

Matthew and Anti-Judaism

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Discussion of whether or not Matthew's Gospel is anti-Jewish flounders on such intractable questions as how to define "anti-Jewish," who gets to make the determination, and on what criteria the judgment can be made.¹ Yet regardless of whether the Gospel was initially anti-Jewish, however defined, it has certainly been interpreted in ways that convey anti-Jewish messages. Our task is to prevent this abuse of the text.

Most homilists realize the dangers of passages such as John 8:44, "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires," and 1 Thess 2:15, "[the Jews], who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets. . . ." Most recognize that congregations may associate the Pharisees with "the Jews," and so appropriately defuse this impression by reading Matthew 23, for example, as instructing the church: those who exalt themselves (23:12), neglect justice and mercy (23:23), and ignore the prophets (23:34) are the people in the pulpit and the pews. Yet even ministers who consciously avoid anti-Jewish sermons may convey anti-Jewish messages nonetheless. While completely preventing such slippage between what we intend and what others hear is impossible, being forewarned of potential problems helps eliminate numerous problems.

The following examples of anti-Jewish ideas come from student papers, ser-

mons, and comments made by clergy and laity in numerous workshops

Matthew 1

Following the Greek translation of Isaiah 7, Matthew 1:22–23 proclaims the fulfillment of "what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'" Although the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing about a virgin—it presumes a normal conception—the Greek does. Matthew has, like other readers of Scripture then and now, understood the text to speak to his own situation.

Problems arise when congregants conclude that "the Jews" misread deliberately, a conclusion reinforced by 2 Cor 3:14, "to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there. . . ."

All texts have multiple meanings. In secular terms, we bring to texts our own questions, and we filter that text through our own experiences. In religious terms, new meanings can be the work of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah has multiple meanings: for

1 See Amy-Jill Levine, "Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew," in *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*, ed. Wm R. Farmer (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 9–36.

his original audience, for the church, for the synagogue, for any who hold his words sacred. Religious educators should explain how Jewish and Christian readings, although diverse, both point to Isaiah's meaning, fulfilled and unfulfilled.²

Matthew 2

Sermons highlighting the fact that the Gentile Magi anticipate the Gentile mission sometimes convey a countermesssage: If the Magi represent the Gentiles, "Herod and all Jerusalem" represent the "Jews." Matthew does not divide the world into "good Gentiles" and "bad Jews." Joseph and Mary, along with slaughtered children and the grieving parents, are also "Jews." The principal division is not between Jew and Gentile but between those who bear good fruit and those who corrupt.

Matthew 3

Congregants may see Judaism as ethnocentric or xenophobic whereas Jesus represents "universalistic" Christianity. Matthew 3:7, 9, John's polemic against the Pharisees and Sadducees, can reinforce this impression: "You brood of vipers! . . . Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'"

While some Jews thought that only they were in God's good graces, others recognized the righteous among the nations (for example, the centurion in Luke 7 or Cornelius in Acts 15). Judaism welcomed converts (such as Nicolaus, the proselyte from Antioch of Acts 6:5), and the Jerusalem Temple's "Court of the Gentiles" was open to all. Jews did not engage in formalized proselytizing efforts because they did not believe Gentiles needed to convert to be in a right relationship with God. When Zechariah 8:23 envisions "ten men from the nations of every language" . . . saying [to Jews], 'Let us go with you,

for we have heard that God is with you,'" he does not foresee them adding, "and please circumcise us when we get there." Christian educators might want to problematize the notions of "particularism" and "universalism" further by querying whether the church, with its proclamation of salvation only through the Christ, represented "particularism."

Matthew 5

The so-called "antitheses" (Matt 5:21–47) are poorly named. To those who heard "You shall not swear falsely" (5:33) Jesus does not say "but I say to you, lie all you want." The point is not antithesis but intensification: "Don't swear at all." It is what rabbinic sources call "building a fence about the law" (Mishnah, *Avot* 1:1) to insure that divine will is followed. To call these passages antitheses suggests that Jesus is against Mosaic Law, and, because congregants will associate Mosaic Law with "the Jews," the impression is doubly problematic.

