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## Intergroup Conflict and Matthew 23: Towards Responsible Historical Interpretation of a Challenging Text

### Abstract

Matthew 23 is challenging because of the nature of the attack Jesus mounts on the scribes and the Pharisees and the way texts such as this have subsequently figured in persecution of the Jews. Responsible historical interpretation of Matthew 23 requires that we pay the closest attention to the precise nature of the intergroup conflict evident in the text in its particular setting, especially by use of social-scientific theory (here drawn from social identity theory). After denying “race” any role in designating ancient or modern groups, I focus on the conflict portrayed between the leaders and certain members of the ethnic Judean group and a Christ-movement with a different kind of identity, one that had transcended ethnic boundaries. Matthew begins with a fairly mild criticism of the scribes and Pharisees (vv 1–7). He then highlights Christ-movement identity (vv 8–12). Next he critiques the Judean outgroup in close engagement with its ethnic character, initially focusing on its leadership (vv 13–36) but then embracing a wider group (vv. 37–39). Using as an example the Vatican II statement on the Jews, I conclude that we should never eschew responsible historical interpretation of a text like Matthew 23 for political reasons.

Key words: Matthew 23, ethnic, Judean, social identity theory, intergroup conflict, delegitimization

Our very necessary post-Holocaust alertness to the evil of anti-semitism and our need to counter it wherever it raises its ugly head make reading Matthew 23 with equanimity a difficult task.

### **The Challenge of Matthew 23**

This difficulty is not simply due to any alleged anti-semitic character of the text. Such a charge is a gross anachronism given that the notion of anti-semitism was coined only in the second half of the nineteenth century to describe attempts to label Jews as members of one of the lower “races.” The whole idea of “race” was itself the product of a risible yet vicious pseudo-scientific effort in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to argue that human beings could be divided into a number of categories (“races”) on the basis of visible, physical characteristics and then, inevitably, arranged in a hierarchical order with “white” Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic peoples at the top and the allegedly inferior “races,” Irish, Jews, Asians, Africans, and so on, at the bottom (Esler 2003: 51–53). The word “race” should never be used to describe an ancient or modern group. Denise Kimber Buell, while fully cognizant of the problems with “race,” insists on using it as an alternative to ethnic group:

Far from seeking to rehabilitate the concept, I use it precisely because of the damage this modern concept has wrought and continues to wreak. If we want to get beyond race, we have to grapple with how it informs historical interpretation even when it is excluded. By provocatively using race interchangeably with ethnicity in this book, I am challenging readers to be accountable to the terms we use for interpreting cultural differences in antiquity [Buell: xi].

While many others (such as Horrell [138] and Marchal, to cite but two) accept this approach, it seems to me at least that it is intellectually and ethically unconvincing. By parity of reasoning, should we smack rather than admonish our children to alert others of the evil of smacking, or laugh uproariously at funerals to warn people of the inappropriateness of such behavior, and so on? We become accountable for the terms we use and show our disapproval of “race” by expressly disavowing it to describe ancient or modern groups, not by embracing it.

Daniel Harrington expressed a similar concern about the inappropriateness of using “anti-semitic” in relation to the ancient world when he wrote, “The term anti-Semitic arose in the late nineteenth century as a result of the prevailing racial theories and is so imprecise as to be unhelpful” (Harrington: 21). But this does not go far enough. It is not just unhelpful but actually detrimental to seek to understand what Matthew 23 meant to its original audience if we insist on seeking to interpret it in terms of a concept, anti-semitism, only invented some nineteen centuries later. Such thwarting of proper historical analysis is particularly unfortunate when we consider that there are, indeed, in Matthew 23 some notably unpleasant ideas that make reading this text very discomfiting, but yet demand due and socially accurate consideration, if we wish to undertake the task of historical investigation in a serious and responsible way. Making this even more urgent is the related problem that in the subsequent history of interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel passages such as Chapter 23 and others, especially the startling self-inculpation of the people before Pilate in Jerusalem, “His blood be upon us and upon our children” (27:25), have been used as justification for persecution of Jews, including in the 19th and 20th century phenomenon of anti-semitism (as noted by Harrington (22). Analysis of Matthew 23 in its late first century CE setting allows us to show the historical situatedness and conditionality of its message and thus to oppose its misappropriation in later contexts.

Harrington also considered that “Anti-Semitic is used today to mean ‘anti-Jewish,’ which is a far more precise and helpful term” (21). Matthew 23 has been described as “anti-Jewish.” Samuel Sandmel has written that “One senses in reading Matthew that his anger and hatred of Jews increases as he writes, especially against the Pharisees, until in chapter 23 it boils over into a unique, unparalleled specimen of invective” (Sandmel: 68). Similarly, M. J. Cook argued that even apparently “pro-Jewish” passages (such as Matthew 5:18; 10:6; 15:24 and 23:3) merely serve to pave the way for anti-Jewish attacks in this Gospel and are really part of Matthew’s “anti-Jewish” position and are not “pro-Jewish” at all.

In the context of the current discussion on what *loudaios* meant in the first century CE Mediterranean world (Miller 2010, 2012 and 2014), I consider that “anti-Jewish” is also problematic in relation to Matthew 23 or any text from that context. The reason for this, in brief, is that the words “Jew” and “Jewish,” as translations of the *Ἰουδαῖος*: *loudaios* (Greek) or *Iudaeus* (Latin) of our sources, are too frequently construed as denoting the members of a religion, Judaism. There is strong evidence, however, especially in the *Contra Apionem* of Josephus (Esler 2009), that the *loudaioi* were like other peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world, members of an ethnic group (understood in the self-ascriptive and interactional sense of Fredrik Barth). Like other peoples in that setting their ethnic identity had a religious dimension but embraced several other aspects as well. Hutchinson and Smith (3–14, at 6–7) have offered a useful list of diagnostic (not

constitutive) elements of an ethnic identity: (a) a common proper name; (b) a myth of shared ancestry; (c) a shared history; (d) a common culture, embracing such things as customs, language and religion; (e) a link with a homeland; and (f) a sense of communal solidarity. For Barth, an ethnic group's sense of its groupness depends on a boundary, and the "cultural characteristics" signaling that boundary can change progressively (14). Thus a group can exist for a very long time, and today's Jews certainly belong to the same group as ancient Judeans. Many are even their biological descendants (Atzmon et al.). But we need to differentiate the specific cultural features constituting their group boundary in each historical period.

The name of every ethnic group in the ancient Mediterranean derived from their land of origin (Romans, Egyptians, Parthians and so on). At one point in the *Contra Apionem* (1.179) Josephus expressly mentions with reference to a saying of Aristotle that the loudaioi were named from loudaia ("Judea"). But translating loudaioi as "Judeans" is not to employ a "geographic" name (which is a lamentably frequent misunderstanding) but an ethnic group name linked to the ancestral homeland, whether they lived in Judea or abroad, just like all the other ethnic groups. At one point Josephus even needs to use a periphrasis in relation to Judeans who were actually born in Judea to distinguish them from Judeans from other lands, all of whom were travelling to Jerusalem at Pentecost (*Judean War* 2.43; Esler 2003: 67–68, 71–72). Those who translate loudaioi as "Jews" fall into the error of exceptionalism, since they then make these people the only ethnic group in the first century ce Mediterranean world not named after their homeland. They also fail to honor the memory of this ancient people by referring to them using a name that does not reflect their own understanding of the group name loudaios and the group identity that they bore at that time. The Josephan evidence in particular puts beyond doubt that the selection of such exceptionalist translations as "Jew" or "Jewish" for loudaios in relation to first century persons is a reflection of politics or ideology, not history (a matter to which I will return in the conclusion of this article). When no other ethnic group was in view, it should be noted, these people also called themselves "Israelites."

On the one hand, the identity of the Christ-movement, especially (although not exclusively) where it consisted of groups of Judeans and non-Judeans sharing the mixed table-fellowship of the Lord's Supper, was not ethnic in this sense, even if it did, at times, use ethnic language in a symbolical or fictive way to describe its own distinctive sense of group identity, as with Paul's enlistment of Abraham in Galatians (Esler 2006). Judeans and Christ-followers represented two different types of group identity, more like chalk and cheese than apples and oranges, and their relationship was asymmetrical not symmetrical.

The thesis of this article is that Matthew 23 is best understood in terms of first century CE history as a product of intergroup conflict between a branch of the Christ-movement on the one hand and the Judean outgroup on the other. To investigate this conflict it will assist to introduce certain perspectives from the social sciences, especially social identity theory that is capable of application to any intergroup conflict. First I will lay out certain broad features of Matthew 23.

### **Matthew 23: Opening Considerations**

Matthew 22:41–24:44 largely reproduces the order of incidents found in Mark 12:28–13:36. Thus

Mark has:

1. the question about the greatest commandment (12:28–34),
2. the question about David's son (12:35–37),
3. denunciation of the scribes (12:38–40),
4. the widow's offering (12:41–44),
5. the destruction of the Temple foretold (13:1–2), and
6. continuation of the Marcan apocalypse (13:3–36).

Similarly, Matthew has in the same order: incident 1. (22:34–40), 2. (22:41–46), 3. (23:1–35), 5 (24:1–2) and 6. (24:3–44). Matthew omits passage 4. and adds a lament over Jerusalem (23:37–39). Matthew probably omitted Mark's passage about the widow's mite because it is a story that "tugs at the heartstrings" and would not have fitted the mood of judgment that permeates Matthew 23 (Garland: 27); it is worth noting that Luke retains this passage in its Marcan position (Luke 21:1–4). At the same time and quite remarkably, however, Matthew has elaborated the three verses of Mark 12:38–40 into the thirty-nine verses of Matthew 23:1–39. While some of the extra material, namely that represented by Luke 1 :43, may have come from Q, that hardly explains the Matthean expansion. The likely explanation for this phenomenon, which will be confirmed in the argument below, lies in real or perceived conflict with a Judean outgroup.

