

**“HIS BLOOD BE ON US AND ON OUR CHILDREN!”:
A CONTEXTUAL STUDY AND REEVALUATION OF THE
INFAMOUS BLOOD CURSE**

Abstract

After the horrors of the Holocaust, many churches began to reconsider their stance towards the Jews. This reconsideration consistently included the Gospel of Matthew’s statement, “His blood be on us and on our children!” For centuries, this “blood curse” has served as a basis for Christian anti-Jewish violence and Christian animus towards Jews. But perhaps this statement was never intended to lead to such atrocities. This article examines both this phrase’s textual and cultural context, concluding that the anti-Jewish slant was interpreted into the text itself.

Keywords: Matthew, anti-Judaism, antisemitism, blood curse, interfaith

Introduction

The darkness of the Holocaust cast a spotlight onto Christianity. Germany, the country that initiated the Holocaust, had a population that was nearly entirely Christian.¹ The Pope, one of the most respected Christians in the world, remained more or less silent throughout the tragedy.² Some Christians even went as far as staffing concentration camps.³

How could those who subscribed to a religion that taught “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39)⁴ as the second most important commandment—second only to loving God with all of your heart, soul, and mind (Mt 22:36–37)—have followers or members who stood by and

1 “The German Church and the Nazi State,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 6, 2018, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005206>.

2 Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xii.

3 David Cymet, *History vs. Apologetics: The Holocaust, the Third Reich, and the Catholic Church* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 337.

4 All Biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

watched as the Jews were slowly excluded from German society, or even worse, have individuals who actively took part in this spurning—to the point of murdering Jews themselves?

Reflection upon the Holocaust has prompted deep scrutiny into Christianity, its roots, its texts, and its values—and particularly the relationship of Christians to Jews. Thus, just three years after the war, the World Council of Churches declared that antisemitism was irreconcilable with Christianity.⁵ The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church issued a similar statement in 1964.⁶ In 1965, the Catholic Church followed suit with *Nostra Aetate*.⁷ Almost forty years later, the Catholic Church published *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, which urged Christians to reflect on Christian attitudes towards Jews.⁸

Numerous books have been published about Christian theology and its relationship to antisemitism. This essay is meant to be an addition to that literature—specifically examining the Gospel of Matthew and the phrase “His blood be on us and on our children!” and the possible anti-Jewish nature of its teaching. In doing so, this study will define antisemitism and anti-Judaism, and will consider the textual and cultural contexts of the verse. Finally, it will assert, based on the evidence considered, that severe anti-Judaism was simply interpreted into both the verse and the gospel and was not the original message of the composition.

5 The World Council of Churches, quoted in “Jews and Christians: The Unfolding Interfaith Relationship,” United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/programs-ethics-religion-the-holocaust/articles-and-resources/jews-and-christians-the-unfolding-interfaith-relationship>.

6 House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, quoted in Clark Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 36.

7 Pope Paul VI, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” The Holy See, accessed August 2, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

8 Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” The Holy See, accessed August 2, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html.

Defining Anti-Judaism

Prejudice and hatred against Jews today is generally termed antisemitism⁹—and yet to better understand the term, it is useful to know more about its etymology: the word antisemitism was coined in the 1800s, and expressed an antipathy towards Jews on perceived racial grounds, rather than religious.¹⁰ In this way, antisemitism was meant to be specifically for the new age—when religious differences were put aside and emphasis was put on nationalism and race. Jews were seen as a distinct race, as Semites—and thus anti-Semites could be opposed to Semites, regardless of whether someone was part of Judaism as a religion. Though the term has come to mean hatred for anything Jewish—regardless of whether it is religious or cultural—its origins tend to make it appear anachronistic when referring to Christian animosity toward Jews. Thus, scholars often make a distinction between antisemitism and anti-Judaism—or hatred of religious Judaism.

