

CHAPTER 5 THE ANTI-JUDAISM IN MATTHEW

Matthew's Gospel exhibits far more antagonism towards the Jewish leaders than Mark's. This has traditionally been explained due to Christianity being born and persecuted in the Jewish setting of the Holy Land. Matthew wrote soon after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, so reflected this background. Mark wrote many years later in Rome, where the population and civil authority was Gentile. In Rome, Jewish antagonism towards Christians was not so intense. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark echo these two periods.

But according to Markan history, Jews and Christians had good relations till 85 AD. In that year Jewish leaders, at a Council at Jamnia, wrote a prayer containing an anti-Christian curse. When it was introduced into services and Christians refused to say it, they were expelled from the synagogue. This anti-Christian act by the Jews was a major turning point and explains why the Gospel of Matthew has an anti-Judaic tone.

So which history is correct? These periods have been studied in detail by both Jews and Christians. Rabbi Phillip Segal, a Talmudist, and other Jewish scholars have pointed out that while Jamnia was a Jewish centre of learning, there is no record of the Council being held there. The hypothesis of such a Council was first put forward in 1871 by Heinrich Graetz. He wrote the first history of Judaism and, although a praiseworthy pioneering work, it is not reliable. A curse against Christians was written at Jamnia by a small number of Jews, but it was not a big event, nor was it introduced into all synagogues.

Other Jewish research was published in: '*Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*' by E. P. Sanders in 1981. William Horbury, the leading Christian authority on this subject, endorsed the findings in the book. The Anglican Archbishop, John Robinson, commented on it:

[The prayer] ... does not reflect a watershed in the history of the relationship between Jews and Christians in the first centuries of our era. Apparently there was never a single edict which caused the so-called irreparable separation between Judaism and Christianity. The separation was rather the result of a long process dependent upon local situations and ultimately upon the political power of the church'.

Concerning a later period he wrote:

'...there is abundant evidence from patristic sources that Christians were frequenting the synagogues quite often. Indeed there is far-flung evidence that it was the church leadership that strove to keep Christians away from the synagogue and not the Jews who were excluding them. Such protest from the church Fathers demonstrates the receptivity of the synagogues to Christians. This situation is highly unlikely if the synagogue liturgy contained a daily curse against Christians'.

And again: 'There is no evidence to show that people were excommunicated on the ground of harbouring non-orthodox beliefs ... While to Christians heresy mainly implied doctrinal dissent, in Judaism doctrinal dissent did not make a Jew into a heretic. Deviationism was assessed on grounds of practice or discipline rather than doctrine'. ((JATRP 75-77)).

Christian history shows there were very strong reasons for Christians to be critical of the Judaic leadership from the earliest times of Christianity. While Christ was alive his followers feared being expelled from the Synagogues (John 12: 42), and when hiding in the upper room after the crucifixion, they lived in fear (John 20: 19). After the descent of the Holy Spirit, they emerged to proclaim the Resurrection, perform miracles and attract converts.

The Sadducees and the High Priest brought Christians before the Sanhedrin, ordering them to be beaten and to cease preaching. Stephen, a very eloquent deacon was tried by the Sanhedrin and stoned to death (Acts 7:59).

Later, the Roman governor visited Caesarea and left the High Priest to govern Jerusalem. The High Priest took this opportunity to launch a persecution of the Christians consisting of searches, arrests, imprisonments and executions (Acts 8:1). Then he sent Saul to Antioch and other towns to bring fleeing Christians back for trial and death. (Acts: 28: 11). It was during a journey to Damascus that Saul was converted and took the name Paul (Acts 13: 9). The Apostles had to hide until the return of the Roman governor.

When Claudius became emperor in AD 40, he appointed the Jewish Herod Agrippa as king of Palestine. Needing to consolidate his influence with the High Priest, Herod beheaded the Apostle James the Great and, "Seeing that it pleased the Jews", arrested Peter (Acts 12: 1-11). When King Herod died his son was too young to rule, so a Roman governor was appointed and under him the Church was left in peace.

In 58 AD Paul decided to return to Jerusalem from Asia but, hearing that some Jews were plotting to kill him, he travelled by an indirect route (Acts 20: 3). So as to uphold the traditions of his people Paul visited the Temple for the purification ceremonies but, when recognised, was dragged from the Temple and an attempt made to kill him (Acts 21: 30-31).

Fortunately Roman troops in a nearby fort intervened and, wishing to learn the reason for the disturbance, asked the Sanhedrin to hold a trial. The Pharisees were willing to acquit Paul, but the Romans had to intervene again to protect him from the Sadducees (Acts 23: 10).

The following day he was sent to Felix the Roman governor of Judea, now living in Caesarea. Hearing that forty Jews had taken an oath sanctioned by the High Priest to kill Paul, Felix provided a large escort of troops (Acts 23: 21-25). Although rejecting the accusations of the Jewish leaders, Felix granted Paul a limited freedom only.

After two years, Festus replaced Felix. Wishing to gain popularity, the new governor was willing to grant the demand of the Jewish leaders for Paul to be tried by the Sanhedrin. Paul avoided this by claiming his right as a Roman citizen to be tried in Rome. But, before Paul could be sent to Rome, Festus died and Albinus was appointed to replace him.

A few weeks passed while Albinus prepared to travel to Palestine so as to take up his post. In his absence, the High Priest and Sanhedrin were free of Roman control. The city would be crowded during Passover and the leading Jews feared the Christians would take the opportunity to preach more openly. At this time, a holy man was known to spend long periods of daily prayer in the Temple. So the authorities placed him on a wing of the building and told him to warn the crowds against Christian preaching.

They were not aware he was the Apostle James, now bishop of the city. As soon as he stood up on the wing he openly preached Christ. The priests and Pharisees realised their mistake so threw him down. After being stoned he was beaten to death with a club. Following this incident in 62 A.D other Christians were killed. ((EH 2: 23 and BC 118-121)).

Albinus, who was still in Alexandria, sent an angry letter depriving Annas of the high priesthood. This brought the Sanhedrin under control and an end to the killings. But the Sadducees banned Christians from worshipping in the Temple ((BC 121)). Within four years Palestine was ravaged by war so the Christians moved to the Gentile town of Pella, 130 kilometres to the north.

These events clearly explain why Matthew viewed much of the Jewish leadership as enemies.

In 64 AD Nero launched a persecution far worse than anything attempted by the Jews. If the author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote much later, why are the Romans reported so favourably? If a Council at Jamnia so outraged the Christians that they suddenly became anti-Judaic, why is there no hint of it, or the curse, in Christian and heretical literature?

CHAPTER 6

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