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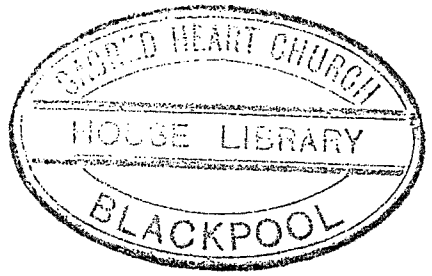

A Crucified Christ in Holy Week

Essays on the
Four Gospel Passion Narratives

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The Passion According to Matthew

The same liturgical year (A) that offers the Matthean passion account on Palm/Passion Sunday draws from the rest of Matthew on the Sundays of the Ordinary Time. Once again this reminds us to set the passion in the context of the whole Gospel story. For instance Matthew opens with Herod the king, the chief priests, and the scribes seeking the death of the child Jesus;[9] as Matthew comes to an end Pilate the governor, the chief priests, and the scribes are instrumental in putting Jesus to death. The two scenes contain Matthew's only references to Jesus as "the King of the Jews." In the infancy narrative there is a five-fold pattern of scenes alternating between those friendly to Jesus (Mary, Joseph, magi) and those hostile to him (Herod, chief priests, scribes). In the burial narrative there is a similar fivefold pattern of alternating friends (Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene, women, disciples) and enemies (chief priests, Pharisees, guards).[10] Deeper meaning is found in some of those who appear in the passion if we remember their role in the ministry. The Matthean disciples (unlike the Marcan disciples) have clearly professed that Jesus is the Son of God (14:33), and so their failure and flight from Gethsemane is all the more shocking. The Matthean Peter, rescued by Jesus from sinking in the sea (14:30-31), has spoken for all in confessing Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God"; this makes truly poignant his repeated denial, "I do not know the man" (27:72, 74). In Matthew (23:1-36) Jesus' critique of the

[9] Matthew 2:5, 16, 20 ("those who have sought the child's life").
[10] Compare 1:18–2:23 to 27:57–28:20.

Pharisees is particularly severe. Yet, while Matthew (27:62) mentions the Pharisees among the adversaries of Jesus during the passion, he does so only once (elsewhere only John 18:3) and so supports the general Gospel contention that the (Sadducee) chief priests were the principal Jewish agents in Jesus' death. If the Gentile magi are set over against Jewish figures hostile to the child Jesus at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, the Gentile wife of Pilate is a similar contrasting figure in the trial of Jesus; and both function in a uniquely Matthean context of revelation given in dreams. The dire self-condemnatory "His blood on us and on our children" (27:25) has an antecedent in the self-condemnation of the chief priests and the elders in 21:41 who interpret the parable of the vineyard to mean: "He [God] will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants." It has a sequence in that by the end of the Gospel (28:15) "the Jews" are an alien group to the followers of Jesus.

But let us move on from the overall context of the Gospel to the individual scenes of the Matthean passion account. Because of the closeness of Matthew to Mark in the passion (p. 20 above), I shall not repeat elements in the previous chapter that are also applicable to Matthew.

A. GETHSEMANE: PRAYER AND ARREST (26:30-56)

The echoes of the Last Supper die out with the hymn the disciples sing as they go to the Mount of Olives, perhaps a hymn of the Passover liturgy. This Mount is mentioned twice in the OT. In Zechariah 14:4ff. it is the site to which God will come from heaven to judge the world—a reference that explains why Luke specifies the Mount of Olives as the place of Jesus' ascension and ultimate return (Acts 1:9-12). More important for our purposes, in II Samuel 15:30-31 David in peril of his life has to flee Jerusalem from Absalom's revolt; he goes to the Mount of

Olives and weeps there, discovering that he has been betrayed by Ahitophel, his trusted advisor. Small wonder that in Matthew this Mount is the site where Jesus predicts desertion by his disciples, denial by Peter, and where he is arrested through the treason of Judas. The story of the Davidic Messiah echoes the story of David; and yet the attachment of the arrest to Gethsemane, "oil press," an otherwise unknown locale on the Mount, suggests a basis in historical tradition, rather than pure symbolism.