We Remember defines anti-Judaism as “long-standing sentiments of mistrust and hostility” specifically toward Judaism.¹¹ Robert Chazan gives a more detailed description, stating that anti-Judaism is Christian negativity towards religious Jews specifically because of a disagreement in theology.¹² Ruether gives a similar definition to Chazan.¹³ Later, however, she further details her definition, essentially arguing that Christian downplaying and criticism of Judaism,¹⁴ as well as attempts to

9 “anti-Semitism,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/anti-semitism>.

10 Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), xv.

11 Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” The Holy See, accessed August 2, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html.

12 Robert Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), viii.

13 Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 30.

14 *Ibid.*, 95.

minimize Judaism as a way by which one can come to God, is anti-Judaism.¹⁵

Nevertheless, these definitions can lead to a definition of anti-Judaism that is so broad that it inadvertently labels large swaths of Christianity as anti-Jewish—denigrating Christians who merely believe that the way to God is through Jesus, regardless of if they hold any animosity or hostility towards the Jews.¹⁶ Therefore, anti-Judaism should not be defined as seeing Jesus as “the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). Rather, it is much more disparaging and sinister, and, for the purpose of this essay, will be defined by any combination of the following characteristics: portrayal of Judaism as being eternally rejected by God, a replacement of the Jews with the Church,¹⁷ an inherited guilt upon all followers of Judaism for Jesus’s crucifixion,¹⁸ and/or a demonizing of those who follow Judaism.¹⁹

Rather than placing the emphasis on a theological disagreement with Judaism as a religion, this definition places the emphasis on the *relationship* that the Christian has with the Jew. Civil religious disagreement must be acceptable in a society based upon tolerance. But, when that theological disagreement crosses into judging the character and

15 Ibid., 106–107.

16 Thus, McKnight: “It must be admitted by all objective historians and theologians that tolerant and civil ‘anti’ sentiments flowing from any firm religious conviction are beyond the capacity for historians to pronounce a final verdict regarding truth. Just as an orthodox Jew, by definition, must think that Christianity is wrong at some level (and Jesus Christ not God’s sole agent of salvation), so an orthodox Christian, by definition, must think that any expression of Judaism is wrong at some level if it excludes Jesus Christ as God’s sole agent of salvation.” Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 56-57.

17 Lloyd Gaston, “Paul and the Torah,” in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 50.

18 Amy Jill-Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 91.

19 Rosemary Ruether, “Old Problems and New Dimensions,” in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 249.

the value of the adherents of Judaism, then the disagreement has passed from the realm of civility into anti-Judaism.

The Passages

There are a number of passages and themes in the Gospel of Matthew that have been denoted as anti-Jewish²⁰—in fact, some have even suspected that it was specific texts within this gospel that led to the poor Christian response to the Holocaust.²¹ In considering some of these texts, Lloyd Gaston has gone so far as saying that Matthew’s anti-Judaism is so strong that the book “can no longer be part of the personal canon of many.”²² Daniel Goldhagen, in looking at the three synoptic gospels, has noted that Mark has approximately 40 anti-Jewish verses, Luke has 60, and Matthew has 80.²³ Since this article cannot evaluate every theme or passage in Matthew that has ever been labeled as anti-Jewish, it will examine only the most notorious of the statements²⁴—Matthew’s blood curse, in which the Jews declare that Jesus’s blood should be “on us and on our children!” (Mt 27:25).

The Textual Context of Matthew 27

In his phrase, “His blood be on us and on our children!,” Matthew uses the Greek word *πάς*, which is translated as “all.” While the word itself is all-encompassing, it often allows for exceptions. Thus, Matthew describes all of Jerusalem being troubled with Herod after hearing the news that the

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- 20 Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 59.
- 21 Duncan Macpherson, “Michael Prior, the Bible and Anti-Semitism,” *Holy Land Studies* 6.2 (2007): 151, ISSN 1474-9475.
- 22 Lloyd Gaston, “The Messiah of Israel as Teacher of the Gentiles: The Setting of Matthew’s Christology,” *Union Seminary Review* 29.1 (1975): 40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096437502900103>.
- 23 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 263.
- 24 Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 30; James Charlesworth, “The Gospel of John: Exclusivism Caused by a Social Setting Different from That of Jesus (John 11:54 and 14:6),” in *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, & F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 248.