Given this expansion on Mark, much scholarship has been devoted to the manner in which Matthew has, or may have, used sources in the composition of Chapter 23. Ernst Haenchen argued that Matthew created a balanced and consistent composition that built toward a dramatic climax; in his view vv 8–12 were the calm before the storm, followed by the seven woes with their climactic charge that the scribes and Pharisees were murderers. Then comes the decree of judgment on Jerusalem (23:37–39) terminated by Jesus' departure from the Temple (24:1), never to return. Haenchen argued all this went back to Matthew himself. Garland's careful study of the text also advocates its being a Matthean composition (20–23). On the other hand, Kenneth Newport has mounted an argument against Matthean composition. He argues that Matthew 23:2–31 comes from a "Jewish-Christian" (intra muros) source anterior to Matthew (who was writing from an extra muros position) which Matthew has taken and added to it 23:32–39 (Newport: 76–78). The major weakness of Newport's position is his insistence that the Judean material in 23:2–31 could not have been composed after 70.

While I prefer the views of Haenchen and Garland over those of Newport on this matter, since my focus in this article is the final form of Matthew 23 it is not necessary to reach a view on this issue. Nevertheless, the question of intra versus extra muros, which is squarely raised by Newport, bears heavily on the argument below and must be briefly addressed here. The issue, in its current formulation, is whether Matthew was writing for an audience that was still "within Judaism" (hence intra muros), a position for which David Sim is the most prominent champion at present, or whether Matthew's Christ-followers had decisively broken with "Judaism", either by expulsion or secession, and were thus extra muros (on which see Foster). Often associated with the intra muros position is that Matthew taught that his audience was bound by the Mosaic law in all respects, a view held by Sim (1998). Most interpreters active in this debate unfortunately ascribe to a two religions model, one of them being "Judaism" and the other "Christianity" (apparently standing in symmetrical relation to one another, so that the metaphor of the "parting of the ways" can make some sort of

sense). Accordingly, they couch the question as whether Matthean “Christianity” was inside or outside “Judaism.” Yet even when we replace this model with one based on a relationship between two entities with different types of identity—the Judean ethnic group on the one hand and the Matthean Christ-movement on the other—a somewhat similar issue arises. Did Matthew’s Christ-followers consider that they were still part of the Judean ethnic group or did they consider that they were decisively separated from that group? In my view the data strongly points to the latter option (Esler 2013 and 2014c). The investigation into Matthew 23 conducted below will presuppose but will also provide further evidence for this understanding of the Gospel in the context of its publication. My view is close to that of Luz, who regards the Gospel as written when the inclusion of non-Judeans was fairly recent and Matthew was the advocate of that development (Luz: 84–87).

Central to my position on this Gospel is that, while during his ministry the Matthean Jesus primarily restricts himself to Israel (cf. Matt 15:24), on two occasions (Matt 8:5–13 and 15:21–28) he does extend his mercy to non-Judeans and in a number of places makes clear that in the future non-Judeans will be included, as mandated in Matthew 28:19–20 (Esler 2013). Part of this future, which must have been a reality among the Christ-followers for whom Matthew composed this Gospel, was the practice of mixed table-fellowship between Judean and non-Judean members of the movement (as is evident from Matthew 8:10–11). In Matthew 18 we have another occasion on which Jesus is speaking about a matter that relates to the time of the Matthean audience and not to that of his ministry, in the discussion concerning one brother who sins against another (vv 15–20). Textual features such as these indicate that the evangelist is actually working on two temporal levels; mostly he situates Jesus within the timeframe of his actual ministry, but on certain occasions Jesus’ message is for Christ-followers contemporary with Matthew. This means that for Matthew to keep Jesus in character he has to have him engage with characteristic Judean issues in the pre-70 CE period. This is certainly the case in Matthew 5, including 5:23 where he envisages someone leaving a gift at the altar. We will soon observe that in Chapter 23 we have the same situation—dramatically Jesus is speaking to Israelites of his time, while clearly indicating what is going to happen in the future. Although Matthew operates on these two temporal levels, on occasion there is a measure of tension between them. Sometimes what is said could have reference to the dramatic date of the narrative and the position in Matthew’s day. This is all the more important because Matthew makes clear in 23:1 that Jesus is addressing both the crowds and the disciples. I will now set out theoretical perspectives from social identity theory that will inform the subsequent discussion of the text.

### **Social Scientific Perspectives on Intergroup Conflict**

Social identity theory offers useful perspectives on inter-group conflict that closely bear upon the phenomena visible in Matthew 23. The foundational insight of this theory came in Henri Tajfel’s “minimal group experiments” which showed that merely categorizing people into a group led to them discriminating against an outgroup, even when the members of both groups were entirely anonymous to one another (for the seminal experimental report, see Tajfel et al.). Thus ingroup bias and prejudice towards outgroups have been concerns of social identity theory since its inception in the 1970s.

Dovidio et al. have recently affirmed the fundamental role of social categorization for intergroup

conflict. Ingroup members are regarded as being more valuable and more similar than they actually are, while differences with outgroups are exaggerated. At the same time the members of one group are more likely to recognize unique and disparate qualities amongst themselves while regarding members of an outgroup as homogeneous (160). The mere anticipation of interaction with an outgroup can generate anxiety that leads to an avoidance of the interaction and the reinforcement of misunderstanding and divergent perspectives (161). During intergroup interaction, behavior is explained in a way that stabilizes the positive image of the ingroup and the negative image of the outgroup (162). Also, implicitly activated prejudice may lead to negative nonverbal behavior, which is perceived as such by the partner/opponent and thus leads to further negative interactions between the two groups (163). As a result, "inter- group biases can alter the course of intergroup interaction in ways that reinforce and exacerbate biases" (167). Power disparities between groups characterize human societies and are fundamental for intergroup conflict. Members of high-power groups are motivated to maintain their advantageous position, resources and power, for instance, by deflecting attention from power differences or by supporting ideologies that legitimize them. Members of low-power groups, however, seek to gain power and resources (167–68).

Marilynn Brewer has provided, from a social identity perspective, a detailed explanation of how intergroup relations can deteriorate into conflict. "Social identity" in this context means that part of the self-concept of an individual that derives from the knowledge that one belongs to a group, together with the value and emotional significance of such belonging (Tajfel 1978: 63). This means that there can be a very strong affective attachment of the members to the group and positive feelings for and attitudes towards other members. As Brewer has pointed out, such "positive evaluations and expectations give rise to trust and cooperative behavior that in turn justify positive feelings and future expectancies," thus producing a "benign circle" (Brewer: 22). And yet, she notes, such a positive regard among ingroup members "is not devoid of implications for intergroup relations," since it can stop at the boundary between ingroup and outgroup, while "attitudes towards those outside the boundary are, at best, characterized by indifference" (22; italics original). For when positive regard and cooperation are extended to some people but not others on the basis of membership of a social category (that is, a group) "an initial form of intergroup discrimination is evident," so that outgroup members are less likely to be helped, or even viewed as deserving help, and more likely to be regarded negatively (22–23). While such attitudes may be comparatively mild, they set "the stage for more pernicious forms of intergroup discrimination" (23).

Various factors push outgroup discrimination in a negative direction. A comparison with an outgroup may move from the sense of "we are good" to "we are better" if both groups are in competition with one another and improvement in the position of the ingroup can occur only at the expense of the outgroup. This will occur where valuation with respect to resources (including a subjective resource such as status) is relative, so that "the welfare of the ingroup and the outgroup is psychologically a zero-sum distribution" (24). In addition, the closer the two groups are in values and aspirations the more acute will be the competition between them; indeed, the closer the outgroup is, the greater the threat. Ingroup favoritism is strongest in areas that matter most to it, but is relaxed with respect to matters that are important to the outgroup but not the ingroup (25). Something that matters both to ingroup and outgroup is thus likely to be an arena for intense ingroup favoritism, and hence negative attitudes towards the outgroup.

Yet there is a clear distinction between competition such as this—seeking relative gain over an outgroup—and aggression, meaning the intention of harming the outgroup, which may either be motivated by a desire to serve or protect the ingroup or be an end in itself. The step, the very large step, from competition to protect the ingroup to a desire to harm the outgroup is not very well explained merely in terms of the ingroup maintaining positive distinctiveness. No doubt virulent outgroup hate and hostility occur, as can be seen in pogroms and “cleansing” of neighborhoods in ethnic conflicts, but other factors need to come into play for such phenomena to occur (26–28).

One such factor is a competition for scarce resources where the survival of the ingroup may depend on the destruction of the outgroup. Yet research has shown that it is not necessary that such a conflict of interest must concern real and objective resources, since sometimes the threat is subjective and symbolic and conflict can occur as a product of antagonism rather than constitute its cause (28). Relations among ingroup members are characterized by mutual trust and interdependence, features which may have their ultimate cause in the processes of human evolution (28–30). The ethnocentric trust characteristic of ingroup members, however, stands in sharp contrast to the different norms and behavior adopted during interactions with outgroup members. Rather than trust and cooperation, we find wariness and constraint. Such a difference provides a solid foundation for distrusting the outgroup and understanding it in terms of negative stereotypes. Even in the absence of overt conflict, observes Brewer, “the differentiation between ingroup and outgroup behavior creates a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in the realm of intergroup perceptions.” The ingroup tends to present itself in terms of features the opposites of which characterize the outgroup, especially the fundamental polarity between the trusted ingroup and the distrusted outgroup (30). From this it follows that actual or perceived conflict with an outgroup will encourage the generation of extremely negative stereotypes and antagonism.

This trust/distrust dichotomy allows an ingroup to infer malevolent intent on the part of outgroups even where there is none, so that such an inference represents a misattribution. Often emotions play a significant role in this process, with the result that “intergroup anxiety is transformed into more virulent intergroup emotions of fear, hatred, or disgust.” Indeed, according to Brewer, this emotional component is the critical component in turning intergroup comparison into intergroup antagonism (32). She acknowledges that sometimes emotions of disgust and contempt can co-exist with mutual segregation and avoidance between ingroup and outgroup. Nevertheless, where social changes mean that an outgroup has come to be associated with threats to the ingroup—for example, via the prospect that the outgroup will influence or absorb the ingroup—feelings of fear and anger will be generated. This will be the case a fortiori, we suggest, if the outgroup is, or is alleged to be (rightly or wrongly), threatening to extirpate the ingroup.

