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### **THE “BLOOD CURSE” OF MATTHEW: THE DAWN OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

*Статтю присвячено такому важливому питанню як інтерпретація текстів святого Євангелія. Автор намагається висвітлити деякі аспекти Біблії, які потребують додаткового трактування, зокрема традиції єврейського народу, появу нової ідеології, розкрити етимологію та причини появи існуючого упередження проти євреїв на основі аналізу священних текстів Євангелій. У цій статті автор акцентує увагу на питання «прокляття крові», висловлене жителями Єрусалиму, які зібралися перед Понтієм Пілатом під час суду над Ісусом Христом.*

*У ході свого дослідження автор виявив, що деякі моменти опису суду і розп'яття Христа є відображенням єврейських традицій у порівнянні з іншими сценами із тих же Євангелій. Так, траурний плач і голосіння жінок під час ходу до Голгофи є типовою традицією серед єрусалимських жінок.*

*Іншим важливим аспектом дослідження американського науковця є заміна ідеології. Вивчаючи Євангелія, Кен Хенсен виявив певний підтекст, який свідчить про заміну існуючої ідеології єврейського народу, яка полягала в тому, що у зв'язку з появою нового вчення Ісуса Христа утворився Новий Ізраїль, до якого належали тільки послідовники Ісуса з Назарету. Вони, і тільки вони, є спадкоємцями завіту*

Авраама. Всі інші, включно з ізраїльтянами, відпали від Божої милості і благословення.

Автор порушує питання, пов'язане зі стереотипом про прокляття всього єврейського народу, що бере свої витoki з часу Ісуса Христа. Вивчаючи Євангеліє від Матвія, науковець виявив, що в тексті Євангелія зазначені всі люди, які взяли прокляття на себе: «Його кров на нас». Порівнюючи Євангелія трьох апостолів, Матвія, Луки і Марка, Кен Хенсен виявив, що Лука, не Марк, був першим євангелістом і цей момент має значний вплив на вивчення питання ранньохристиянського антисемітизму.

Вивчаючи синоптичні Євангелія в певному порядку від Луки до Марка і Матвія, було виявлено, що відповідалність провини за розп'яття динамічно зміщується від «священників і правителів» до безіменного єврейського натовпу. Автор статті схиляється до думки про те, що існує очевидна зміна у підході до опису подій суду над Ісусом Христом, починаючи від Луки, у тексті якого спостерігаємо збалансований, навіть безпристрасний виклад зазначених подій, до опису в Марка, у тексті якого переважає тенденція до гіперболізації, а потім до опису Матвія, в тексті якого засуджено євреїв словами «увесь народ».

Зрештою, бездумне використання матеріалу Євангелія від Матвія, на переконання Кена Хенсена, сприяє формуванню негативних стереотипів та надає негативного забарвлення міжконфесійним стосункам. Наслідком такої практики є збереження найбільш наклепницького звинувачення проти єврейського народу – вбивства «помазаника Божого», Ісуса Христа. Звинувачення зберігалося і підсилювалося протягом століть, починаючи від святих отців церкви до сучасних понтифіків. Незважаючи на такий стан справ, питання все ж таки залишається актуальним, чи проблема, виявлена в Християнській Біблії, може бути пом'якшена шляхом критичного аналізу? Автор вірить, що порушене питання упередження проти всього єврейського народу може бути вирішене позитивно.

It is recounted that a learned man once came to the Buddha and said, “The things you teach, sir, are not to be found in the Holy Scriptures.”

“Then put them in the Scriptures,” said the Buddha.

After an embarrassed pause, the man went on to say, “May I be so bold as to suggest, sir, that some of the things you teach actually contradict the Holy Scriptures?”

“Then amend the Scriptures,” said the Buddha.