Concerning Matt 5:38, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," this commandment is not put into practice. Rabbinic texts insist that it could not be, since no two eyes or two teeth are equivalent. Moreover, it would be inapplicable for perpetrators who lack teeth or are blind; thus it must have a nonliteral meaning (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Kamma* 84a).

The point of not responding to violence with violence, as Jesus advises in the next verses, is known in Jewish thought; Jesus does not have to be unique in order to be profound. Such communal nonviolent

2. An excellent example is Ralph W. Klein's "Promise and Fulfillment," in *Contesting Texts: Jews and Christians in Conversation about the Bible*, ed. M. Knowles et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 47–63.

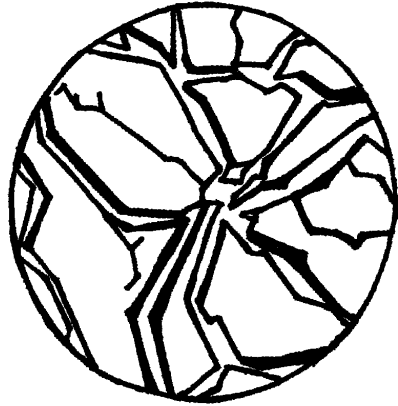
response in the first century surfaced most clearly in 41 when Caligula determined to put his statue in the Temple. The crowds did not rebel; instead, they left their fields and engaged in a sit-down strike.

Concerning 5:43, “love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” biblically illiterate individuals (there are a few) conclude both that the Old Testament enjoins such hatred and that “the Jews”—whom they associate with the Old Testament—follow that law. Churches with missions in Palestine are especially prone to this view, because some congregants make facile connections between “Old Testament” violence, Matthew 5:43, certain Israeli policies such as “the fence” or military incursions, and what “Jews” think.

First, there is no such commandment. Scripture insists not only “Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble” (Prov 24:17) but also “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat, and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink” (Prov 25:21). Second, congregants need to be reminded that the Old Testament is part of their Bibles and that the God of the Old Testament is the same God as the one in the New Testament. Third, each Testament has parts to celebrate, and each has texts of terror. Finally, there is no single “Jewish” view on anything, including politics in the Middle East.

Matthew 8

By proclaiming that Jesus came to welcome “outcasts and marginals” (the phrase has become axiomatic in sermons), pastors give the impression that “Judaism” is characterized by oppressive purity laws, xenophobia, and misogyny, which create those outcasts and marginals. Matthew 8 provides three common examples used to illustrate this impression. By healing a man



with leprosy (vv. 2–4), fulfilling the request of a Gentile centurion (vv. 5–13), and touching a woman (vv. 14–15), Jesus is seen, incorrectly, as challenging the oppressive Jewish system.

Nothing in Matthew’s text suggests that Jesus contravenes purity codes or abrogates any law. To the contrary, Jesus commands that the healed man fulfill Torah: “Show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift” (v. 4). Nor, by the way, is this supplicant ostracized in Matthew; the image comes primarily from readers who presume that Leviticus accurately explains life in Second Temple and subsequent Judaism.

As for xenophobia, the centurion is living in Capernaum; in Luke’s account, he not only built the synagogue, but also the Jewish elders supplicate on his behalf. He is rather a splendid example of good Jewish-Gentile relations. Finally, Peter’s mother-in-law is not marginal, not outcast, and not impure. She is sick, and Jesus heals her.

Matthew 9

In Matthew 9:11, Pharisees ask Jesus’ disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Some Christians

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believe that “sinners” means those who transgress “ritual law” such as eating non-kosher food or refusing to tithe. The connection of “sinners” to banqueting tax collectors, agents of the Roman government, indicates that the term has a more specific meaning—sinners are those who have removed themselves from the general welfare of the population. Today’s “sinners” would be drug pushers and arms dealers. The issue is not ritual purity but moral action.

Preachers next announce that by touching the hemorrhaging woman and then a corpse (9:18–26) Jesus does away with the purity laws. This interpretation reinforces the view that Judaism is about law and Jesus is about grace; worse, it suggests that the law makes women into “outcasts and marginals.”