Stereotypes play an important role in social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams: 64–91). At this point it is worth noting that Henri Tajfel (1981) identified three functions that stereotypes serve for society, but which also apply to smaller groups. “Social causality” refers to the process of accusing a particular group of being responsible for distressing, large-scale social (or non-social) events by elaborating stereotypes alleged to typify the group and its responsibility for the problematic event. This is the phenomenon of scapegoating. “Social justification,” particularly relevant to Matthew 23, means the elaboration of a stereotype or stereotypes alleged to characterize the outgroup so as to justify actions that are planned or have been committed against the group. “Social differentiation,”



thirdly, refers to the practice of an ingroup to enhance the stereotypic differences from outgroups that are thought to constitute its distinctiveness in a context in which intergroup distinctiveness is perceived to be insecure or to be becoming eroded.

Daniel Bar-Tal, another psychologist who employs social identity theory (1990a), has very usefully identified an extreme form of outgroup stereotyping and prejudice that is readily interpreted as the most serious type of “social justification” as described by Tajfel. Bar-Tal has modeled this phenomenon as “delegitimization” (1990b and Bar-Tal & Hammack). In brief, this refers to the categorization of a group into an extremely negative social category that is excluded from the realm of acceptable norms and values. Delegitimization utilizes decidedly negative bases for categorization; denies the humanity of the outgroup; is accompanied by intense emotions of rejection, such as hatred, anger, contempt, fear or disgust; suggests that the outgroup has the potential to endanger the in- group; and implies that the outgroup does not deserve human treatment and therefore harming it is justified (1990b: 66). Bar-Tal and Hammack note that because delegitimization “is rooted in the rhetorical construction of social categories” they view it as “a discursive phenomenon that facilitates intergroup violence by rhetorically placing members of an outgroup in a position of lesser moral and existential worth” (2012: 30).

Bar-Tal poses two broad arenas for delegitimization: inter- group conflict and ethnocentric derogation of another broad social group. The former is relevant for Matthew 23. There are different types of conflict between groups and not all of them involve extreme antagonism, but when they do delegitimization is likely to occur. For Bar-Tal, intergroup conflict often begins when “a group finds itself blocked because the attainment of its goal or goals is precluded by another group” (1990b: 66). This view is closely cognate with Brewer’s postulation of outgroup threats to the ingroup as a stimulus for extreme animosity to the former. According to Bar-Tal, when a group considers that the outgroup is posing a far-reaching and unjustified threat to its basic goals, then it “uses delegitimization to explain the conflict.” Of utmost importance is the fact that whether the ingroup’s belief of impending and serious harm is based in reality or in the imagination is irrelevant, for “it is the perception of the threat that leads to action and reaction” (1990b: 67).

Delegitimization, whatever its moral nature, is cognitively helpful: it allows the ingroup to “understand” the situation quickly and to explain why the outgroup threatens and what it will do in the future (Bar-Tal 1990b: 68), or, we might add, what will happen to the outgroup. In such a situation the ingroup is likely to employ various means of delegitimization such as these:

- Dehumanization: labeling a group as inhuman by characterizing its members as different from the human race, as either “inferior races” or animals, or demons, monsters and satans.
- Trait characterization: describing a group as possessing extremely negative traits that are unacceptable in a given society, such as aggressors, parasites and idiots.
- Outcasting: characterizing members of an outgroup as transgressing social norms so seriously that they should be excluded from society, such as murderers, thieves or maniacs.
- Use of political labels: presenting groups as dangerous to society, such as Nazis, Marxists or imperialists.
- Group comparison: labeling the outgroup with a name of some other very negatively perceived group, such as “Vandals” or “Huns” (1990b: 65–66).

In the Middle East Israeli Jews and Palestinians persistently use means such as these “to explain the threat that each group poses to the other and to justify the harm that they inflict on the other” (1990b: 70).

When the process of delegitimization has begun it may or may not open the way to harming the outgroup:

Delegitimizing labels may indicate either that the delegitimized group is inhuman and therefore harming it is allowed, or that it is threatening and therefore, to prevent the danger, harm should be carried out (1990b: 76).

In keeping with the methodology of social-scientific interpretation, we will apply these social identity perspectives to Matthew 23, both to pose new questions to that text and also to make better sense of the answers that the text provides (the latter aspect akin to “drawing lines between the dots”).

### **Matthew 23 and Intergroup Conflict**

The incidents in the Matthean Gospel immediately before Matthew 23, the questions about the greatest commandment and David’s son (22:34–40 and 41–46), pave the way for the very sharp edge in that chapter. Thus the Matthean Jesus does not praise the lawyer as he does in Mark 12:32–34, while in Matthew 22:41–42 Jesus puts the question directly to the Pharisees (who are not mentioned in Mark at this point), thus creating an encounter and sharpening the issues between him and them (Garland: 23–26).

#### ***Matthew 23:1–7***

Of utmost importance is that in Matthew 23:1 we are told that Jesus was speaking to “the crowds and to his disciples.” This immediately raises the prospect that the Matthean Jesus may have a message that is differentiated between these very dissimilar target audiences and we will see that this is indeed what occurs in this chapter. Indeed, interpreting his very first statement (23:2–3) requires that we distinguish the two: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but they do not practice” (RSV). Newport takes this literally, that is, at its face value, and as similar to Matthew 23:23; on his view it represents “Jewish-Christian” teaching that Matthew simply incorporates into his Gospel (123). Supporters of the intra muros interpretation of Matthew see this statement as evidence that the law of Moses was still binding on his audience (Rabbinowitz). Other interpreters try to avoid what they see as an embarrassment in a variety of ways. For France 23:3a is ironic and not to be taken at its face value (France: 859–60). Talbert also sees it as ironic, noting that “It was a part of prophetic style for the prophet to tell the people to perform an act that obviously was not approved (e.g., 1 Kings 18:27; Isa. 6:9; Jer. 44:25–26; Amos 4:4–5)” (Talbert: 256–57). Supporting this approach is the existence of an ironical command later, at 23:32, where clearly Jesus is not really suggesting that the scribes and Pharisees murder prophets; the statement is not meant to be taken literally. Moreover, not only has Jesus previously attacked the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes to their face (15:3–6), but he has also warned his disciples of the dangers of the teaching (not the actions) of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 16:5–12). The most probable explanation

for the statement in Matthew 23:2–3 is that here Jesus is speaking in a manner dramatically appropriate to the crowds in the time of his mission to Israel and ironically for post-Easter Christ-followers. At this early stage Jesus' criticism of them is comparatively mild. That will soon change.

In Matthew 23:4 he takes the scribes and Pharisees to task for the heavy and difficult burdens they lay on people's shoulders. Such a practice on the part of the leaders of the Judean outgroup stands in stark contrast to what the Matthean Jesus has previously said happens to those who follow him (1 :28–30). With him those who labor and are burdened (οἱ κοπιῶντες καὶ πεφορτισμένοι; 1 :28)—which is pretty much where the scribes and Pharisees leave people, since they load them with heavy burdens (φορτία βάρεια; 23:4)—will find rest. Jesus is offering not just the opposite of the outgroup leadership but the remedy for their abuses. Matthew is drawing a very stark contrast that is entirely at home within the setting of intergroup conflict. So too is Jesus' attack on the scribes and Pharisees in vv 5–7 for parading their pious deeds in public “so as to be seen” (πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι, v 5) that strongly recalls his criticism of the hypocrites in 6:1–6 (there also with the aim of being seen: πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι; v 1) and 6:16–18.

### ***A Discourse on Christ-Movement Identity: The Meaning of Matthew 23:8–12***

Matthew 23:8–12 represent a firmly demarcated section in Matthew 23. Prior to this, after an introductory statement concerning Jesus' audience, the crowds and his disciples (v 1), Jesus has been criticising the scribes and Pharisees (vv 2–7). After vv 8–12 he returns to the scribes and Pharisees in a sequence of seven woes against them (vv 13–36). The words ὑμεῖς δὲ (“But as for you”) with which Matthew 23:8 begins mark a transition to an address, comprising vv 8–12, by Jesus to his disciples, the second part of the audience mentioned in Matthew 23:1. As many, if not most, commentators observe, however, at v 8 the Matthean Jesus is speaking to the disciples of Jesus contemporary with Matthew. This follows especially from the fact that what Jesus says relates (but only in part, as we will see) to how the authority should be exercised within the Christ-movement, an interest that makes sense only in a post-Resurrection context. Thus Schweizer comments that “With verse 8 we come to an admonition addressed to the disciples; here Matthew is less concerned to debate with Judaism than to regulate the Christian community” (431). Davies and Allison (275) recognize that v 8 is directed to “authorities in the church,” who are to shun titles, while according to Wiefel these verses constitute “a short community-rule” (kleine Gemeinderegulierung) from the tradition (Wiefel: 397). While there is an element of truth in these scholarly opinions, Matthew's meaning is rather more ample than they suggest and very heavily dependent on his redaction, as a textual examination that pays close attention to the issue of group identities will reveal. This is an important matter to get right since, as David Garland has accurately observed, vv 8–12 “should be seen as a major clue for understanding the whole chapter” (Garland: 61).

At first sight, these verses appear to cover three statements of much the same type that could be taken as addressed to leaders of the Christ-movement: “But you are not to be called rabbi” (v 8), “And call no man your father on earth” (v 9) and “Neither be called instructors” (v 10). This dimension would even be strengthened were a possible alternate translation to be adopted in v 9: “And call none among you father on earth.” An obstacle blocking the way of treating all three statements in the same way, however, is the circumstance that the first and third are in the passive

and the second in the active voice. This has led some scholars to treat v 9 as a discordant element. According to Garland, “father” is “not a title which the disciples might be tempted to acquire for themselves, but a title which they might bestow on others.” To him this “suggests that v 9 may not be original to the con- text and vv 8–10 are composite” (Garland: 59). Investigating this question and other issues of interpretation that arise in connection with the passage benefits initially from a careful consideration of its structure, something that has been given insufficient attention in research into its meaning hitherto.

### ***The Structure of Matthew 23:8–12***

Here is the basic structure of Matthew 23:8–12 that emerges when one lays out the stichoi and aligns those that fulfill a similar function.