“king of the Jews” had been born (2:3)—and yet the phrase does not mean that every person in the city was troubled, but that there was a general feeling of concern in the city. In the next chapter, Matthew writes that all of Jerusalem, Judea, and the surrounding region were going out to visit Jesus—once again, this must be hyperbole. And thus Matthew’s use of the word appears to allow for discrepancy: “all” does not necessarily have to be understood as being all-inclusive. “All the people,” could simply refer to a group of Jews, rather than all Jews, all of the time.²⁵ It would appear as though this indeed is the way that the word is used in this passage: contextually, Matthew very specifically states that those who shouted “His blood be on us and on our children!” were simply part of a crowd that had gathered (Mt 27:15, 20, 24). Even more, Matthew places culpability for this statement, not merely upon the crowd, but even more upon another group: “Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus” (Mt 27:20)—this would appear to be the focus on Matthew’s ire. It was not that the crowd necessarily had a mind of its own, but that it was following the leadership and charisma of a group of men who stood for the religious establishment, and specifically, for the temple. This conclusion is reinforced by Matthew’s description of Jesus’s death throughout his gospel: four times Jesus references those who would bring about his death (Mt 16:21, 17:12, 17:22-23, 20:18), and in three of those instances, Jesus states that he would be killed by the “scribes” or the “chief priests”—and only once refers to his killers in general terms (Mt 17:22-23). It would appear, therefore, as though Matthew’s intention was to place the blame for Jesus’s death, not upon the Jews in general (Matthew

25 Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 72.

only uses the word “Jews” five times in the entirety of the gospel),²⁶ but upon the Sadducees, the scribes, and their children.²⁷

Nevertheless, this proposition can be expanded—it is not simply that Matthew wants to place the death of Jesus mainly upon the priests and the scribes, but he also appears to include the Pharisees, in what he appears to see as the religious establishment.²⁸ Therefore, in the chapters that begin with Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem and lead up to his crucifixion, Matthew repeatedly notes Jesus’s condemnation—not of the Jews, but specifically of the religious leaders of the time, generalized as the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes. Thus, after entering Jerusalem and casting out the moneychangers from the temple, Jesus was confronted by the chief priests and the scribes (Mt 21:15). The next day, the chief priests and elders demanded to know the source of his authority (Mt 21:23), and after refusing to answer their question, Jesus told two parables—the latter of which has been characterized by numerous scholars as anti-Jewish.²⁹ Once

26 Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, “Wrestling with Johannine Anti-Judaism: A Hermeneutical Framework for the Analysis of the Current Debate,” in *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, & F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 15.

27 Amy Jill-Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 88.

28 Philip Cunningham, *Education for Shalom* (Philadelphia: The American Interfaith Institute, 1995), 10; Peter J. Tomson, “‘Jews’ in the Gospel of John as Compared with the Palestinian Talmud, the Synoptics, and Some New Testament Apocrypha,” in *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, & F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 200; Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 34.

29 Steve Motyer, *Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2002), 12; Douglas R. A. Hare, “The Rejection of the Jews in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 38-39; Lilian Freudmann, *Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1994), 79-80; Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 83.

again, however, Matthew specifically states that both parables are about the chief priests and the Pharisees (Mt 21:45).³⁰ After those two parables, Jesus told another—the parable of the wedding feast. Just like the parable of the tenants, this is also considered anti-Jewish by many scholars,³¹ and with Matthew stating that “the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words” (Mt 22:15), directly after this parable, he implies that the parable was also specifically directed at the Pharisees.³² As part of this plan to entangle him, the Pharisees and the Herodians ask him whether or not one should pay tribute to Caesar (Mt 22:17), and after this question, the Sadducees challenge him regarding his belief in the resurrection (Mt 22:23). The next challenge comes from a Pharisee—after the Pharisees had gathered together again in an attempt to trick him (Mt 22:34-35), and then Jesus specifically asks the Pharisees a question about the Messiah (Mt 22:41). From there, Jesus turns towards his disciples and the crowd and launches into a diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:13), specifically stating that his criticism is leveled at them at least six times (Mt 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 29). This polemic ends with Jesus placing the blame for the blood of every righteous person on the shoulders of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:35), not upon Jews or Judaism in general. This places the Pharisees into the same camp as the Sadducees, who are blamed for the death, not of every prophet, but of Jesus himself.³³ It would come upon their generation³⁴—and Matthew has Jesus describe the