Corrections begin by observing that Jesus does not touch the woman; she touches him. Indeed, she touches his “fringe,” his *tzitzit*, which symbolizes the law (9:20). Second, there is no law forbidding such touch. Third, she does not convey impurity by touch (if she did, she and her sisters could pollute all Galilee in the amount of time it takes to read this article). Fourth, no version of this story (see also Mark 5:22–43 and Luke 8:41–56) says anything about purity laws. And fifth, to focus on purity

takes the emphasis off the story’s good news—a woman who takes initiative and the healing of a body.³

The same points apply to the ruler’s daughter. To touch a corpse is not a sin; to bury a body is rather one of the most valued *mitzvot* (commandments), because it is one in which the person who benefits from it has no means of reciprocating (see Tobit). Touching a corpse does create impurity, but so what? John’s disciples, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and others who touch corpses are not “marginal and outcast.” There are, furthermore, means for restoring purity. Finally, purity does have numerous positive lessons from sanctification of the body to resistance to assimilation.

Concerning Jewish misogyny, no law forbids conversation between men and women. While Jewish society, like pagan and Christian society, was patriarchal, the Gospels themselves indicate that Jewish women owned homes (Luke 10:28), had freedom of travel (the women who follow Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem), could leave their husbands (e.g., Joanna, Mrs. Zebedee), participated in synagogue and Temple worship, etc. The single line that might suggest that Jesus’ conversation with women is anomalous is John 4:27. But setting makes all the difference. The woman is a Samaritan, and she herself queries Jesus’ comment to her. One could read the verse as suggesting that Jesus usually refused to speak with women, but that would be as uncharitable to Jesus as are those readings that see Judaism as misogynistic and Jesus as Hillary Clinton in homespun.

3. Amy-Jill Levine, “Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 70–87.

Matthew 12

In the first controversy story (12:1-8), the Pharisees—whom some congregants associate with “the Jews”—see the disciples plucking heads of grain and accuse them of violating the Sabbath. By arguing from both scriptural precedent (David) and current example (priests), Jesus shows his continuity with the Jewish tradition. In the second story, Jesus heals a man in the synagogue. His explanation, an argument from the lesser (the sheep in the pit) to the greater (the man in the synagogue), is called in Hebrew a *qal v' homer* argument, and it is found frequently in rabbinic literature. Nor does Jesus actually “practice medicine,” for he does not touch the man. Jews then, and now, just like Christians, continue to debate how to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. The point is the sanctity of the day, not Mosaic Torah or Jewish Law vs. Jesus’ compassion.

Matthew 15

In 15:21–28, Jesus ignores a desperate Canaanite woman, states that he was sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24), and responds to her plea “Lord, help me” with “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (15:25–26). The woman, “turning the other cheek,” responds not with violence but with cleverness. Problems begin when interpreters highlight Jesus’ Jewish ethnocentrism; they increase when commentators include the idea that in heeding the woman Jesus also overcame his Jewish misogyny. A few critics even suggest that Matt 10:5b–6 and 15:24 are from a “Jewish-Christian” source; they cannot imagine either Jesus or a “full” Christian behaving this way.

None of this is helpful or necessary. The “Canaanite” woman (as opposed to Mark’s “Syro-Phoenician Greek”) reminds

readers of Canaanite women in the genealogy, Tamar and Rahab, who proved more faithful than the men with whom they are associated (respectively, Judah and the spies sent to Jericho). She represents the faith of the outsider, a representation echoing the Jewish tradition of the “righteous Gentile.” By initially refusing the woman, the Matthean Jesus follows a literary convention, known from both Roman and Jewish sources, in which someone in authority is humbled by his social inferior. Thus Matthew instructs ecclesial leaders to follow Jesus in attending to the “least,” even if doing so is not part of their job description.⁴ Finally, Matthew follows both the Old Testament and Paul in noting that Jesus did come “to the Jew first,” as Paul puts it. The Gentile mission begins only with the “Great Commission” (28:16–20). The point is not Jewish exclusivism; it is rather history, and salvation history.

Matthew 18–19

When “little children were being brought to [Jesus] in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray,” his “disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them” (19:13). Unfortunately, numerous Christians think that the unwelcoming disciples here represent the “Jewish” attitude to children, whereas the “Christian view” is Jesus’ welcoming of them (18:2–5). This tendency to regard as “Jewish” anything the disciples or Jesus do that seems contrary to our moral values is the same argument that attributes 1 Cor 14:33b–36 to Paul’s “rabbinic background.” The argument is not only facile, it is wrong.

4. Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Readership,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 22–41.

The concern for children is a Jewish value, not just a Christian one. It is seen throughout the Old Testament, and it carries through into rabbinic literature. As the Gospels themselves indicate, Jewish as well as pagan parents, from the “ruler” to the “Canaanite,” advocate for their sons and daughters.

Matthew 21

I have heard numerous times how Jesus drove the “money-lenders” from the Temple (21:12–14). Money-lenders is Shakespeare, not Matthew. The phrase “den of robbers” (21:13) does not suggest that the Temple robbed the peasants or overcharged worshippers; the den is the place where thieves feel safe. The analogy would be criminals who put ten dollars in the collection plate and believe all is well.

Next, the Parable of the Vineyard (21:33–45) yields the common interpretation that Israel, the vineyard, is taken from the Jews, who “seize the son, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him.” The vineyard is then given to the Gentile church. To break this impression, homilists might move from the parable proper, which ends in v. 41, to v. 45, where Matthew states that “the chief priests and the Pharisees . . . realized that he [Jesus] was speaking about them.” The conjoined leadership is precisely that: leadership. Like the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:32–46), judgment is based on action, not on confession.

Matthew 26

Many Christians who celebrate the Passover meal (the *seder*) on Holy Thursday (Matt 26:17–20) perceive that they are following Jesus in his final days: they eat with him, hold vigil with him in Gethsemane, follow him to the cross. A further incentive to celebrate the Passover is the desire to recover the church’s Jewish roots; partici-

pation in this Jewish festival is even seen as a means of overcoming anti-Semitism.

While good reasons for Christian *seders* can be adduced, the practice creates several potential problems. First, historically, the Last Supper was probably not a Passover meal; John’s chronology, which sets the crucifixion at the time when the paschal lambs are sacrificed in the Temple, is both theologically symbolic and historically credible. Next, the Passover then was comparable to what Christians now would call a “closed table.” Those eating the Passover sacrifice had to be Jews (whether by birth or conversion). Third, John’s Gospel combines Passover and sin-offering imagery to describe Jesus as the “lamb of God.” Thus Jesus replaces the Passover. Fourth, the *seder* today is substantially a rabbinic tradition; it does not replicate what Jesus did. Finally, the Christian *seder*, whether done in a traditional Jewish manner or with Christian imagery (e.g., the *afikomen* is the Christ hidden in the tomb), risks a coopting of Jewish tradition. Pastors and congregations will need to weigh the pros and cons of participating in such a celebration.

Matthew 27

The idea that the crucifixion was the responsibility of all Jews in all times and places derives from Matt 27:25: “All the people (*pas ho laos*) cry, ‘Crucify him, crucify him. His blood be on us and on our children.’” Pilate then washes his hands, frees Barabbas, and hands Jesus over to be crucified.

The scene make no sense historically. Roman governors did not give occupied populations a choice in freeing prisoners. If the point of this action were to free a prisoner for the feast, then for the Synoptics the act came too late: the *seder* was the night before. But the scene is theologically profound. Barabbas, whom Matthew calls

“Jesus Barabbas” (literally, Jesus son-of-the-father) is Jesus’ mirror-image. The innocent man dies so that the guilty can go free; Jesus Son of the Father dies as a “ransom” (Matt 20:28) for every father’s child.

Jesus died sometime between 26 and 36 C.E. The next generation, the “children” of the Jerusalem crowd, witnessed the devastation of their city in 70. Perhaps Matthew suggests that the defeat by Rome, and the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, was a direct result of the crucifixion. To preach this, however, would *inter alia* be tantamount to proclaiming a vengeful deity, blaming the victims, and refusing personal responsibility for the cross. The correct answer to “Who killed Jesus?” is “humanity” or “everyone.” The church needs to confess its own sins, not the sins of the “Jews.”

Matthew 28:15

Matthew 28:15 states that the story about the disciples having taken Jesus’ body is “told among the Jews [*Ioudaioi*] to this day.” Matthew thus defines “Jews” as those who reject the proclamation of the resurrection.

