people. This is why "all the people" are depicted as uttering the "blood curse" of Mat. 27:25. He saw a connection here with specific changes made by the author of Matthew (23:33-35) on his source, namely the Lukan narrative. Flusser, *Judaism and the origins of Christianity*, 566.

36 As J. W. Ehman points out, the only utterance of Jesus is his response to Pilate's query, "Are you the king of the Jews?," namely, "You say so." See "Luke 23:1-49," 75.

37 The author of Matthew seems to delight in such ironic elements. As Frank J. Matera notes, the depiction could not be more laden with irony, for the mute one to whom they kneel in mock homage is in fact the King of the Jews and, according to the Gospel writer, will soon be their king as well (27:54). The soldiers proclaim – on a level beyond their comprehension – a message laden with theological significance. Matthew 27:11-54, 1984, *Interpretation*, 38: 57.

received him not". It should not surprise us that such "M" material is dutifully picked up by the Catholic mass and by Mr. Gibson, who dramatically heightens the tension in the same way as the original Gospel writers.

In Matthew the narrative begins and ends with "the people"/ "the multitude" and the chief priests and elders appear only once (Mat. 27:20) as devilish inciters. In sharp contrast with Luke, the chief priests and elders are not present at the beginning of the pericope. They, not "the people," are a third party, a literary foil for the multitude. They conveniently appear and drop out again, leaving the mob – "all the people" to drive the narrative.

9. Conclusion

If we might be adventurous enough to examine the synoptic Gospels in the order of Luke, Mark, and Matthew, it would seem that the onus of guilt progressively shifts, from "priests and rulers" to the nameless Jewish mob. We might be inclined to see an evolution in approach, from Luke's more balanced if not more dispassionate account, to Mark's tendency toward hyperbole, to Matthew's biting narrative that effectively damns the entire Jewish people through the damning words of "all the people."

In the final analysis, it is appropriate to reiterate that there are indeed anti-Semitisms in the Gospel narratives, and that neither pontiffs nor filmmakers need be personally anti-Semitic to run into trouble when reproducing them, whether in liturgy or on screen. In either case, an undiscerning reliance on Matthew's "M" material tends to communicate unfortunate stereotypes and negatively color the fabric of interfaith relations. The result is the perpetuation of arguably the most slanderous charge ever levied against the Jewish people: the murder of the "Anointed One," the Christ – deicide. Can the problems inherent in the Christian Scriptures be mitigated through the efforts of critical scholarship? The author believes they can. Again recalling that the Buddha once counseled that the Scriptures be amended, we might simply add: "Amend them indeed."