- 1a. ὑμεῖς δὲ μὴ κληθῆτε ῥαββί·
  - 1b. εἷς γὰρ ὑμῶν ἐστὶν ὁ διδάσκαλος·
  - 1c1. πάντες δὲ ὑμεῖς ἀδελφοί ἐστε
  - 1c2. καὶ πατέρα μὴ καλέσητε ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς·
  - 1c3. εἷς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν, ὁ οὐράνιος.
  - 2a. μηδὲ κληθῆτε καθηγηταί·
  - 2b. ὅτι καθηγητῆς ὑμῶν ἐστὶν εἷς, ὁ Χριστός.
  - 2c1. ὁ δὲ μείζων ὑμῶν ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος.
  - 2c2. ὅστις δὲ ὑψώσει ἑαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται,
  - 2c3. καὶ ὅστις ταπεινώσει ἑαυτὸν ὑψωθήσεται.
- 
- 1a. But as for you, do not be called “Rabbi,”
  - 1b. for you have one teacher.
  - 1c1. You are all brothers
  - 1c2. and do not call anyone on earth  
your father
  - 1c3. for you have one father, who is in heaven.
  - 2a. Neither be called “Guides,”
  - 2b. because you have one guide, the Christ.
  - 2c1. He who is the greatest among you will be your servant.
  - 2c2. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled,
  - 2c3. and whoever humbles himself will  
be exalted.

What emerges is a carefully arranged composition. Structurally there are no discordant features. Some decades back J. Ramsey Michaels also proposed that two propositions were dominant here (= 1a and 2a), not three (which would mean the inclusion of 1c2 on an equal level with 1a and 2a), although without setting forth the structure in such a way as to bring out the parallels between 1c1–3 and 2c1–3 (Michaels: 306).

There is, in fact, no messy mix of tradition and redaction here; the passage shows a very firm redactional hand at work, although some material from the tradition has been included in it (in 2c1–

3 especially; cf. Mark 9:35 and 10:43; Luke 13:30 and 18:14). The structure consists of two clusters of meaning, the first elucidating the negative command, “But as for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’” and the second the very similar negative command, “Neither be called ‘Guides.’” 1a is precisely balanced by 2a, as indicated not least by “Neither” (μηδὲ) at the start of 2b. The passage so produced fits nicely into the context since the Matthean Jesus has just been attacking the scribes and the Pharisees for their exercise of teaching authority in three respects: first, the inconsistency between what they say and what they do (vv 2–3); secondly, the onerous nature of their teaching (v 4); and, thirdly, their fixation on attracting honor from their teaching role, including through being called “Rabbi” (vv 5–7), with the latter charge leading straight into v 8. Once again, in the context of intergroup conflict the Matthean Jesus is setting out a diametrically opposite vision of what teaching should be like in the Christ-movement contemporary with the evangelist.

The elucidation of the two primary injunctions (1a and 2a) proceeds in a very similar way in each case. First a broad reason for the command is given, in each case saying something very similar about the Christ, that he is either their one teacher or their one guide. “The Christ” is implied in 1b and expressed in 2b, although some manuscripts also insert “the Christ” in 1b, probably to harmonize the two clauses. Both 1b and 2b are then followed by three clauses of similar length, with the parity of treatment being quite striking. In each case these three clauses provide material that sheds light on the causal statement.

At the same time, however, the connection between each causal statement and its three explanatory clauses is not inevitable, in the sense that one could imagine other material that Matthew could have proffered to support the ideas expressed in 1b and 2b. This increases the significance of the material in 1c1–3 and 2c1–3, since Matthew has used the two causal statements (1b and 2b) as a frame upon which to hang Jesus-sanctioned teaching that he clearly thought his audience needed to hear in the framework of this attack on the Judean leadership. In 1c1–3 and 2c1–3 he provides two mini-essays on particular subjects the content of which we will consider below.

The structure of these two mini-essays is also precisely the same. First there is a general statement in each case, “You are all brothers” and “He who is the greatest among you will be your servant,” and after this come two clauses that shed direct light on it, with each pair of clauses featuring the repetition of key words (“father” in 1c2 and 1c3 and “exalt”/“humble” in 2c2 and 2c3). Before moving to the content of the elements of this passage, it is worth noting that this structuration reveals how inappropriate it would be to regard the statement 1c2 (“and do not call anyone on earth your father”) as in any way parallel to 1a (“But as for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’”) or 2a (“Neither be called ‘Instructors’”). These latter two clauses constitute the primary imperatives, while 1c2 forms part of the explanatory material. We will now proceed to a detailed examination of the text in the light of this structure.

### ***The Textual Data in Matthew 23:8–9***

The injunction in v 8 not to be called “Rabbi” (= 1a) follows naturally from the statement immediately before that this was a title desired by the scribes and Pharisees (v 7). As it is here aimed at Christ-followers contemporary with Matthew who held or aspired to hold teaching roles in

the movement, having that title must have been a live possibility among Judeans at that time. Davies and Allison point out that unequivocal evidence for “Rabbi” as a technical term to designate the authoritative leaders of emerging rabbinic Judaism only appears in the late second century CE so that its use in all four Gospels without its technical meaning is probably to be taken as a term of respect. Nevertheless, they consider it is likely that the Jamnian period witnessed the word’s evolution into a title (Davies & Allison: 275).

The reason given for the negative injunction (= 1b) is that they have (only) one teacher, and that teacher must be the Christ, as we learn in v 10. Yet when we move to the next clause in v 8 (= 1c1), we actually transcend the specific issue of teaching and arrive at something far more fundamental: “You are all brothers.” While it is true, as France notes (863), that this expression rules out differences of status (such as would be imposed by some of them being called “teacher”), it does so only within the context of a much larger reality that is being invoked. This reality is the identity of the Christ-movement in its modality of a fictive brotherhood/sisterhood. As it struggles to develop a new identity for itself in the face of the ethnic identity of the Judeans, the new movement reaches out to the language of the strongest group identity in that context, the family, for appropriate terminology. The word “brother” has already featured as a way to describe post-Resurrection Christ-followers in the instructions for such members laid down in Matthew 18:15–35 and this meaning is picked up here. Matthew was not unique in this respect since “brother” is also an important identity-descriptor for Christ-followers in other New Testament texts, such as John (20:17) and Hebrews (2:1–18). Yet this question of group identity does not end with this statement of the brotherhood of all Christ-followers but is developed even further in the next two clauses that constitute v 9 (= 1c2 and 1c3), whose meaning has largely eluded existing scholarship.

In v 9, immediately following Jesus’ assertion of their all being brothers, Jesus turns to the intrinsically linked question of fatherhood. The “and” (καί) that connects the first clause of the verse (“and do not call anyone on earth your father”) to that which precedes it indicates the close relationship between the statement that they are all brothers and the injunction not to call anyone father. As already noted in discussing the structure of the passage, unlike 1a and 2a this is not a statement relating to teaching office in the movement, but part of an explanatory statement loosely attached to 1a. Townsend observed long ago that these words can either mean “Do not call anyone on earth your father” or “Do not call anyone of you (i. e. ‘among you;’ partitive genitive) father on earth” (Townsend: 57). On the former view the targets of this prohibition remain to be identified; on the latter we have a ban against Jesus’ disciples calling anyone among their number “father.” The former view (favored by most translations and commentaries) is correct for two reasons: (a) it preserves the necessary equivalence in meaning of ὑμῶν (your) in 1c2 and 1c3, with the word being a possessive adjective in both cases (rather than a personal pronoun [in the genitive case] in the first and a possessive adjective in the second); and (b) as Davies and Allison note, the sweeping nature of “father on earth” is inconsistent with the notion that it is only certain members of the Christ-movement who are in view (1997: 276).

Current attempts to explain the point of “and do not call anyone on earth your father” tend to isolate it from “You are all brothers” and to ask who were the targets of the prohibition. Thus, in spite of some detractors, Keener follows the view of Jeremias “that Jesus addresses the custom of using abba as a respectful title for older men and other prominent individuals, especially teachers”

(Keener: 544). Davies and Allison (276–77), on the other hand, suggest three possibilities (none of which they are particularly enamoured of): “Jewish” synagogue leaders, Christian leaders, and dead worthies, by which they mean dead teachers. They consider that the issue here is humility: against the idea that Matthew is combating a new habit of memorializing late teachers with “father” they say “But this scarcely fits the context of 23.9, whose theme is humility—what does humility have to do with what one calls the dead?” (Davies & Allison: 277).

All four of these suggestions, however, fail to take account of the link between the brotherhood of all disciples and the injunction to call no one on earth “your father.” Moreover, the notion of “humility,” proposed by Davies and Allison as the issue at stake here, does not do justice to the nature or richness of the meaning that Matthew is generating in vv 8–9. A rather different view was proposed by Schweizer, who suggested that Jesus originally inveighed against calling Abraham our father (Schweizer: 431–32). But, in so doing, Schweizer says nothing about identity; while suggesting that the historical Jesus might have warned against appeals to Abraham as the father of Israel instead of entrusting oneself to God as one’s only father, he does not say why Jesus would have done this.

Yet another suggestion is far more promising, one made by John Townsend in 1961 and, independently of him, Ramsey Michaels in 1976. In relation to it, Keener has observed that “One rare view proposes that Jesus here prohibits calling the patriarchs fathers, that is, prohibits trusting in descent from Abraham (Townsend 1961; cf. 3:9)” (Keener: 544). Rejecting the idea that the fathers in view were great teachers of the past, Townsend proposed that there was a more plausible explanation, one that went back to Tertullian (*De monogamia*, 6):

Although in early Judaism the great teachers of the past were commonly referred to as fathers, it was even more common to use the term in reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In fact there is a Talmudic injunction limiting the title, father, to these three alone. If Jesus had had this practice in mind, the passage would mean that his followers were not to call the patriarchs father, i. e. not to boast of their Hebrew ancestry [Townsend: 59].

To similar effect, but with more exegetical detail, is Michaels:

In Jewish literature, “father” is less characteristically a title for contemporary Rabbis or religious leaders than for great men of earlier generations. If this is the meaning here, Jesus is urging his disciples not to rely on their Jewish ancestry but on their new and unique relationship to their father in heaven. The point is much the same as in the words of John the Baptist (“Don’t presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as father’...,” Mt. 3:9, Lk 3:8), and corresponds in a way to the debate over Abrahamic and divine sonship in Jn. 8:33–47 [Michaels: 306].

He then adds that when Matthew. 23:9 is understood this way,

it can be read simply as an explanation of “brothers” at the end of v 8. The disciples are brothers not by virtue of a common human ancestry but because they are children of God. Therefore they must call no one but God their “father” [306].