Before Judas arrives at Gethsemane, the relation between Jesus and his disciples comes to a dramatic finale. Leaving behind the group of the disciples and then the three chosen ones, Jesus goes on alone to pray, falling on his face to the earth, with his soul sorrowful like that of the Psalmist (Ps 42:6—another instance of the all-pervasive OT coloring of the Passion Narrative).[11] The touching prayer he pours forth in this moment of distress has often been the subject of historical skepticism. The disciples were at a distance and asleep; how could anyone know what Jesus said to God? It may be observed, however, that the words Matthew attributes to Jesus in Gethsemane echo the Lord's Prayer: "My Father"; "Pray that you may not enter into temptation"; "Your will be done." We know of a tradition that Jesus prayed when he faced death, for in Hebrews 5:7 we read, "Christ offered prayers and supplications with cries and tears to God who was able to save him from death." It is not implausible that Christian reflection filled in this prayer with words patterned on Jesus' prayer during his ministry. This would have been a way of affirming that Jesus' relationship to his Father remained consistent through life and death.

[11] For the christological tension between the situation in Gethsemane and Jesus' prophetic confidence during the ministry, see my discussion of the Marcan account above.

The three times Jesus withdraws to pray and the three times he returns to find the disciples sleeping exemplify the well-attested literary pattern of "the three," namely, that stories are effective and balanced if three characters or three incidents are included. The repetition underlines the continued obtuseness of the disciples and makes their inability to keep awake a perceptive comment on Jesus' prayer that the cup pass from him. It will not pass, and in his moment of trial he will not be assisted by his disciples. Yet Jesus' prayer is not without effect: it begins with him sorrowful, troubled, and prostrate; it ends with him on his feet resolutely facing the hour that has approached: "Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

The betrayer is "Judas, one of the Twelve." The identification of Judas at this point, as if he had never been mentioned before, is often hailed as a sign that the Passion Narrative was once an independent unit that needed to introduce the dramatis personae. But "one of the Twelve," as it now stands in Matthew 26, a chapter that has already twice mentioned Judas, helps to catch the heinousness of a betrayal by one who had been an intimate. This intimacy is further stressed when Jesus addresses him as "Friend" or "Companion," a touch peculiar to Matthew here (and previously used as a disappointed address to one who should have been grateful in 20:13). Also Matthean is Jesus' rebuke of armed resistance: "Put your sword back in place, for all who take up the sword will perish by it." There are traces in the Gospels of Christian puzzlement that, when Jesus was arrested, a sword was raised. This puzzlement surely increased when the identification of the assailant moved from Mark's vague "bystander" to "one of the followers of Jesus" (Matthew) to "Simon Peter" (John); and so the later Gospels must clarify that such action was not directed by Jesus. On the other hand, the helplessness of Jesus against those who ar-

rested him was also a problem since the tradition reported previous occasions when he had frustrated attempts to seize him. Matthew has Jesus giving an assurance: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" The ultimate explanation is that Jesus is allowing such indignities so that "the prophetic Scriptures might be fulfilled."

B. SANHEDRIN TRIAL; PETER'S DENIAL AND JUDAS' DESPERATION (26:57–27:10)

Matthew is alone among the Synoptics in identifying as "Caiaphas" the high priest before whom Jesus was brought for trial after being arrested. No part of the passion narrative has been more disputed historically than the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin. A session in the middle of the night on a major Jewish feast where the high priest encourages false witness and then intervenes to tell the judges that the prisoner is guilty, and where the judges themselves spit on the prisoner and slap him—all of that violates jurisprudence in general and rabbinic jurisprudence in particular. Moreover, it is never made clear why, having sentenced the prisoner as liable to death, the Sanhedrin then handed him over to the Roman governor for a new trial. (The explanation that the Sanhedrin did not have the right of capital punishment comes from John and does not help us with Matthew.) There are, of course, possible explanations, but these should not distract us from the impression Matthew wants to give. His evangelical concern is to convince his readers that Jesus was totally innocent, for the blasphemy charged against him had distorted his words and intent. Yet there is also irony. Despite the falsehood in the anti-Temple words attributed to Jesus, Matthew's readers in the 80s know that the Temple really was destroyed; and they are invited to see this as a sign of retribution. Despite the malice of the high