30 An identification where Matthew differs from Mark, and which makes it appear as though Matthew is “specifically targeting them;” Philip Cunningham, *Education for Shalom* (Philadelphia: The American Interfaith Institute, 1995), 9-10.

31 Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 85; Douglas R. A. Hare, “The Rejection of the Jews in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 39; Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 37.

32 Or perhaps the chief priests; Philip Cunningham, *Education for Shalom* (Philadelphia: The American Interfaith Institute, 1995), 10.

33 *Ibid.*

34 McKnight notes that the word for generation, γενεά, refers to the generation contemporary with Jesus, and has a particular focus on the Pharisees; Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological

consequence of this guilt as the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Mt 23:36-39, 24:1-2), supporting the proposition that the statement “his blood be on us and on our children,” was meant to refer to that generation and their families that experienced 70 CE,³⁵ with a specific focus upon the religious rulers, who experienced a vast change in the way in which their religion was practiced when the temple was destroyed.

By contrast, Matthew writes very differently about the crowd. Indeed, it was the crowd that Matthew has proclaiming “his blood be on us an on our children,” but this was the crowd after it had been stirred up by the chief priests. Other times, without the interference from the religious rulers, Matthew describes the crowds in very sympathetic terms: Jesus had compassion upon them because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36), Jesus had compassion on them on healed their sick (Mt 14:14), and Jesus was accepted by the crowd as a prophet and the son of David (Mt 21:9, 11). Oftentimes, the crowd is described in contrast to the religious leaders—although it is not always described positively.³⁶ Nevertheless, what should be noted here is that Matthew tends to distance the crowd from the rulers, with the rulers as the ones who are the focus on Jesus’s vitriol. Hence, even in the context of the crucifixion, Matthew repeatedly shows Jesus’s popularity with the crowd and describes the crowd as his supporters (Mt 21:1-11, 26), with the Pharisees actually fearing the crowd’s loyalty to Jesus (Mt 21:46, 26:5).³⁷ In that light, Hay suggests that the chief priests who condemned Jesus “had no mandate from the Jewish people for what they were about to do,” and instead of the crowd of Matthew 27:25 representing all Jews, it represented a “crowd of

Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 71.

35 Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 92; Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 76.

36 Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 34-35.

37 Malcom Hay, *Thy Brother’s Blood*, (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1975), 13.

idlers and ruffians which can be always collected for an evil purpose, to provide a democratic covering for what [the chief priests] proposed to do.”³⁸

Perhaps it could also be argued that this is the way in which the phrase “his blood be on us and our children” was understood initially: there is one possible reference to the phrase inside of the New Testament itself. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the chief priests say to the disciples: “you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” (Acts 5:28)—as though the author of Acts sought to show a fulfillment of Matthew’s phrase.³⁹

At the same time, Matthew does not solely focus on the religious rulers. It is not just them that are implicated, but also their followers.⁴⁰ Perhaps this is why Matthew specifically notes that the crowd that cried out for Jesus’s blood to be upon them and their children was made up of those who were encouraged by the chief priests and elders—these were meant to be seen as their followers.

According to the textual context, therefore, the focus of Matthew vituperative language was not all of the Jews, but was rather a specific few sects within Judaism—namely, the Sadducees, the scribes, and the Pharisees.

38 Ibid.

39 John Hellowell appears to detect an allusion in these two verses. Barnes also notes the similarity of the phrase. John Hellowell, *Beginning at Jerusalem* (Birmingham, United Kingdom: The Christadelphian, 2014), 83; also Albert Barnes, *Barnes New Testament Notes* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2003), 1408.