In my view both of these interpreters are correct in their exegesis, as far as they go, but the introduction of the important distinction between the Judean ethnic identity and the identity of the Christ-movement, which stand in asymmetrical relation to one another, allows for a more ample interpretation.

At v 8, with the words “But as for you” (ὁμεῖς δὲ), the Matthean Jesus not only re-directs his discourse to the disciples but also continues with two surprisingly ample statements of Christ-movement identity. The broad context here is the differentiation of ingroup and outgroup identities that formed the early layer of social identity research and paves the way for intergroup tension and conflict. In particular, we witness the process of inscribing positively valued ingroup identity as diametrically opposed to that of the outgroup. But whereas the ostensible differentiation is between the way in which the scribes and Pharisees exercised teaching authority among Judeans contrasted with that of the Christ-movement, the descriptions of the Christ-movement in vv 8–12 extend to far more fundamental differences of identity than this.

For the combined statements of vv 8 and 9, “All of you are brothers” and “And do not call anyone on earth your father, for your one father is in heaven” eloquently testify to the tension between Christ-movement and Judean identities. This is so because one of the main diagnostic indicators of Judean ethnic identity in the first century CE was the idea of patrilineal descent, with histories or myths of descent being one of the most common diagnostic indicators of ethnic identity (see Weber; Barth: 13, and Hutchinson & Smith: 6–7). This notion was focused especially on descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as recognized in this Gospel at the very outset with a genealogy beginning with Abraham (Matt 1:2–17) and as alluded to again in Matthew 3:9 and 8:1. Yet this dimension of the ethnic identity of Judeans also manifested itself in the belief that they were descended from “the fathers,” their male ancestors going back through the long course of Israelite history. This idea is actually mentioned by the Matthean Jesus later in this chapter, in v 30. In v 9 Jesus is establishing a sharp contrast between earthly fathers and a heavenly Father. This means that when he says “do not call anyone your father on earth”—without any limitation on the scope of the word “father”—he is not just referring to a person’s immediate father but to anyone to whom this title could be addressed, and in this setting that includes all his disciples’ male ancestors. At one stroke the Matthean Jesus thus disentitles his disciples from reliance on a central prop of Judean ethnic identity. No doubts attend the reason for this. They now belong to another group with an entirely different kind of identity, a group where they are all brothers, as has just been asserted in v 8, under a heavenly Father. The point here relates to the fundamental character of Christ-movement identity, with the members being brothers/sisters with a heavenly father, in sharp contrast to Judean ethnic identity with its dependence on physical descent from ancestral fathers.

John makes a very similar point in his Gospel. Although, as we saw above, Michaels recognized the issue in John 8: 33–47, it actually surfaces much earlier, in the Prologue, in fact, with the assertion “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13; RSV). As I have argued elsewhere (Esler 2007), here John is defining a Christ-movement identity in terms of a new family of God in a manner that differentiates it from what we could call the ethnic identity of Judeans. In Chapter 8 John goes even further, for there



Jesus rejects the claims by Judeans (v 31) that they were descended from Abraham and that God was their father (vv 39–42) and asserts that their real father was the devil (v 44). We need to recognize (and Michaels was writing long before issues of identity became prominent in interpretation) that the similarities between Matthew and John spring from their involvement in similar dynamics of identity. Both of these evangelists are speaking of a new group identity in the world that eschews physical descent and rather conceives of itself as a new family of siblings with God as Father. In these passages both Matthew and John assume that there is a radical difference between Judean ethnic identity and the new and different identity of the Christ-movement and do so in a context of pronounced outgroup stereotypification.

Matthew 23:9, so interpreted, casts interesting light on the discussion as to whether the Matthean audience was *intra muros* or *extra muros*. As already noted, that whole debate is currently implicated in the flawed assumption that the two identities in question were both religious in nature: “Judaism” on the one hand and “Christianity” on the other. The imagined walled entity underlying the metaphor is a religion, “Judaism.” This image entails asking whether Matthew’s “Christians” were still within “Judaism” or had passed through some notional portal to become a new religion beyond its walls. If the Christ-followers were forced out, this would be akin to expelling heretics. If they left voluntarily, this would resemble the secession of certain members to form a new religious movement. Yet once we acknowledge that the Christ-movement, at least as presented here in the Matthean Gospel, represents an identity of a different type altogether from Judean ethnic identity, the question at issue looks rather different. We now need to ask how ethnic Judeans would have regarded a group whose devotion to Jesus Christ entailed rejection of the notion of physical descent as incompatible with the Fatherhood of God, especially when that view had the practical consequence that non-Judeans could join Christ-groups and engage in table-fellowship with Judean members. This would represent an example of what we call treason, or perhaps could more accurately describe as “ethnic betrayal,” than heresy. A very instructive parallel from an earlier period is found in the dim view taken in 1 Maccabees 1:1–15 of certain Judeans who were seeking to destroy the vital boundary that separated them from other ethnic groups by adopting their customs (Esler 2014a: 137). No wonder that we find Luke reporting the Judean view that it is *ἀθέμιτον* (“lawless,” “unlawful”) for a Judean man to associate with or visit a foreigner (Acts 10:28).

#### *The Textual Data in Matthew 23:10–12*

Matthew 23:10–12 are also redolent of the identity of the Christ-movement, but in relation to an issue not quite as fundamental as that in vv 8–9. The opening statement, 2a, “Do not be called ‘Guides’ (*καθηγηταί*),” notably introduces a plural form compared with the singular “Teacher” (*ῥαββί*) in the parallel clause in v 8. While there is some textual support for the singular, “Guide” (*καθηγητής*), here, it is likely to represent a harmonization both with *καθηγητής* in v 10 and also the influence of the singular form *ῥαββί* in v 8. In addition, the word *καθηγητής* is itself unusual. Its two appearances here are unique in the New Testament, and it does not occur in the Septuagint. France observes that it originally meant leader or guide, but later came to be used of teachers in the sense that they “show the way intellectually or spiritually” (France: 864). Based on non-biblical usage of the word, Byrskog has argued that for Matthew *καθηγητής* was a teacher of higher dignity than an ordinary *διδάσκαλος* (Byrskog: 287–90; cited by France: 864). This seems very likely here, since the notion of Jesus as *διδάσκαλος* has already appeared in v 8 and *καθηγητής* must

convey something more. But why is *καθηγητής* used here in the plural? Michaels (307) valuably suggests that that “the matter is no longer a matter of particular titles, but of a general attitude toward honor and authority.” He likens the point made to that of Mark 10:42–44, as preserved in Matthew 20:25–27. This view is confirmed in what follows.

With the next clause, 2b, “because you have one guide, the Christ” (*ὅτι καθηγητής ὑμῶν ἐστὶν εἷς, ὁ Χριστός*). we have an explanation parallel to 1b above, “for you have one teacher.” At this point the difficulty Matthew has in juggling the dramatic present and the actual present for his audience becomes visible, seeing that only here in the canonical Gospels does Jesus refer to himself as “the Christ.” D. A. Carson (101) has argued that Matthew “is unambiguously writing from the confessional stance of his own mature reflection” when he uses the expression “Jesus Christ” (as at Matthew 1:1 and 1:18). Carson suggests that to describe the events of Jesus’ ministry Matthew uses the titular form (i. e. “the Christ”). “In short,” he notes, “Matthew ably distinguishes between his own linguistic practice and Christological understanding, and that enjoyed by the disciples during the days of Jesus’ ministry” (Carson: 101). This is reasonably accurate although it is not so easy to draw this distinction in Pilate’s two uses of the word (27:17 and 22). Furthermore, things are not so straightforward here. Jesus has previously instructed his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ (16:20) and he has avoided calling himself this hitherto. In the light of these considerations we conclude that the statement in v 10, “Because you have one guide, the Christ,” presupposes a later period when that was indeed how Jesus was openly regarded among his followers. It refers to the period after Jesus’ death and resurrection when the final command that he gave the eleven disciples on the mountain in Galilee (Matt 28:18–20) has become a reality, including that they must teach everything that he commanded them, while he would be with them all days until the consummation of the age (v 20). The reality of Jesus being present while his commandments are taught by his disciples well expresses the idea of the Christ as *καθηγητής*. This is the case even granted Carson’s point that at the time Matthew was writing the use of “Christ” as the second part of Jesus’ name was becoming common or was already in the ascendant.

Matthew 23:1 –12 (= the clauses marked 2c1–3 above) also relate to the present experience for the Matthean audience, even if one can well imagine that they were uttered by the historical Jesus for present application during his ministry. The view of Davies and Allison that in vv 1 –12 we see “a general call for humility, the paradigm of which is Jesus (20.26–28)” represents a far too narrow view of their meaning (Davies & Allison: 278). The statement “He who is the greatest among you will be your servant,” which is similar to what Jesus has said earlier (Matt 20:26–27) and has a parallel at Luke 22:26–27, prescribes for the Christ-movement a reversal of roles in a number of areas. It does not simply recommend a personal disposition to be humble. It must include, for example, the manner in which authority is to be exercised in the community, in particular, how followers are treated by leaders, not just the personal disposition adopted by leaders in doing so. Much the same point must be made with respect to 2c2–3: “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” These statements are similar to teaching by Jesus earlier in this Gospel (18:1–5) and have a close parallel at Luke 14:1 . They encapsulate ethical norms and behavioral practices distinctive of the Christ-movement, even if the notion of humbling the exalted and exalting the humbled has earlier precedents in Israelite tradition (cf. Prov 29:23) and elsewhere, including in Ahiqar: “If thou, my son, wouldst be exalted, humble thyself before God, who humbles the lofty man and exalts the humble man” (Column 10, lines 149–50, in

Cowley: 225). These balanced two clauses of Matthew 23:12 provide for a radical rejection of prevailing modes of conduct in the honor and shame culture that was pervasive in the ancient Mediterranean. While they reflect what it means for a guide, the “greatest” among them, to act like a servant, they transcend this arena and really occupy the entire domain of the attitudes and behavior Christ-followers must adopt vis-à-vis one another, all of which thus become potent identity-descriptors of the movement. Again, this is not about humility but the much broader notion of the new identity of the Christ-movement.