priest, they also know that Jesus' answer to the definitive question was true: he is the Son of God and is seated at the right hand of the power. If the portrait of the Sanhedrin is unrelievedly hostile, we must remember that Matthew is writing to Christians who themselves have suffered from confrontations with synagogue leaders. We cannot impose our different religious sensibilities on the first century (see p. 15 above).

The president and the members of the Sanhedrin are not the only ones set over against Jesus in this drama. At the very moment Jesus is being interrogated by the Jewish court, Peter is being interrogated in the courtyard below by maids and bystanders—again the effective pattern of three times. Jesus shows himself resolute, remaining silent before false witnesses and nuancing his answer to the high priest; but Peter tries to avoid the issue ("I do not know what you mean"); then he lies ("I do not know the man"); and finally he abjures Jesus with an oath.[12] The best proof that Jesus' words before the Sanhedrin will ultimately come true is offered by the fact that, even as he utters them, his previous prediction about Peter is being verified: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times."

Indeed, still another prophecy of Jesus is verified as he is taken to be delivered to Pilate. Among the evangelists, only Matthew stops at this moment to dramatize a threatening word that Jesus had spoken to another of his followers earlier in the night: "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed; it would be better for him if he had never been born" (26:24). Logically Matthew's reintroduction of Judas here is awkward. The chief priests and elders are said to lead Jesus to Pilate (27:1); yet simul-

[12] No less than in Mark (above), Matthew's account of Peter's denials, followed implicitly by a rehabilitation so that he became a rock of Christian faith, could have served to encourage those who failed when first tested by persecution.

taneously they are portrayed in the Temple wrestling with the issue of the blood money that Judas has thrown back. They decide to buy with the money a burial field for Judas who has hanged himself (even as did Ahitophel who, as we saw, betrayed David: II Sam 17:23). This detail increases the awkwardness of the Matthean narrative if one thinks of Acts 1:18-19 where Judas himself buys the field and dies from a type of internal combustion (even as did the anti-God figure Antiochus Epiphanes in II Macc 9:7-10). We must assume that, unexpectedly, Judas died soon after the crucifixion and that early Christians connected the "Field of Blood" where he was buried with his betrayal or his death, a death described according to patterns supplied by the demises of OT unworthies.
However, the main goal of Matthew's narrative about Judas is in a different direction. Judas' violent death matches Jesus' prophecy, and the use of his ill-gotten thirty pieces of silver matches prophecies of Jeremiah and Zechariah. A divinely sketched triptych has provided not only Jesus on trial in the center panel, but also Peter's denial on one side-panel and Judas' desperation on the other. The mystery of the different fate of these two prominent disciples, both of whom failed Jesus, is penetratingly captured by Matthew's laconic description of the last action taken by each in the passion narrative: Peter "went out and wept bitterly"; Judas "went away and hanged himself."

C. ROMAN TRIAL (27:11-31)

Deserted by disciples, surrounded by enemies, Jesus now confronts the governor who can decree his death. Self-possessed, Jesus remains silent—a silence that puts the governor on the defensive. Matthew joins the other evangelists in describing the custom of releasing a prisoner at the feast, a custom that provides a possible solution for Pilate. Yet, despite the fourfold reference of the Gospels to

Barabbas, this episode has been the subject of much scholarly controversy, for such an amnesty custom is not attested among either the Romans or the Jews. (The parallels offered by ingenious defenders of historicity leave much to be desired when examined carefully.) Matthew's account is the most problematical because it is interrupted by the dream of Pilate's wife. As a dramatic touch, however, this peculiarly Matthean insert is highly effective: a Gentile woman through dream-revelation recognizes Jesus' innocence and seeks his release, while the Jewish leaders work through the crowd to have the notorious Barabbas released and Jesus crucified. Some important manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel counterpose Barabbas and Jesus in a unique way, for they phrase Pilate's question in 26:17 thus: "Whom do you want me to release to you—Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called Christ?" Since "Barabbas" probably means "Son of the Father," it is a fascinating irony to think that Pilate may have faced two men charged with a crime, both named Jesus, one "Son of the Father," the other "Son of God." But Matthew calls no attention to the meaning of the patronymic; he is satisfied with the irony of the guilty man being acclaimed and the innocent being thrust toward death.