40 Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 60.

The Cultural Context of Matthew 27 - Authorship and Audience

When an individual presents information, the meaning of the information is nuanced by the speaker's background and the audience's background.⁴¹ Therefore, who was Matthew, and who was his audience?

The gospel itself does not claim any specific authorship. However, early Church writers uniformly assign its composition to Matthew—whose other name was Levi (Mk 2:14)—the Jewish tax collector who became one of Jesus's disciples (Mt 9:9, 10:3).⁴²

Matthew's Judaism comes out in the gospel itself. It is Matthew's Jesus that declares that he has not come to "abolish the law" but rather to fulfill it, and that "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (5:17-18).⁴³ To this Nicholls adds, "His statement could hardly be more emphatic in its adherence to the Torah as a divine revelation of the right way of life."⁴⁴ The Sermon on the Mount thus becomes Jesus's interpretation of how a faithful Jew should follow the Torah. Later, rather than criticizing the Torah itself, Matthew again has Jesus interpret it for his followers (12:1-14).⁴⁵ Near the end of the gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to listen to the instructions of the scribes and Pharisees, because they "sit on Moses' seat" (23:2). Thus, upholding the

41 Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?," in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 77-78.

42 Craig L. Bloomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1.

43 Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?," in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 87.

44 William Nicholls, *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 64; Sandmel disagrees, arguing that Jesus is creating a new Christian law; Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 52; Considering Matthew's clear statement that Jesus has not come to abolish the law, I agree with Nicholls.

45 Aaron M. Gale, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

Torah becomes a theme throughout Matthew's gospel,⁴⁶ with Jesus giving instruction on sacrifices, vows, and endorsing the idea that God dwells in the temple at Jerusalem.⁴⁷ It has even been suggested that Matthew used a rabbinic form of interpretation.⁴⁸

But what about Matthew's audience? Scholars are divided over whether the gospel was written to all of Jesus's followers, or to a specific sub-group, such as Jewish Christians,⁴⁹ and the gospel itself does not specify an audience.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, consider the first words of the text: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). Why would it be significant to Gentiles that Jesus was descended from Abraham? Why would it be significant that he was the son of David? Yet for a Jewish audience, these words would have been weighty: here was one who was Jewish himself, and even more, from the kingly line of David⁵¹—the one who had been promised that Messiah would come from his descendants (2 Sm 7:12-16).⁵²

46 Francois P. Viljoen, "The Torah in Matthew: Still Valid, yet to be Interpreted Alternatively," In *die Skriflig* 50, no. 3 (July 2016): 3, accessed August 2, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i3.2036>.

47 E.P. Sanders, "Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues," in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 39.

48 Aaron M. Gale, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?," in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 81.

51 David, out of all of the kings mentioned in this genealogy, is the only individual specifically called a king (1:6).

52 John P. Meier, "Reflection on Jesus-of-History Research Today," *Jesus' Jewishness*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York & Philadelphia: The Crossroad Publishing Company & The American Interfaith Institute, 1991), 99.

This same idea is shown by the way in which Matthew describes Jesus's birth—calling Jesus the “king of the Jews” (2:2), quoting Micah 5 in regard to a “ruler” coming from Bethlehem, and changing the quotation so that it no longer reads that Bethlehem was “little” among the cities of Judah, but instead calling Bethlehem “no means least.”⁵³ In the same way, Matthew also omits the Lukan portion of the narrative that emphasizes Jesus's humble birth in Bethlehem—with Luke focusing on Jesus being born in a manger (Luke 2:7, 12, 16) and being visited by shepherds (Luke 2:8-20)—and instead emphasizes Jesus being visited by magi and chased by the current king of Jerusalem. This theme of kingship is emphasized all throughout Matthew's gospel,⁵⁴ with Matthew referring to Jesus as “son of David” 10 times (1:1, 1:20, 9:27, 12:23, 15:22, 20:30, 31, 21:9, 15, 22:42).⁵⁵ It was a bold proclamation: Jesus was the king of the Jews.⁵⁶