It might be refreshing if western ecclesiastical leaders were as open-minded in their approach to sacred text as Siddhārtha Gautama, but the pursuit of “enlightenment” has hardly been as important in the whole scheme of theological “correctness” as pursuing an inviolate “canon.” So it was, that when the pope issued in mid-2007 an edict reinstating an old mass that contains references to Jewish blindness, traditional church authorities did not bat an eye. And so it is, that certain equally offensive passages in the New Testament itself continue to go unchallenged by the Christian church, worldwide. The Jews are “perfidious,” declares the sixteenth-century Tridentine Mass, recited in Catholic practice every Good Friday. They are in such darkness that God must “take the veil from their hearts” so that they come to acknowledge Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>. From what source did such ideas originate, and to what extent are they rooted in the Gospels themselves?

On a more positive note, there has in recent years been renewed interest in understanding the nature of what may well be called “the mother of all anti-Semitic charges,” namely, “deicide” – the “murder of God.” In tandem with this new sensitivity, an understandable tide of opprobrium has called into question Pope Benedict’s judgment in leading the church at least “one small step” backward, toward a darker age. But whether enough scholarly attention has been brought to bear on the persistent and underlying question of anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism in the Gospels themselves is another matter.

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<sup>1</sup> For an insightful examination of resistance to alterations in the Tridentine liturgy, see William D. Dinges, “Ritual Conflict as Social Conflict: Liturgical Reform in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Sociological Analysis*, 48:2 (1987): 138-57.

John Dominick Crossan and Marcus Borg have broken new ground in arguing convincingly that the gospel texts themselves need reinterpretation<sup>2</sup>.

It might in any case be argued that certain passages are beyond reinterpretation. This may well hold true when it comes to the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. I will in this article attempt to provide some serious answers to such problems imbedded in the synoptic tradition and even "mitigate" at least to some extent the anti-Jewish attitudes fostered in the Gospels, particularly by the "passion" narrative. The most grievous verse in this narrative is the so-called "blood curse," uttered by a mass of Jerusalemites who had hastily assembled themselves before Pontius Pilate: "Then answered all the people, and said, his blood be upon us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:25).

At the outset it is worth noting the obvious – that an "accurate" picture of the last days of Jesus of Nazareth is virtually impossible to assemble and is certainly more complicated than certain outdated liturgical traditions might suggest<sup>3</sup>. Modern scholarship has asserted that the so-called "trial" of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin was no trial at all, that the Gospels embellish the account to depict Jewish culpability for Jesus' execution, and that the only responsible party was the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate<sup>4</sup>. There are in

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<sup>2</sup> See Marcus Borg and John Dominick Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 137-64. The Jesus introduced by Borg and Crossan is this new moral hero, a more dangerous Jesus than the one enshrined in the church's traditional teachings.

<sup>3</sup> Some have poignantly noted that there are many subtle ways in which the gravity of Jesus' suffering is unintentionally diminished. See John W. Ehman, "Luke 23:1-49, (New Testament)," *Interpretation* 52 (1998): 74.

<sup>4</sup> Weddig Fricke, *The Court-Martial of Jesus* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1987), declares that there was no trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin at all and that Pilate alone was responsible. See also Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 221-3; Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The five gospels* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 152-3. It is argued that if Jesus had in fact been tried and convicted by the

any case those (the Pope among them) who look for a degree of historicity in the traditional narratives. We might ask, for example, whether the Lukan account (22:66) is in any sense accurate when it speaks of a gathering of the elders of the people, the chief priests and scribes, referred to by the dubious title “Sanhedrin.” David Flusser and Dan Barag jointly proposed that there may in fact have been such a gathering, but that it was not the Sanhedrin *per-se* that met, but rather a “Temple Committee,” composed of elders of the Temple and Temple secretaries, i.e. “scribes,” in addition to the priests.

The leading implication of such textual details is potentially groundbreaking, namely, that Luke’s version of the entire trial and crucifixion sequence is arguably more “authentic” and certainly more “Jewish” in tone than the other Gospels<sup>5</sup>. Not only does it not record a “Jewish conspiracy” to put Jesus to death, it instead reflects genuine grief and solidarity with Jesus on the part of the Judeans. Specifically, we find traditional Jewish mourning practices in evidence among the Jerusalemite women:

And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!’” (Luk. 23:27-29)<sup>6</sup>.