The governor is overwhelmed by the demand of all for the crucifixion of Jesus; and so, in a dramatic gesture peculiar to Matthew's account, he publicly washes his hands to signify, "I am innocent of this [just] man's blood." Like his wife, the Gentile recognizes innocence; but "all the people" answer: "His blood on us and on our children." No line in the passion narratives has done more to embitter Jewish and Christian relations than this. It echoes OT language describing those who must be considered responsible for death (II Sam 3:28-29; Josh 2:19; Jer 26:15), even as washing one's hands is an OT action signifying innocence in reference to murder (Deut 21:6-9).

One can benevolently reflect that the Matthean statement was not applicable to the whole Jewish people of Jesus' time, for relatively few stood before Pilate, and also that it was an affirmation of present willingness to accept responsibility, not an invocation of future punishment or vengeance. (Yet rabbinic law exemplified in Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 4:5 holds perjurers accountable for the blood of an innocent man until the end of time.) On the whole Matthew's attitude is generalizing and hostile, and we cannot disguise it.[13] He thinks of the Pharisees and Sadducees as a "brood of vipers" who kill and crucify saintly prophets, wise men, and scribes, so that on them comes "all the righteous blood shed on earth, beginning with the blood of the innocent Abel" (23:33-35). Judas acknowledged that he had sinned in betraying Jesus' innocent blood; Pilate dramatized his own innocence of this just man's blood; but "all the people" agree that, if Jesus is innocent, his blood will be on them and their children. Any amelioration of this self-judgment in Matthew must be sought in the words that Jesus spoke at the supper, referring to his blood "as poured out for many [all] for the forgiveness of sins" (26:27).

The obduracy of the leaders and the people leads Pilate to have Jesus flogged and crucified. Ultimately, then, the Roman governor passes on Jesus the same sentence that the Jewish high priest passed; and at the end of the Roman trial Jesus is mocked and spat upon and struck even as he was at the end of the Jewish trial. Matthew has shown Pilate and his wife as favorable to Jesus, but the Galilean is a challenge to Gentiles as well as to Jews and is rejected by many from both sides.

[13] For the obligation to deal pastorally with such passages lest they produce anti-Semitism, see pp. 15–16 above.

D. CRUCIFIXION, DEATH, AND BURIAL (27:32-66)

The journey to Golgotha, which introduces Simon of Cyrene, is narrated with almost disconcerting brevity, as Matthew hews close to Mark in the finale of the story. Incidents at the place of execution are merely listed with little comment and no pathos. If there is a dominating motif behind the selection, it is correspondence to the OT. For instance, only Matthew has Jesus offered wine mixed with gall—an echo of Psalm 69:22: "For my food you gave me gall, and for my thirst sour wine to drink."

As in Mark, three groups parade by the cross in derision of Jesus. (Once more the pattern of "the three.") The most general group of passers-by begins by blaspheming against Jesus' claim to destroy the Temple, echoing the false witnesses of the trial. Also choosing a motif from the trial, the chief priests with the scribes and elders mock Jesus' claim to be Son of God. Without specification the robbers are said to revile in a similar manner. Peculiarly Matthean is the phrasing of the mockery so as to strengthen the reference to Psalm 22:8-9: "All who see me scoff at me; they deride me . . . . 'He trusted in the Lord; let Him deliver him.'"