Yet, not only does Matthew attempt to show Jesus as the king of the Jews, he wants his readers to see Jesus as another Moses.⁵⁷ The Midrashic description of Moses's birth bear similarity to Matthew's story of Mary's miraculous pregnancy, Joseph's intention to divorce

53 Which Lillian Freudmann notes is a purposeful misquote, although she takes it as evidence that Matthew lacks understanding of the Jewish Scriptures; Lillian Freudmann, *Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1994), 63-64. This, however, does not have to be the case and would appear to be a characteristic of Matthew's use of the LXX: Harry Whittaker, *Studies in the Gospels - Extended Edition* (Staffordshire, United Kingdom: Biblia, 1989), 24, 436, 554-555.

54 Andrew Jukes, *Four Views of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1982), 29.

55 Mark, Luke, and John combined only use the title 6 times.

56 This is an appellation which Matthew associates with Jesus four times (2:2, 27:11, 29, 37)—and which accounts for four of the five times in which Matthew uses the word “Jews.”

57 Aaron M. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9-10; Harry Whittaker, *Studies in the Gospels - Extended Edition* (Staffordshire, United Kingdom: Biblia, 1989), 40; Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 78-79

her, and the angelic instruction to continue the marriage.⁵⁸ At the same time, Matthew, out of all the gospel writers, is the only one to relate the story of Herod killing all of the baby boys in Bethlehem—so that Jesus, like Moses, survives a mass slaughter.⁵⁹ And, as Moses escaped from Egypt, so did Jesus; even what the angel says to Joseph, “Those who sought the child’s life are dead,” is a quotation from the story of Moses.⁶⁰ As Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea, and into wilderness to be tested, so Jesus passes through the Jordan River and into the wilderness to be tested.⁶¹ As Moses fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, so does Jesus. As Moses was tested in bringing water out of a rock, so Jesus is tempted to create bread out of stones.⁶² As Moses ascended Mount Sinai and brought the law, so Jesus ascended a mount and gave his own interpretation of the law in the Sermon on the Mount.⁶³ Yet, in some of these comparisons, Jesus is presented, not just as Moses, but as better than Moses—Moses failed in the temptation of bringing water from the rock,⁶⁴ and Jesus's interpretation of the Torah requires “an enormous *increase* in religious scrupulosity.”⁶⁵ Matthew is

58 Aaron M. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9-10.

59 Craig L. Bloomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 7.

60 Harry Whittaker, *Studies in the Gospels - Extended Edition* (Staffordshire, United Kingdom: Biblia, 1989), 40.

61 Aaron M. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

62 Craig L. Bloomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 14.

63 Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 81.

64 Craig L. Bloomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 14.

65 Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 81-82. See also Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele

depicting Jesus as a *new Moses*—a “superior Moses”⁶⁶—not for Gentiles, who would likely not see a significance to the Moses parallels, but for the sake of his Jewish audience, who revered Moses.

Finally, Matthew uses the Jewish scriptures extensively,⁶⁷ quoting from the Old Testament 55 times—almost as many quotations as all three of the other gospels taken together (which have 65).⁶⁸ Over and over, Matthew’s quotations are prefaced by the words “this was to fulfill”, also known as the “fulfillment formula”—in which he specifically links his text and description of Jesus with the Jewish Scriptures.⁶⁹ The structure of the book also reflects a basis in Judaism: scholars have noted that Matthew contains five main teaching sections, divided by the phrase “when Jesus had finished speaking” (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1), which perhaps reflect the five books of the Torah.⁷⁰ Even Matthew’s Christology is such that it would not necessarily

Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 87. Nicholls explains: “Accordingly, some of these injunctions are stricter than other interpretations of the Torah, but none of them is opposed to the Torah itself, in detail or in spirit. Much of the language of the discourse is hyperbolic or exaggerated; some of the sayings can be recognized as parable, not intended to be taken literally. This does not detract from the spiritual ideal set forth, but it should warn us against excessively literalistic and legalistic interpretations, often found in Christian writers.” William Nicholls, *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 65.