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

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Sanhedrin, Pilate would not have needed to try him again. See Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 29-32.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (JSNT Supplement Series 20; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Traditional commentary on this narration often neglects the underlying Jewish context, focusing instead on a more “universal” message. Ehman simply points out that the ‘onlookers’ are, in Jesus’ view, in an even worse predicament than he. See J. W. Ehman, “Luke 23:1-49,” 74.

traditional *Jewish* lamentation recorded after the destruction of the Temple:

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

In Luke, the words "for your children" form part of a tonally Jewish lamentation, whereas in Matthew the words "on our children" are imbedded in a different and much more sinister context. The remarks of Jesus to the women making lamentation are conspicuously absent in Matthew as well as Mark, along with mention of the sympathetic "multitude." This accords well with the later tendency to blame "the Jews" for their "blindness." Moreover, it could well be that Luke's mention of weeping "for your children" gave the author of Matthew (who must have written after Luke) the right to place in the mouths of "all the people" what is perhaps the most troublesome single statement in the entire passion narrative – "His blood be upon us and *on* our children!" (Matthew 27: 25)<sup>7</sup>.

David Flusser pointed out that Matthew appears to have altered the object of Jesus' harangue, as recorded in the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel, namely "this generation":

*The blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the*

<sup>7</sup> The idea that Matthew essentially re-wrote certain passages in Luke is argued by a number of scholars, including David Flusser, Brad Young and Shmuel Safrai. See Jesus' Last Week, R. Steven Notley, Marc Turnage, and Brian Becker, eds. Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2006). See also Ronald V. Huggins, "Matthean Posteriority: A Preliminary Proposal," NT 34 (1992): 1-22.

*foundation of the world, may be required of this generation. (Luke 11:50)*

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

*Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth. (Mat. 23:34-35)*<sup>8</sup>.

Flusser suspected Matthew of altering Luke's wording, from: "the blood of all the prophets ... *may be required from this generation*" to: "*upon you may come all the righteous blood ...*" He saw this as a reflection of the statement that appears only in Matthew 27:25, "His blood be upon us..." Flusser viewed Matthew in the role of transforming the passage into a harsh condemnation of the Pharisees and by extension of the entire Jewish people<sup>9</sup>.

T.B. Cargal suggests that the incendiary words of "all the people" at Jesus' trial may be seen as Matthew's literary

<sup>8</sup> Compare Luk. 11:49-51: "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute, that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary.' Yes, I tell you, it shall be required of this generation." The Matthean version is arguably a redaction of Luke, intensifying the language and personalizing it. The power of this "blood theme" is well expressed by H.G.L. Peels, who comments that this passage represents a concrete depiction of the long tradition of prophetic blood, spilt from the beginning of the world. In Jewish thought, the blood of the prophets will not go unavenged, and Jesus appeals to this tradition by evoking the names of Abel and Zechariah. The phrase, "from Abel to Zechariah" (Mat. 23:35; Luk. 11:51) energize the words which precede – "the blood of all the prophets" – with a strong dynamic. See H.G.L. Peels, "The blood 'from Abel to Zechariah' (Matthew 23,35; Luke 11,50f.) and the Canon of the Old Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 113:4 (2001): 583-601.

<sup>9</sup> David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 554. A similar alteration is that, whereas Luke speaks of "Zechariah who perished," Matthew mentions Zechariah "whom you murdered".

counterbalance of Jesus' judgment on the Israelites<sup>10</sup>. “His blood be upon us” echoes the prophetic pronouncement from the Mount of Olives, the people accepting the verdict and adding, as it were, their own “amen”<sup>11</sup>. Pilate by contrast performs an elaborate hand washing ritual – present only in Matthew – in which he exonerates himself and by extension the empire he represents<sup>12</sup>.