### *Conclusion on the Meaning of Matthew 23:8–12*

This analysis of Matthew 23:8–12 confirms what was suggested above: that in these verses we find two mini-essays on Christ-movement identity. The first discourse, 1c1–3, encapsulates this identity as a brotherhood under God sharply differentiated from Judean ethnic identity with its focus on patrilineal descent. It relates to the very nature and basis for existence of the group. Here the inter-group dimension is prominent. The second discourse (2c1–3) drills into that identity to typify the manner in which the leaders and all members must be disposed and behave towards other members. It lays down counter-cultural norms relating to attitudes and behavior for the members. This passage valorizes the intra-group dimension of group belonging and identity.

### **Seven Woes on the Scribes and Pharisees: The Meaning 23:13–36**

Having legitimated, that is explained and justified, important aspects of the ingroup identity of the Christ-movement in Matthew 23:8–12, the Matthean Jesus then proceeds to launch an increasingly serious attack on the ethnic Judean leaders in Matthew 23:13–26 that illustrates many aspects of intergroup conflict and outgroup stereotypification and delegitimization discussed above. In Matthew 23:8–12 we find very positive, indeed ethnocentric views, of a sort calculated to develop trust and interdependence among the members (they are all “brothers” after all) expressed towards the ingroup. Yet as noted above in discussing the views of Marilyn Brewer, trust and cooperation between ingroup members can be balanced against wariness and constraint towards outgroups that provide a fertile field for worsening intergroup relations. We observe phenomena closely comparable to this in the seven woes of Matthew 23:13–36.

Commentators disagree on the intention of the seven woes (οὐαὶ). Three main possibilities have been suggested: first, as expressions of sorrowful pity; secondly, as expressions of pity and anger; and, thirdly, as curses, an extreme form of denunciatory judgment. Garland’s careful analysis provides strong evidence for the third possibility, advocated by Ernst Haenchen, being correct (64–90; Haenchen). Yet such condemnation is a product of Matthean redaction and should not be attributed to the historical Jesus (Garland: 87). The evangelist was writing from a perspective in which the “the coming disaster implied by the woes against the leaders of Israel had come to pass with the destruction of Jerusalem; and the mission to Israel had ended in failure” (Garland: 89). At the end of the chapter the fate of the leaders will be widened to embrace Jerusalem as well (Matt 23: 37–39), while a little later all the people before Pilate will accept responsibility for the death of Jesus (Matt 27:25). Since limitations of space preclude a full discussion of the woes here, I will concentrate instead on certain aspects that illustrate and strengthen my argument.

### *The First Woe (Matthew 23:13)*

The first reason for denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:13) is that they shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces; they neither enter themselves nor permit those seeking to do so, to enter. (I am omitting consideration of Matthew 23:14 here on account of the textual difficulties surrounding its authenticity.) In Luke a similar woe is raised over lawyers who have taken away the key of knowledge, who do not enter themselves and who prevent others from entering (1 :52). The Matthean version is included in the extended case mounted here against the scribes and Pharisees and is a more serious charge given that the notion of entering or getting into the kingdom of heaven has previously occurred on a number of occasions in this Gospel as an expression denoting the principal goal that Jesus offers to those who listen to him (5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23–24; and 21:31). On the other hand this is very much a Christ-movement way of looking at the situation. Salvation may have been the goal of Christ-followers, but was this really how an ethnic Judean would have viewed his or her major life goal? It is extremely instructive that John (9:27), looking at Judeans from a Christ-movement perspective, mistakenly attributes to them (in the late first century ce) a belief that they regarded themselves as disciples of Moses, which they did not (Esler 2014b: 189–91). For Moses was their lawgiver, just as Solon was for the Athenians and Lycurgus for the Spartans (Esler 2009). Similarly Matthew, viewing ethnic Judeans with a Christ-movement understanding, misinterprets their leaders as being focused on salvation. Jesus has already indicated that the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees will not be enough to gain entrance to the kingdom of heaven (5:20). Scribes and Pharisees in the second half of the first century ce instead regarded righteousness as expressing the goal of life, since this certainly encompassed the benefits of Judean ethnic identity. We see this in Galatians, where righteousness (along with descent from Abraham) is being presented by Paul's opponents as the glittering prize of Judean identity for his non-Judeans undergoing circumcision (Esler 1998: 141–77). The preaching of Jesus on righteousness in Matthew 5:20–48 is really an audacious attempt by Matthew to appropriate a primary expression of Judean identity. It presupposes the vital importance of righteousness for Judeans but asserts that Christ-followers have it in spades!

### *The Second Woe (23:15)*

The extent to which Judean leaders in the first century ce did attempt "to make proselytes" is quite disputed (McKnight). Unfortunately, the notion of making proselytes has been almost uniformly interpreted as "converting Gentiles to Judaism," in other words, a process of precipitating movement to a new religion. A long-standing disposition among scholars to accept that this happened much as the Matthean Jesus claims here has been challenged recently, for example by Scot McKnight (16–17) and Irina Levinskaya (49). From the perspective advocated in this article, however, "to make a proselyte" means to persuade someone to accept Judean ethnic identity, not to become an adherent of a religion "Judaism." This is a very different and larger change of identity. Part of it means to become a descendant of Abraham. While for such "proselytes" the claim of actual physical descent from the patriarch could not be made, as far as males were concerned the process of circumcision that accompanied joining the people of Israel was a notably physical act that may have provided a substitute for actual descent. There are very rich data on the acquisition of Judean identity in Galatians. Abrahamic descent was clearly being offered to Paul's non-Judean Christ-followers in Galatia as a benefit that would flow from circumcision, and this necessitates that

there was considerable attraction in that idea. Paul's response is to run the highly artificial argument that it is actually those who have faith in Christ who are the sons or seed of Abraham, as in Galatians 3:7, 29 (Esler 2006). So when Paul suggests that it is in Christ Jesus that the blessing of Abraham is obtained (Gal 3:14), his argument presupposes that his Judean opponents were holding out the prospect of that blessing by another route: Judean identity. To this extent, it is also likely that in the Matthean understanding there was competition between Judeans and Christ-followers to attract new members, either to become Judeans or to become Christ-followers through baptism without a change of ethnic identity (Matt 28:19–20). We have noted above how competition between groups is one of the factors that encourages intergroup conflict.

That for Judeans to make proselytes meant to endow them with valued Abrahamic descent (via circumcision), that is, to provide them with succession from a great figure in the past—very often a central prop of an ethnic identity—is confirmed by the sting in the tail of Matthew 23:15: “And when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell (υἱὸν γεέννης) as yourselves.” France (870–71) is quite justified in noting that “child of Hell” is a Semitic idiom for someone who belongs to and is destined for hell. Nevertheless, in the present context (especially where we have had mention of “fathers” as recently as v 9) the point of the remark lies in the implicit subversion of the notion that such a proselyte (or his Judean sponsor) is a child of Abraham (or of Isaac or Jacob for that matter).

Once again, it is useful to note the comparison with John 8:31–59. Here the Judeans with whom Jesus is speaking affirm that Abraham is their father (8:39, 53). Jesus concedes that point while making clear that his father is God (8:54–55). Yet at the same time he also asserts that their father is the devil (8:44). The point of this charge is that they share the devil's characteristics: like him, they are murderers who are opposed to the truth (John 8:44). Presumably the Matthean Jesus, likewise, is not seriously denying that the scribes and Pharisees in his sights are Judeans who have descended from Abraham, nor that proselytes were accorded that status. Rather, in the process of negatively stereotyping the leaders of a threatening outgroup, he is reinterpreting their identity by imputing to it sonship from hell. This is no doubt a way of saying, in the intemperate rhetoric of intergroup conflict, that they behave very badly indeed. The charge at Matthew 23:15 that the scribes and Pharisees make a proselyte a child of hell is thus at home in this effort in various reaches of the first century ce Christ-movement to undermine Judean claims to Abrahamic descent by tarring them with the charge of demonic ancestry. For Christ-followers, of course, the only father is the heavenly one (Matt 23:9). The denunciation of proselyte activity so expressed therefore presupposes a clash between two very different types of group identity. More specifically, the charge of demonic ancestry well illustrates the process of delegitimization as described by Daniel Bar-Tal, in particular that aspect of it that constitutes “dehumanization,” the process of labeling a group as inhuman by describing its members, inter alia, as demons, monsters or satans. This will become a prominent theme of the woes.

### *The Third Woe (23:16–22)*

In Matthew 23:16–22 Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees for their misdirections and misunderstandings in relation to oath-taking. Here Jesus refers to them as “blind guides” (v 16), a description he previously applied to the Pharisees in Matthew 15:14 and will repeat in the fourth

woe (Matt 23:24). He also calls them “blind fools” (v 17) and “blind people” (v 19). This type of language is consonant with that aspect of delegitimization that Bar-Tal calls “trait characterization,” meaning the attribution of characteristics that are unacceptable or very negatively perceived in a society, such as blindness and stupidity.

France reasonably captures the point of these verses when he suggests that “The basis of Jesus’ criticism here is that the scribal approach is superficial, and fails to think through the principles underlying the details on which their debate is focused” (France: 870). The Matthean Jesus is here neutral as to the legitimacy of that practice. We would not expect him to endorse it when in Matthew 5:33–37 he had warned his disciples against taking oaths at all. As Newport points out: “To say ‘all oaths are binding’ does not contradict the statement ‘do not swear’” (Newport: 140). These considerations indicate that this is not teaching for the disciples (and thus not for the Matthean audience) but for the crowds in the dramatic setting. Any Judean members of Matthew’s audience, however, would have drawn from this passage the realization that Jesus had in his lifetime demonstrated the inadequacy of claims of scribes and Pharisees in relation to oath-taking. In spite of views to the contrary (Newport: 138 and France: 872), there is no reason to assume that the preoccupation with temple rituals in this passage presupposes a period when the temple still stood. This is simply a result of Matthew having his Jesus speak in character to crowds at the dramatic date before the temple’s destruction. Prior to 70 CE the temple cult formed a vital part of the customs that played their part in the maintenance of Judean ethnic identity. The cult is the λατρεία (latreia) mentioned by Paul in his list of elements of Israelite identity in Romans 9:4–5. Here Jesus adverts to the presence of the cult as the context for oaths such as these but does not subvert it.