A few scholars suggest that *Ioudaioi* be translated as “Judeans.” Although a legitimate translation, it does not resolve the potential anti-Judaism, because congregants will equate “Judeans” and “Jews.” Moreover, a *judenrein* New Testament is not desirable.

Many Jews at the time of Jesus, and since, believed that a general resurrection would accompany the messianic age (see John 11:24). Because there has been no general resurrection, no peace on earth, and no end to war, disease, or poverty, most Jews at the time of Jesus, and since, concluded that the messiah had not come.

Rather than suggest that Easter formal-

ly marks the separation between “church” and “synagogue”—the separation took another several centuries—one might instead ask about the meaning of the resurrection. What difference does what happened to Jesus’ body make? Does the gospel teach that bodies are important? Does the resurrection suggest people should care for their own bodies and those of others? Does it remind its hearers that bodies are in the divine image? Unless belief in the resurrection translates into some change in behavior, why not believe the counter-story?

Matthew 28:19

The resurrected Jesus commands his eleven male followers to “make disciples of all the nations” (*panta ta ethne*). Should Christians then proselytize Jews?

Panta ta ethne could be translated “all the Gentiles,” but this still would still keep evangelism of Jews. The Great Commission is an extension of the mission, not an end to the old. Matthew 10:6 (see 15:24) insists that the mission is to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The resurrected Jesus does not say “Make disciples of all the Gentiles and forget those Israelite sheep.”

Some Christians believe that the Jews are still under covenant with God and therefore do not need evangelizing. Others seek to bring Jews to “completion” or “fulfillment.” In this Evangelical view, Jews who accept Jesus are not “Christians”; they are completed or fulfilled Jews. This approach might be compared to those who would proclaim to, say, Lutherans, “your faith is not complete unless you accept a new book into your canon” (e.g., the Book of Mormon; the writings of Mary Baker Eddy) “and a new conception of your deity” (e.g., a Trinity in three male bodies; a mother-father). Most Lutherans would not see such belief as a “fulfillment.” But some would.

Similarly, most Jews would not accept the New Testament or the idea of the Trinity, but some would. Finally, some Jews who convert to Christianity still proclaim their identity as Jews; some Jews would accept their self-definition; others would see them as apostates, or simply as Christians.

If the Christian wishes to proselytize, there are good ways and bad ways of doing so. The bad way is to suggest that those who do not confess Jesus are damned. The Matthean Jesus precludes this view, commending “not those who say ‘Lord Lord’” [7:21, 22; 25:11] but those who do the will of the Father.” The good way to do it is by example: alleviate poverty; visit the sick and those in prison; make a public display of good works rather than pious proclamation. And when someone asks, “Why do you do this?” respond, “Because I am a Christian.”

Conclusion

Anti-Jewish impressions show up where one might least expect them. In looking over the copy of *Currents* Ralph Klein sent me to help me prepare for this essay, I found the following note on Matt 6:1–6, 16–21: “Certainly, the strained relations with the synagogue in Matthew’s world make this a bit of polemic against conventional Jewish piety as practiced in a Roman culture” (*Currents in Theology and Mission* 33 [December 2006]: 509). Despite the fact that the homilist goes on to state that “Matthew also aims the polemic at the constant temptation to this kind of heartless piety in his congregation (and ours),” the damage is already done. According to this article, bad practices are for Jews both conventional and heartless; the church only faces the “temptation” to act in conventionally heartless manners. The writer did not intend to be anti-Jewish. Anti-Judaism simply slipped in with the rhetoric.

Avoiding anti-Jewish preaching requires a concerted effort. There are more techniques and safeguards,⁵ but perhaps this illustration will prove most effective. When he was younger, my son attended Nashville’s Orthodox Jewish dayschool. I’d bring this adorable child, in *kippah* (yarmulka) and *tzitzit* (fringes), to my classes and say, “When you talk about Jews or Judaism, think about this child. Say nothing that will hurt him, and say nothing that will cause a member of your congregation to hurt him. Do not use Judaism as a foil, do not bear false witness against it, and do not make the Gospel of Love into a message of hate.”

5. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), chap. 7.



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