Matthew arguably picks up Jesus' Lukan words to the “daughters of Jerusalem” from Luke 23, fuses them with the “blood theme” from his version of the “Olivet discourse” (Mat. 23:34-35) and creates a new context for both, wherein the Jewish people as a whole tempt the Deity, as it were, to judge them. It is clear that the evangelists themselves were more than a trifle confused and befuddled when it came to laying blame. Mark, commonly assumed to have written first, impugns the Pharisees in conspiratorial conjunction with the ill-defined “Herodians” in a passage dealing with the healing of a man with a withered hand:

*And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel*

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<sup>10</sup> T. B. Cargal points out that the supposed curse under which the Jewish nation is placed is frequently connected with the crowd accepting responsibility for shedding the blood of an innocent man. He observes that it is too striking to miss the link between Jesus' prophecy in Mat. 23:29-36 and the cry of the people, “His blood be upon us.” Moreover, the two passages in question appear to bracket a specific section in Matthew which gives special attention to the blood theme. Timothy B. Cargal, “His Blood Be upon Us and upon our Children’: A Matthean Double Entendre?,” NTS 37 (1991):109.

<sup>11</sup> As Cargal points out, many Christian commentators agree that Matthew is viciously attacking the Jewish people in verse 25. Some have gone as far as to suggest that this verse was fabricated by the author of Matthew in a scurrilous anti-Jewish polemic, the intent of which was to show that Israel – thanks to this murderous cry – will eternally be beyond the hope of redemption. Cargal, “His Blood Be upon Us.” 102.

<sup>12</sup> Fitzmeyer notes Dominic M. Crossan's conclusion that the New Testament texts need reinterpretation and states that Mat. 27:24-25 is a typical Matthean emendation of the Synoptic Passion Narrative. Significantly, neither Mark nor Luke (not to mention John's Gospel) contains a parallel to Matthew's details concerning Pilate's washing of hands or the cry of all the people. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, “Anti-Semitism and the Cry of ‘All the People,’” TS 26:4 (1965): 667-71.



*with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him. (Mar. 3:6).*

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

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

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

*Simeon ben Shetach sent to him this message, "Were it not that you are Honi I would have placed you under the ban, but what can I do unto you who importune God and He accedes to your request as a son importunes his father and he accedes to his request?"<sup>13</sup>*

The clear implication in the Mishnaic passage is that *nothing* will be done to the offending individual. After all, the Pharisees boasted that they had to all intents and purposes abolished capital punishment in the land of Israel. Significantly, Matthew, in his version of the same "triple tradition" pericope about the man with a withered hand, appears to copy Mark's depiction of the Pharisees as murderously conspiratorial:

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

Elsewhere, Mark continues his depiction of a grand conspiracy:

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

This of course conveniently ignores the enmity between the two camps, in the same way that the Catholic liturgical formulation blurs the distinctions between Jesus' Jewish opponents. In Luke's account not only is the murderous conspiracy of the Pharisees absent, but we are specifically told that the voices demanding crucifixion were those of the crowd and of "the chief priests." Clearly, Luke intends to

<sup>13</sup> Mishnah Taanit 3:8; see David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (New York, Adama Books, 1987), 33-4.

castigate the Sadducean priesthood in a manner not unlike the Pharisee sect, which went so far as to mount a revolt in the second century B.C.E. against the Sadducee-dominated monarchy of the house of Hashmon.

Such subtleties are lost sight of in traditional Christian *kerygma* ("preaching") as expressed in liturgy, though the same can in fact be said of the Gospel of Matthew. It is therefore the Gospels themselves that must be courageously addressed. It is evident that there was a good deal of anti-Jewish polemicizing in the Greco-Roman world; but arguably, it is the Gospels that have generated more anti-Semitism than all other anti-Jewish writings ever produced. Furthermore, the verse in question (Mat. 27:25) has, according to Gerald O'Collins "done more than any other sentence in the New Testament to feed the fires of anti-Semitism"<sup>14</sup>. Perhaps the issue is actually about seeing the internal tensions and contradictions within Matthew, and between Matthew and the other synoptic accounts. While there has been a long-held tradition of harmonizing the gospels, perhaps the most interesting possibilities arise when they are not harmonized, but are held in tension, as on-the-ground accounts of people who had their own interests, limits, and opinions.