#### *The Fourth Woe (23:23–24)*

In the fourth woe Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of paying close attention to small matters of the law (νόμος), like tithing garden herbs, while ignoring the weightier ones, such as justice and mercy and faith/faithfulness. Interpreters disagree as to whether the Matthean Jesus is here attacking the scribes and the Pharisees or their teaching, with Newport (140–42), for example, favoring the former view and Garland (136–41) the latter. In opting for the former view, (which does accord more with the whole point of the woes), Newport notes that Jesus seems relaxed about observance by the scribes and Pharisees of certain aspects of the law, while criticizing them for not observing others. He concludes that this demands a back-ground of “intra-Jewish controversy” (Newport: 141). Yet the pattern we have seen already, of a rather difficult juggling act by Matthew to acknowledge the dramatic date of this discourse while addressing the needs of his audience, is present here too. Matthew’s audience may well have considered it appropriate that when speaking to Judean crowds in the 30s CE Jesus should have adopted such a stance—especially when, in and for that context, he has already recognized their teaching authority while lambasting their behavior in general terms (Matt 23:2–3).

But surely the presence of his targeted audience in Matthew’s mind as he composed this material peeps through when Jesus suggests that one of the weightier matters of the law with which they should have been concerned was faith (πίστις—Matt 23:23). Since when was faith one of the heavier aspects of the law? The word only appears once in the Septuagintal version of the

Pentateuch, at Deuteronomy 32:20, where it translates *Nwm*) and means “faithfulness,” a characteristic God taxes the Israelites in Sinai with lacking. On the other hand, it appears eight times in Matthew—its use at Matthew 23:23 representing the last instance of the word—and on each occasion it refers to a, perhaps the, fundamental characteristic of those aligning themselves to the new reality Jesus has announced (Matt 8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; 17:20 and 21:21). Within the dramatic setting of the Gospel, in the years of Jesus’ ministry, the neglect of πίστις by the scribes and Pharisees reflects their rejection of Jesus in his lifetime. Yet he is accusing Judean leaders from the 30s of neglecting something which was actually crucial to Christ-movement identity towards the end of the first century CE. The manner in which faith is (very artificially) presented as an aspect of the law continues Matthew’s efforts to appeal to the Judean members of the Christ-movement. It also coheres with his efforts elsewhere to smooth over the chasm that had opened up between the Christ-movement, on the one hand, and the Judean people and the law of Moses, on the other. This chasm is visible in Matthew 5:17–20, where Jesus exhibits an exaggerated regard for the law (see Esler 2014c). But it is even clearer in the sharp differentiation between Christ-followers and “Judeans” (*Ioudaioi*) implied by the charge that the latter spread a false story about the resurrection (Matt 28:15).

#### *The Fifth Woe (23:25–26)*

The charge here is essentially that the Pharisees are full of violence and rapacity even though it is dressed up as a complaint about the impurity of their vessels—the inside or contents and outside of the vessel are used metaphorically of the person, just as the tomb will be in the next two verses (France: 875). This is a very severe condemnation typical of extreme forms of outgroup stereotyping and delegitimation in the context of inter-group conflict. In Bar-Tal’s discussion of delegitimization, the charge that they are full of violence represents “outcasting,” describing a group as so seriously in breach of social norms that, like murderers for example, they should be excluded from it.

#### *The Sixth Woe (23:27–28)*

This woe is a variation of the theme of the previous one. Like outwardly beautiful whitewashed tombs that nevertheless contain rotting corpses, they give the appearance of being righteous while actually being full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. This is, again, the generalized abuse in extreme terms of the leadership of a despised outgroup not unusual in the context of intergroup conflict.

#### *The Seventh Woe (23:29–36)*

With the seventh and final woe, the sharp distinction between the group identities in this discussion vigorously re-asserts itself. First, Jesus expands upon the sixth woe by referring to the activities of the scribes and Pharisees in building tombs for the prophets and adorning the monuments of the righteous (v 29). He then goes on to explain the hypocrisy involved in their doing so (vv 30–32). From an ethnic identity point of view, these are highly suggestive verses. When in v 30 Jesus attributes to them the sentiment “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets,” we are again confronted with the centrality of physical descent for Judean ethnic identity that is presupposed in v 9 as discussed

above. The Matthean Jesus not only recognizes that descent from male ancestors is a primary mode by which the scribes and Pharisees (like all Judeans) ascribed to themselves Judean identity but also imputes to them a likely attempt to distance themselves from a particularly abhorrent way that those same ancestors behaved—in killing the prophets.

This subject has been mentioned a little earlier in the Gospel, in the Parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants (Matt 21:33–41), a parable magisterially discussed by Kloppenborg, with its mention of the servants of the land- owner whom the tenants beat, kill and stone (vv 34–36), before he sends his own son. The scriptural foundation for the allegation of killing the prophets, as opposed to accounts of slaying a particular prophet, is found in Nehemiah 9. Here, when Ezra is addressing God and recounting the whole, troubled course of Israel’s history, he says, after describing their conquest of the rich land of Canaan and with reference to Israelites generally: “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against thee and cast thy law behind their back and killed thy prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to thee, and they committed great blasphemies (Neh 9:26; RSV).” Such a notion was developed in Israelite tradition in texts such as *Lives of the Prophets*, probably composed in the first century ce (Hare). It also outcrops in Stephen’s accusations against the Judean leadership in Acts 7:52–53. In 1 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul claims the Judeans killed Jesus “as well as the prophets.”

In v 31 Jesus turns their self-ascription as descendants of such ancestors on its head, saying: “Thus you bear witness against yourselves, that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.” Here Jesus assumes a consequence of physical descent that must have been accepted in this culture (see John 8:44), namely, its capacity to carry personal characteristics, such as a proclivity for violence, down the generations. Thus we learn in Exodus 20:5 that descendants who walk in the ancestors’ ways will reap the ancestors’ judgments. This assumption becomes quite explicit in v 32, when he reinforces such a connection between ancestors and descendants by stating, “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers” (RSV). He purports to direct them to act in accordance with the similarity they have inherited from their ancestors before them. The imperative is ironic, of course; Jesus’ demand that they do so is merely his way of asserting that this is what they will do, as we see set forth in vv 34–38. He next affirms the depth of their evil in a way that continues to play upon the notion of physical descent: “You snakes, progeny (γεννήματα; gennēmata) of vipers, how will you flee from the judgment of hell?” (v 33).

One of the standard words in the Greek of this period for what we would call an ethnic group was γένος (genos), often grievously mistranslated as “race” (so Buell: 1). The word appears, for example, in Josephus’ *Contra Apionem*, along with λαός (laos) and ἔθνος (ethnos), to denote the various ethnic groups in the Mediterranean world of his time, including the Judeans (see Esler 2009: 78–80 for the relevant data in the *Contra Apionem*). It is cognate with γεννάω (gennaō), a transitive verb for which the somewhat antique English word “beget” remains a useful translation. Thus a genos is a descent group, a family or a people that traces its ancestry back through male ancestors generation after generation, a pattern embedded in genealogies such as in Matthew 1:2–17. A belief in such shared common descent, regardless of whether the physical lineage claimed was real or fictive, is often a central feature of ethnic identity, as Max Weber pointed out as long ago as 1922 (Weber: 389). Even Fredrik Barth, in his famous 1969 essay on the self-ascriptive nature of ethnic identity, noted that an ascription of someone to a social category was ethnic in



character “when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background” (Barth: 13; emphasis added). In this context of descent and ethnic identity, Jesus’ description of the scribes and Pharisees as the “progeny (gennēmata) of vipers,” a word also cognate with gennaō and genos, carries a very heavy rhetorical punch. The force of the expression comes in the re-definition of their ancestors not as “the fathers” now but as vipers. This is savage invective: they are not really even Judean but rather . . . ophidian. Again, it represents that aspect of delegitimization that Bar-Tal calls “dehumanization,” whereby the members of an outgroup are labeled as different from the human race, here because they are animals (earlier in the passage they were presented as demonic).

A similar train of thought, which confirms this line of argument, appears earlier in the Gospel, in what John the Baptist says to the Pharisees and Sadducees:

You progeny (γεννήματα) of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming anger? Bear fruit worthy of repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father;” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham [Matt 3:7b–9].

The critical point is that in describing the Pharisees and Sadducees as “progeny of vipers” (the same expression Jesus will later apply to the scribes and the Pharisees) John appreciates that their likely riposte will involve an assertion of their Abrahamic ancestry. In other words, John assumes that they will reject the potent slur on their lineage that is entailed in descent from snakes by asserting their descent from Abraham. He knows that they will interpret the slur as related to descent. So that even though Matthew 3:7b–9 is a Q passage—albeit in Luke targeted at the crowds (Luke 3:7–8)—when we reach what Jesus says in Matthew 23:33 we have been schooled by this earlier discourse to deduce what we would otherwise have suspected—that descent from snakes forms a dark counter-claim to descent from ancestors, meaning Abraham in Matthew 3 and the fathers here.

In Matthew 23:33 Jesus thus subjects one of the pillars of Judean ethnic identity characterizing the scribes and Pharisees to a savage reappraisal. Once again, what the Matthean Jesus says here finds parallels in the approach taken by John when he has Jesus not only deny the Judeans Abrahamic ancestry and divine sonship (John 8:39–42) but also assert that their father is actually the devil (John 8:44). The charge of ophidian descent in Matthew 23:33 is matched by that of diabolical descent in John 8. In both cases Judean ethnic identity is targeted via a re-interpretation of the ancestry that was central to it.

While the charge of being descended from prophet-killers has particular application to the scribes and Pharisees, since they are the ones who have been building tombs for the prophets and Jesus wants to underline the hypocrisy that attaches to them in particular, the implication is left hanging from what he says in Matthew 23:29–33 that all Judeans are descendants of the Israelites who killed the prophets. Corroboration of this view will come a little later, in the remark by Jesus, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you” (Matt 23:37a). Responsibility for these murders will soon be imputed to the (Judean) inhabitants of Jerusalem, not just to the scribes and the Pharisees, and this can only be on the basis of their physical descent

from those who did this in the past, in other words, on the basis of their ethnic identity.