Darkness covers the land at the sixth hour (noon) until the ninth hour (3 P.M.) when Jesus finally breaks his silence with a loud cry, making his only and final statement: *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani;* my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew's Semitic form of the first verse of Psalm 22 is more Hebraized than Mark's *"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani"* and makes more intelligible the misunderstanding by the bystanders that Jesus is calling for Elijah. Those who exalt the divinity of Jesus to the point where they cannot allow him to be truly human interpret away this verse to fit their christology. They insist that Psalm 22 ends with God delivering the suffering figure. That may well be, but the verse that Jesus is por-

trayed as quoting is not the verse of deliverance but the verse of abandonment—a verse by a suffering psalmist who is puzzled because up to now God has always supported and heard him. It is an exaggeration to speak of Jesus' despair, for he still speaks to "*my* God." Yet Matthew, following Mark, does not hesitate to show Jesus in the utter agony of feeling forsaken as he faces a terrible death. We are not far here from the christology of Hebrews which portrays Jesus as experiencing the whole human condition, like us in everything except sin. Only if we take these words seriously can we see the logic of the Matthean Jesus' anguished prayer that this cup might pass from him.

In Matthew's view God has not forsaken Jesus, and that becomes obvious immediately after his death. All three Synoptics know of the tearing of the Temple curtain, but only Matthew reports an earthquake where rocks are split and tombs are opened and the dead rise. Some of these phenomena resemble wondrous events that the Jewish historian Josephus associates with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans under Titus. Certainly, too, there are echoes of OT apocalyptic passages (Joel 2:10; Ezek 37:12; Isa 26:19; Nahum 1:5-6; Dan 12:2). Matthew did not hesitate to have the moment of Jesus' birth marked by a star in the sky; the moment of his death is even more climactic, marked by signs in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth. It is a moment of judgment on a Judaism represented by the Temple; a moment of new life for the saintly dead of Israel; and a moment of opportunity for the Gentiles, represented by the Roman guards who confess, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

What follows is anticlimactic. Matthew, like Mark, mentions the women followers of Jesus but does nothing to relate their "looking on from a distance" to the stupendous phenomena they should have seen. The tradition of Joseph of Arimathea, common to all four Gospels, is embellished in Matthew. Joseph is "a rich man," probably a deduction from his owning a tomb, but also a sign that for Matthew's community the model of a rich saint is not repugnant. He is also a disciple of Jesus, and the tomb in which Jesus is buried is *his*. These details, missing from Mark, complicate the scene. If a disciple buried Jesus, why can Jesus' women followers only look on without participating? Does Matthew's tradition represent a simplified remembrance about a pious Jew who buried Jesus in loyalty to Deut 21:22-23, which stipulates that the body of a criminal should not hang overnight? Did this Jew subsequently become a believer in Jesus, whence the tradition that he was a disciple?

Entirely peculiar to Matthew is the aftermath of the burial where the chief priests and Pharisees get permission from Pilate to post a guard at the tomb. These soldiers were meant to frustrate any machinations based on Jesus' prediction that he would rise on the third day; but, as Matthew sees it, their presence helped to confirm the resurrection since it excluded obvious natural explanations as to why the tomb was empty. For good reasons most scholars are skeptical about the historicity of this scene in Matthew. Elsewhere the followers of Jesus are portrayed as showing no expectation that Jesus would rise, and so it is unlikely that the chief priests and Pharisees would anticipate this. Moreover, no other evangelist shows any awareness that the women coming to the tomb on Easter morning would face an armed guard. Matthew's story fits into his apologetics as we see from its conclusion. In the last words they speak in this Gospel the chief priests tell the soldiers to lie, and that lie "has been spread among the Jews to this day" (28:15). By the time this Gospel is written, the synagogue and the church are accusing each

other of deceit about the principal Christian claim. More theologically, the guard at the tomb helps Matthew to illustrate the awesome power of God associated with Jesus. Men do all they can to make certain that Jesus is finished and his memory is buried; they even seal and guard his tomb. Yet the God who shook the earth when Jesus died will shake it again on Sunday morning; the guards will grovel in fear (28:2-4); and the tomb will be opened to stand as an eloquent witness that God has verified the last promise made by His Son: Jesus sits at the right hand of the Power (26:64).