The author of Matthew is, to be sure, a study in contradiction. It is a matter of supreme irony that the same evangelist who unleashes a stunning condemnation of Pharisaic Judaism (e.g. Mat. 23) also advocates adherence to Mosaic Law (Mat. 5:17-20). He likewise commends an assortment of halakhic practices, from almsgiving (Mat. 6:2) to regular prayer (Mat. 6:5-6) to fasting (Mat. 6:16-18) to offering up sacrifices (Mat. 5:23). Even Jewish purity laws regarding food are to be adhered to by the Matthean community; for whereas both Matthew and Mark report Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over hand washing, Matthew omits Mark's conclusion that all foods are now declared clean. Some passages in Matthew reflect a message respectful of Jews and specifically directed toward them, such

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<sup>14</sup> Gerald O'Collins, "Anti-Semitism in the Gospel," TS 26 (1965): 663-6.

as Jesus' directive that his disciples should not enter areas inhabited by Gentiles, since his words are only for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mat. 10:5-6). Why, then, the harsh words of censure and the calling down of blood upon the people and the nation?<sup>15</sup>

One plausible explanation is that the Matthean community resembled another ancient sectarian group, the Dead Sea sect, in considering themselves to be the "true Israel." Everyone else is doomed. The evangelist, in a manner not unlike that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, writes with a pronounced "exclusivism" that restricts divine blessing to the Judeo-Christian "Nazarene" sect alone. It is commonly theorized that Matthew may have originated in Antioch, in a church composed of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. It is charged that the evidence does not support any suggestion that Matthew is the translation of an Aramaic original<sup>16</sup>.

However, it has also been suggested, based on linguistic features of the Greek in the Gospel that seem to parrot Aramaic, that the final redactor of the Gospel was a member of an Aramaic-speaking group who, as "Nazarene" Christians, now held that the previous people of God had been condemned<sup>17</sup>. In either case, the implications of this early "replacement theology" are that a New Israel had been created, a true Israel, comprised exclusively of the followers –

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<sup>15</sup> G. Baum notes that a number of Jewish researchers of Matthew 27:25 find a link to the phrase in the Hebrew Bible, "His blood be on his head." Gregory Baum, *Is the New Testament Anti-Semitic?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), 104. T. B. Cargal observes that such a formula was utilized to express guilt on the part of an accused person. Some Jewish interpreters have argued that the crowd is not calling for Jesus' execution, but maintaining his innocence. Baum, on the other hand, admits that within the context of Matthew this understanding is unsupported. The crowd clearly demands Jesus' crucifixion, and no change of attitude resulting from Pilate's symbolic hand-washing is indicated. Cargal, "His Blood Be upon Us," 105.

<sup>16</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student's Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1987), 7.

<sup>17</sup> The use of the word *tote* ("then") may indicate that the writer of Matthew was trained to write in Aramaic and wrote Greek with similar features.

or their version of the followers – of Jesus of Nazareth. They alone are inheritors of the Abrahamic covenant. All others, including piously observant Israelites, are excluded, cut off and separated from divine inheritance and blessing<sup>18</sup>.

For Matthew it is "all the people" who utter the stinging words of condemnation, "His blood be upon us." Indeed, it is as though there is a progression (from Luke to Mark to Matthew), from "the people" being mentioned as a conspiratorial "third party" (as in Luke), to the chief priests "moving the people" (as in Mark), to the chief priests and elders persuading "the multitude" (as in Matthew). One controversial though intriguing suggestion, advanced by a small minority of researchers, is that Luke, not Mark, was the first Gospel writer – a conclusion which may have enormous impact on the study of the development of early Christian anti-Semitism<sup>19</sup>. Lockton wrote in 1922 that Luke was the earliest of the three, that Mark was fashioned out of it, and that Matthew was formed from both Luke and Mark<sup>20</sup>. In the mind of both David Flusser and Robert Lindsey, Mark rewrote Luke in order to shock readers/ hearers. Flusser also noted that in Luke one finds no mention of either condemnation or