A dramatic change comes with v 34. These verses roughly correspond to Luke 1 :49–51. In that passage, however, Jesus attributes the sending of the prophets and apostles to the Wisdom of God and it is Wisdom who states that they will be killed but without laying the blame for them at the door of the lawyers to whom Jesus is speaking. Indeed, the Lucan Jesus appears to attribute responsibility for the deaths of the prophets to the fathers, not his present interlocutors (with the latter being criticized rather in v 48 for building their tombs and thus endorsing their actions). Things are very different in Matthew 23:34–36. Having just offered a general criticism of the characteristics and identity of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says the following:

Therefore, look! I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood poured out on the earth, from the blood of Abel the righteous to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar [vv 34–35].

So it is now Jesus who is doing the sending and predicting the particular acts of violence and homicide to his agents will be subjected—but now by the scribes and Pharisees, with the acts of a type closely tied to how he has just described them and their links to Judean prophet-killers in the past. The reference to “your synagogues” is another sign of the decisive break between Judeans and Christ-followers (Newport: 152).

With this accusation we once again confront the practice of Jesus in this passage of speaking in a way that invokes the second temporal dimension of the Matthean Gospel, that which deals with events beyond the lifetime of Jesus and either contemporaneous with the evangelist’s audience, or at least within its recent experience. Garland speaks of “the subtle ‘christianization’ of the pericope in comparison with Luke,” with the use of “you” throughout vv 29–39, for example, making this issue “definitely a contemporary one” (Garland: 171–72). As France rightly notes, moreover, the future tenses used here to describe the fate of Jesus’ emissaries “indicate that this is not about the pre-Easter mission of the Twelve (sc. Matt 10:5–23), but about what is to happen after Jesus’ own death” (France: 878).

Yet it is very difficult to take this account at face value. It is possible that the scribes and the Pharisees had played some part in pursuing those spreading the Gospel and having them scourged as part of synagogue discipline. Both of these things had happened to Paul, for in Galatians he mentions people who turned up advocating circumcision in Antioch and in Galatia and in 2 Corinthians 1 :24 he says he had been beaten by the Judeans on five occasions. Yet the additional claim that they had killed them seems exaggerated and is only supported by the fate of Stephen in Acts 7 and by the allegation in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–15 (a passage additionally problematic for its suggestion that it was the Judeans who killed Jesus). Furthermore, the idea that they carried out crucifixions (a Roman form of execution) lacks any evidentiary basis and is very probably false. Commentators tend to minimize this last point by claiming Matthew means that the Judeans or their leaders encouraged the Romans to crucify the Christ-movement prophets as they possibly had with Jesus, not that they did it themselves. But where is the evidence that any follower

of Jesus was crucified at the instigation of Judeans in the first century?

In addition, these actions are next presented as the reason for the destruction that is coming for Judeans and their leadership, with Jesus foretelling in v 36 that “all these things will come upon this generation.” In v 37 he expands the charge of prophet-killing from the leadership to Judeans more generally in the form of Jerusalem, whose people he had offered to take under his wing but who had refused. Matthew 23:38 looks beyond his own time to that in which the temple has been destroyed. While it is not likely that Matthew wants his audience to believe that the Judean leadership is just as dangerous as it was before 70 CE, the strength of his critique probably indicates that they still had the capacity to trouble members of the Christ-movement. In v 39 Jesus returns to the dramatic setting, as he announces his departure from the temple that occurs in Matthew 24:1. If we ask what is going on here, the only viable answer is that in Matthew 23:34–38 we encounter intergroup conflict in one of its most extreme forms.

As noted above in relation to social conflict, Marilyn Brewer has argued that where an outgroup has come to be associated with threats to the ingroup (as in Matthew 23:34–35), lower levels of intergroup anxiety can be transformed into more virulent emotions directed at an outgroup, such as fear, hatred and distrust. That pattern is being played out in this Matthean passage with pronounced intergroup antagonism being generated. In line with Tajfel’s notion of “social justification,” we here witness the elaboration of stereotypes, mainly characterizing the leadership of the Judean outgroup represented by the scribes and the Pharisees but also extended to other Judeans in Matthew 23:37, in a manner calculated to justify actions that are planned, in train or already executed against that outgroup. In the present case those actions will be undertaken not by ingroup members but by God himself. But such destruction still requires a justification and that is what the Matthean Jesus provides. Fairly extreme examples of the phenomenon Bar-Tal has described as delegitimization occur here. Thus we observe the following: the denial of the humanity of the outgroup leaders (they are, *inter alia*, ophidian); the feelings of distrust, anger, fear and disgust directed towards them; the allegation that the outgroup have taken the lives of ingroup members, even to the extent of crucifixion; and the necessary implication that the Judeans do not deserve human treatment and fully merited the destruction some of them at least have (already) received. As already noted, it is of little account whether the ingroup’s belief of impending and serious harm is based on reality or imagination, since “it is the perception of the threat that leads to action and reaction (Bar-Tal 1990: 67).” We must also add here that while the events described in Matthew 23:34–35 happened in the post-Easter period up to 70 CE, it is likely Matthew intends his readers to understand that they are still under threat from them. Even if he did not, however, his description still served to characterize the Judean outgroup in an extremely negative manner in relation to its past actions and in the context of the intergroup tension and conflict (which, as Brewer maintains, can be actual or perceived) just set out.

Finally, it should be clear from the argument above that in Matthew 23 we are encountering the position of the evangelist not the historical Jesus. This is important considering the force of the view expressed by Kümmel that the zealous polemic in Matthew 23 distorted the reality and the spirit of Jesus (Kümmel: 146–47).

## **Conclusion**

I began this essay with the problems raised by the use of Matthew 23 and other Matthean passages (such as Matthew 27:25) in subsequent centuries as justification for the persecution of Jews, including in the anti-semitic mode since the second half of the nineteenth century. The historical analysis of the text conducted above shows, however, just how closely the denunciation of the Judean leadership in this passage is tied to the very specific conditions of Matthew and his audience in the late first century CE. That is, the onslaught on the Judean leadership reflects the situation of a fairly new and no doubt small socio-religious movement focused on faith in Christ struggling to maintain its identity in relation to the numerous and long-established ethnic group from which it had emerged. A major part of that struggling consisted of its self-understanding as a group existing in a state of tension or conflict, real or perceived, with the Judeans. Such a condition of intergroup conflict helps to explain the extremely negative stereotypification of Judean leaders and, to a much lesser extent, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, extending even to aspects of delegitimization, observable in the text. These phenomena are not pretty but they are readily explicable in such a context. Moreover, the very situatedness and context-specificity of the woes against Judean leaders in Matthew 23 throw up a major obstacle to their use in any subsequent historical settings. In particular, it is the very focused nature of the argument that depends, even in its most virulent details, on a contrast between a non-ethnic ingroup and an ethnic outgroup in very particular circumstances at the end of the first century ce that sounds a death knell over its wider (mis)application. That is why Sandmel and Cook went astray in seeing this and other Matthean passages as “anti-Jewish.” As the (by and large religious) identity they understood by use of the word “Jewish” did not exist in the first century CE, Matthew could not have been “anti-Jewish.” All this means that responsible historical criticism is best served by recognizing that the group from which the Christ-movement sprang was ethnic in nature. This requires treating the word loudaioi in our ancient sources as an ethnic designation meaning “Judeans,” even though today’s Jews enjoy religious, cultural, and in many cases biological descent from them. We will continue to do so in spite of those who oppose that position, sometimes even for explicitly non-historical reasons. Thus, in her 2006 book *The Misunderstood Jew*, Amy-Jill Levine includes in one chapter a section headed *The Judenrein New Testament* in which she argues against translating loudaios in first century ce sources as “Judean” and insists on “Jew/Jewish,” a position recently endorsed by Adele Reinhartz. Those of us who translate loudaios as “Judean” are, by necessary and unacceptable implication, doing history in a way that is somehow analogous to the Gestapo clearing Jews from European ghettos prior to their murder. At one point she recalls when a shaven-headed neo-Nazi interrupted one of her presentations by insisting that Jesus was not Jewish but Aryan (Levine: 161). From this incident she concludes that we must translate loudaios as Jew/Jewish to keep such people at bay: she concedes (161) this approach is expressly driven by “political considerations.” In other words, she is asking us not to do history if it might have unpleasant political consequences. I consider that Levine is mistaken on this matter, and I will now recall an aspect of the Second Vatican Council to illustrate why (see O’Malley: 218–23).

During the course of the Council, in the pontificate of Paul VI, the Church fathers turned their attention to a document on the Jews. The man who introduced this document was Cardinal Augustin Bea (1881–1968), a German scriptural scholar. Bea had already insisted to Pope John XXIII (who had agreed) that the subject had to be addressed because all too often Catholic preachers had accused the Jews of deicide and presented them as accursed and rejected by God

and that the Holocaust showed how important it was to stop such depictions. In addition, there was widespread anti-semitism based on the New Testament. Especially prominent were the Gospel of John with its depiction of the “Jews” as enemies of Christ and Matthew 27:25, which had provided a warrant for blaming Jesus’ death on the “Jews” of his time and for imputing that responsibility to the Jews of subsequent ages. Bea was (very properly) intent on absolving from the charge of killing Jesus not only Jews of the modern period but also ancient “Jews,” as distinct from certain of their leaders. He wanted to interpret the New Testament texts historically to achieve this end. But taking this line, or even having a document dealing with the Jews at all, was strongly opposed by some in the Council for political reasons: it risked pushing the Church too much towards Israel and Zionism and would cause immense problems in the Arab world.

If Bea had taken Levine’s approach, he would have succumbed to the blandishments of abandoning history in the interest of politics. But he did not. Instead, he insisted that the declaration had nothing to do with political questions. Yes, people might misinterpret a biblical text and manipulate it for political ends but we should not forsake our duty of accurate historical interpretation for that reason. In my view, Bea was right on this, and Levine is mistaken. If neo-Nazis want to assert that Jesus was not a Judean (or “Jew” for those who prefer that translation of Ἰουδαῖος) but an Aryan, we must demonstrate that their interpretation of the data is flawed, not be bullied by them into jettisoning historical interpretation. And so, after a controversial process, the Second Vatican Council approved the important statement on the Jews in *Nostra Aetate* (promulgated on 28th October 1965), which contains these words: “Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. John 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion” (O’Flannery: 741). By and large, Bea had won. His example remains to this day a model of how to conduct responsible historical interpretation of New Testament texts.

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