66 Aaron M. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10; Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 51.

67 Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 50-51.

68 Craig L. Bloomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1.

69 Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 87.

70 Francois P. Viljoen, “The Torah in Matthew: Still Valid, yet to be Interpreted Alternatively,” *In die Skriflig* 50, no. 3 (July 2016): 1-2, accessed August 2, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i3.2036>; Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 51.

offend Jewish monotheism.⁷¹ And thus, “Matthew’s narrative is often considered the ‘most Jewish’ of the Gospels.”⁷²

With these considerations, it can be suggested that Matthew still considered himself to be Jewish and a proponent of a flavor of Judaism. It was this Judaism that he sought to bring to his Jewish audience. This background should color the way in which the gospel is understood—suggesting that if the author of the gospel saw himself as a religious Jew, and the audience saw themselves as Jews, it is highly unlikely that the gospel itself is anti-Jewish.⁷³

The Cultural Context of Matthew 27 - Jewish Sects and Debate

But it was not just Matthew and his audience that were Jewish—at one point, all of Christianity saw itself as Jewish: “Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew; he was, moreover, a Jew who lived in Palestine before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Roman soldiers in 70 C.E.; and, perhaps more significantly, his thought was shaped by the dynamic currents within that Judaism.”⁷⁴ As a speaker in Jewish synagogues during the first century (Mt 4:23), Jesus’s talks would have fit within

71 Douglas R. A. Hare, “The Rejection of the Jews in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 40.

72 Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?,” in *Jesus, Judaism, & Christian Anti-Judaism*, eds. Paula Fredriksen & Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 87.

73 I think it is very important here to remember that this essay is considering anti-Judaism, which by definition is animus towards Judaism as a religion. As such, a religion can have many different sects, and I see this as essentially one sect of Judaism writing polemic about other sects: the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Sadducees, as argued in the previous section. Therefore, I would classify Matthew’s writing as anti-Pharisee or anti-Sadducee, but not anti-Jewish. See also Steve Motyer, *Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2002), 7-8. Nevertheless, Ruether would appear to disagree. Rosemary Ruether, “The Faith and Fratricide Discussion: Old Problems and New Dimensions,” in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 232-233.

74 James Charlesworth, “Preface,” in *Jesus’ Judaism*, ed. James Charlesworth, (New York & Philadelphia: The Crossroad Publishing Company & The American Interfaith Institute, 1991), 15.

the framework of contemporary Judaism and its customs,⁷⁵ and the way in which Jesus spoke was customarily Jewish.⁷⁶ The apostle Paul, whom some see as a major proponent of the separation between Christianity and Judaism,⁷⁷ appears to have been religiously observant (Acts 21:17-26), and referred to the Gentiles as being grafted onto the Jewish olive tree (Rom 11:11-24) and part of the “commonwealth of Israel” (Eph 2:12-13).⁷⁸ In 64 C.E., the emperor Nero even saw the Christians as a Jewish sect—declaring that this Jewish group who followed “Christus” would suffer for the fire that had come upon Rome.⁷⁹ Thus, for years, even after Jesus’s death, Christianity was part of Judaism.

Matthew’s words should therefore be understood in the context of Jewish sectarian debate, or even in the light of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures.⁸⁰ Just like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Matthew’s Jesus spoke vehemently against those who were Jews.⁸¹ Others have compared Matthew’s statements with contemporary Jewish polemic, and have come to the conclusion that his statements are either mild or similar to what can be found in the rabbinical

75 Lilian Freudmann, *Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1994), 231.

76 *Ibid.*, 232.

77 Samuel, Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 6-7; Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 14-15.

78 Harvey Cox, “Rabbi Yeshua Ben Joseph: Reflections on Jesus’ Jewishness and the Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Jesus’ Judaism*, ed. James Charlesworth, (New York & Philadelphia: The Crossroad Publishing Company & The American Interfaith Institute, 1991), 41-43.

79 James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2002), 85.

80 Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 55.