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<sup>18</sup> Fitzmeyer declares that there is a secondary/ subsidiary theme in Matthew, aimed at providing a rationale for a Judeo-Christian audience as to why the non-Jewish nations were now usurping the place of Israel. The author of Matthew is wrestling with the issue of 'the rejection' of Israel in his own manner, just as Paul tried to make sense of it in Romans 9-11. Fitzmeyer, "Anti-Semitism," 670.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* (Jerusalem: Dugith Publishers, 1973); "A Modified Two-Document Theory of the Synoptic Dependence and Interdependence," *NT* 6 (1963): 239-63. See also Pierson Parker, "A Second Look at The Gospel Before Mark," *JBL* 100 (1980): 389-413; "The Posteriority of Mark" in Farmer, *New Synoptic Studies*, 65-142; Harold Riley, *The Making of Mark: An Exploration* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989); *The First Gospel* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1992); *Preface to Luke* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> W. Lockton, "The Origin of the Gospels," *CQR* 94 (1922): 216-39; *The Three Traditions in the Gospels* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926); *Certain Alleged Gospel Sources: A Study of Q, Proto-Luke and M*, (London: Longmans, Green, 1927).

the allegation of blasphemy<sup>21</sup>.

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

In Mark it appears as though the chief priests, having “moved the people” (15:11), thereafter take a back seat to the crowd, with whom Pilate continues his dialogue. “The people” take center stage. When Mark narrates, “They cried out” (15:13), we assume that we are hearing the voice of “the people” in unison; there is no longer any mention (as in Luke) of the chief priests. In verse 15, Pilate is said to be willing to “content the people” (not the priests) a detail not found in the Lukan account. Only then is Barabbas released and Jesus sent away to be crucified<sup>22</sup>.

When it comes to Matthew’s Gospel, the language is even more incendiary. The chief priests “persuade the multitude,” who, even more than in Mark, drive the narrative thereafter. The jarring reality of the Matthean narrative is that the chief priests fall silent after 27:20 and, as noted, the incendiary statement “his blood be upon us” is in the mouth of “all the people”<sup>23</sup>. Matthew furthermore implies that it was “the

<sup>21</sup> D. Flusser, Foreward, in Lindsey, A Hebrew Translation, 6,7. For a discussion of this material, see Jay M. Harrington, The Lukan Passion Narrative. The Markan Material in Luke 22,54-23,25. A Historical Survey: 1891-1997 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 919.

<sup>22</sup> Maccoby goes as far as to suggest that Jesus and Barabbas are in fact the same person and that the Gospels were written to ‘shift the blame for the crucifixion on to the Jewish people as a whole’. See H. Z. Maccoby NTS 16 (1969): 55-60. I contend that this shifting of blame is evident regardless of whether Jesus and Barabbas are the same.

<sup>23</sup> Flusser discussed the question of the extent to which the final redactor of Matthew accentuated the sinister images of Jesus’ trial and execution, having already received them from his sources, most notably from Mark. He suggested that the Matthean redactor must have understood the so-called Jewish guilt in the death of Jesus as a climax

people" who had delivered Jesus to Pilate at the outset (Mat. 27:18), as against Mark's statement (consistent with Luke 23:13-14) that "the chief priests had delivered him."

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

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

In the final analysis, an undiscerning reliance on Matthew's "M" material tends to communicate unfortunate stereotypes and negatively color the fabric of interfaith relations. The result is the perpetuation of arguably the most slanderous charge ever levied against the Jewish people: the murder of the "Anointed One," the Christ – deicide. The charge has been perpetuated and echoed across the centuries, from the Church Fathers to present-day Pontiffs<sup>24</sup>. The question

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of the murder of the prophets by their own people. This is why "all the people" are depicted as uttering the "blood curse" of Mat. 27:25. He saw a connection here with specific changes made by the author of Matthew (23:33-35) on his source, namely the Lukan narrative. Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, 566.

<sup>24</sup> We should note, for example, the words of John Chryostom: "The Jews are the most worthless of all men. They are lecherous, greedy and rapacious. They are perfidious murderers of Christ. The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ and for killing God there is no expiation possible, no indulgence or pardon. Christians may never cease vengeance and the Jews must live in servitude forever. God always hated the Jews. It

nonetheless remains: Can the problems inherent in the Christian Scriptures be mitigated through the efforts of critical scholarship? I believe they can. Again recalling that the Buddha once counseled that the Scriptures be amended, we might simply add, “Amend them indeed”.

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is incumbent upon Christians to hate Jews” (*Homiliae Adversus Iudaeos*). See Franklin Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 2000), 1, 27, 104.