81 Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler, “Gospels and Acts,” in *The Annotated Jewish New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6. Ben Birnbaum, “Legacy of Blood: Can Christianity Be Purged of Anti-Semitism without Changing the Gospels?,” *Moment Magazine*, October 2001.

writings,⁸² or from the Qumran community.⁸³ And the purpose of this type of debate is so that one might differentiate one sect from another and creating a group identification.⁸⁴ Thus, considering this cultural context, Matthew was perhaps attempting, not to condemn Jews, but to make a clear delineation:⁸⁵ between those Jews who followed Jesus and those Jews who followed Pharisaism or the religious establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Anti-Judaism has been defined in this article as an idea that has four manifestations: a portrayal of the Jews as being eternally rejected by God, a replacement of the Jews with the Church, an inherited guilt upon all followers of Judaism for the crucifixion, and a demonizing of those who follow Judaism. Under that definition, and with the considering the textual and cultural contexts of the Gospel of Matthew guiding this interpretation, it can be asserted that the phrase “His blood be on us and on our children!” was not originally anti-Jewish, and that neither was the entire Gospel of Matthew.

While the Gospel of Matthew may *seem* to be anti-Jewish, it was not originally. As time passed and as circumstances changed—as Christians separated from Judaism and as the Gospel was further removed from its cultural context—the vitriolic rhetoric that Matthew presented was no longer seen as two sects quarreling within Judaism, but as two

82 James D. G. Dunn, “The Embarrassment of History: Reflections on the Problem of ‘Anti-Judaism’ in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, & F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 52.

83 In that regard, Donaldson writes, “The New Testament authors are no more anti-Judaic than was Jeremiah or Qumran’s Teacher of Righteousness”; Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 16.

84 Scot McKnight, “A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 55-56.

85 Philip Cunningham, *Education for Shalom* (Philadelphia: The American Interfaith Institute, 1995), 10-11.

diametrically opposed religions. And thus, anti-Judaism was read into this gospel and this anti-Jewish interpretation of Matthew became part of the Christian tradition until after the Holocaust, when recent scholarship has attempted to return to the textual and cultural context of the gospel. In other words, for centuries, many Christian groups have *misread* their own sacred writings.

It is acknowledged that this was not an exhaustive study, and perhaps at this point, that is one of this article's greatest weaknesses. Therefore, in the future, in order to make this examination more complete, a fuller study of all Matthew's other seemingly anti-Jewish verses must be undertaken. Additionally, if the assertion of this article is correct and Matthew's gospel has been misread by various Christian denominations for centuries, what of the other gospels? And what of the epistles? Could it be that if anti-Judaism has been read into the gospel of Matthew because of a misunderstanding of the textual and cultural context in which it was written, that the unified New Testament corpus as a whole has been misunderstood in this regard? Could it be that the passages that are typically deemed anti-Jewish, such as John's references to the Jews being born of the devil and his phrase the "synagogue of Satan" were not originally written as anti-Jewish rhetoric? Thus, ultimately, this article is a call for further study, not just in the gospel of Matthew, but in the entirety of the New Testament. Even more, it is a call to consider *why and when* Christianity began to misunderstand and misapply Matthew's writings.

At the same time, this article itself has far-reaching implications: the very verse which has been used as the basis for so much bloodshed, "his blood be on us and on our children!" is not a condemnation of Jews for all time. It was a condemnation of a specific few sects of Judaism and of two generations of those sects. In effect, those murderers who staged pogroms and who supported violent antisemitism because they believed that this verse, and the gospel of Matthew, supported it, have had their divine mandate pulled out from under them. Not only is violent antisemitism ethically wrong, but it is not supported by the Gospel of Matthew—indeed, it is condemned by the gospel, in which Jesus lifted up "love your neighbor as yourself" as one of the greatest commandments. Matthean Christians are not those who fight against the Jews. Matthean Christians recognize their Jewish heritage and follow a Jesus and a group of apostles who

acknowledged their Jewish heritage, and held a respect for Judaism—a respect for Judaism which should continue today with their followers.

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