THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS SET FREE

Preaching without Anti-Judaism

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Foreword by Yehezkel Landau

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Foreword

Fr. Daniel Harrington has written a masterful overview of the Synoptic Gospels, one that demonstrates uncommon expertise and sensitivity in three areas crucial for Jewish-Christian relations in our time: first, the linguistic and historical contexts for statements attributed to Jesus and for the overarching narratives of the Evangelists; second, the contemporaneous developments in Jewish tradition (especially the Mishnah, Wisdom Literature, and the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community); and third, the two-thousand-year history of Jewish suffering at the hands of Christians, exacerbated by polemical and triumphalistic interpretations of gospel passages, especially the passion narratives.

Fr. Harrington writes in a clear and accessible style. His book is an exemplary work of biblical scholarship, reflecting the revolution in Catholic thought ushered in by the Second Vatican Council and Nostra Aetate, the historic statement on the Church’s relations with other religions, notably Judaism. At the same time, Fr. Harrington’s volume is a first-rate pedagogical resource, enhanced by the provocative questions at the end of each section. These questions invite the reader to engage the gospel messages personally and seriously, listening deeply to their different voices. The result is a mutually respectful conversation spanning two millennia. Harrington’s gift as an exegete and writer is to make personalities in the first century of the Common Era (Jesus, his disciples, his Jewish adversaries, the Romans, other non-Jews, and even the Essenes) speak to us, Christians and Jews in the twenty-first century. Harrington compellingly, and successfully, argues that the key theological issues which the New Testament protagonists and writers were passionately debating are still alive for us as faithful students of scripture, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. What does the covenant between the Lord of History and the people of Israel call us to do as we prepare for the messianic kingdom of God? Whose vision of redemption is
Introduction: Freeing the Word

The controversy over Mel Gibson's film, The Passion of the Christ, several years ago generated important questions: "Is Gibson an anti-Semite?" "Is the film anti-Jewish?" and "Are the Gospels anti-Jewish?" That last question is, to my mind, the most significant since it touches the core documents of Christianity.

My response to that third question has always been something like this: The Gospels in themselves are not anti-Jewish. But certain Gospel texts have fostered anti-Judaism, and so one can say that the Gospels may have an anti-Jewish potential. I regard the Gospels as Jewish books in the sense that their authors were Jews by birth, that their main characters were first-century Jews, that their narratives are set in the land of Israel, and that they are unintelligible apart from what we Christians now call the Old Testament and first-century Judaism.

At the same time, I recognize that the anti-Jewish potential of certain Gospel texts has been actualized in ways that embarrass and shame me as a Christian. For example, the cry of the Jerusalem crowd according to Matthew 27:25 ("his blood be on us and on our children," New Revised Standard Version, hereafter NRSV) has been used to accuse Jews of being Christ-killers and a deicide people. The negative examples can be greatly multiplied. But in this book my goal is to approach in a positive and constructive way those Synoptic Gospel texts that seem most troublesome in relationships between Jews and Christians today. I want to show that when read in their first-century Jewish context, problematic passages often turn out to be more intelligible and less likely to foster anti-Judaism.

My thesis is that one effective way to free the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) from their anti-Jewish potential is to read them in their first-century Jewish context. The paradox is one often met in historical studies, that is, historical research often has the effect of liberating us from our real or imagined past. My hope is that when
Part One: Introduction

Matthew is sometimes called the most Jewish Gospel. It makes abundant use of Old Testament quotations and allusions. Its theology is expressed in thoroughly biblical categories. Its author and original audience seem to have been of Jewish origin. And it originated in a crisis that affected all Jews in the late first century CE. Nevertheless, Matthew’s Gospel is sometimes described as anti-Jewish. Its critics accuse it of being the source of negative stereotypes of Jews, blaming the whole Jewish people for Jesus’ death, and evacuating the Jewish tradition of ongoing significance. To deal with this question we need to place Matthew’s Gospel in its Jewish historical context.

WHO, WHEN, WHERE?

The title of this Gospel as “According to Matthew” seems to have been added to manuscripts in the second century CE. Nowhere in the main text does the author identify himself or claim to have been an eyewitness. However, this Gospel has been traditionally associated with Matthew the tax collector (9:9) who became one of the twelve apostles (10:3). What exactly this figure contributed to the actual composition of the Gospel is not clear. He may simply have been an admired person in the community where the Gospel was written or circulated, or he may have been responsible for some of the source material incorporated in the text. While technically the work is anonymous, it is customary to call the writer who was responsible for the present form of the Gospel Matthew.

The evangelist was certainly a Jew. He knew Israel’s Scriptures well and was eager to show how Jesus fulfilled them. He was also aware of and engaged in Jewish debates about various legal matters (grounds for divorce, ritual purity, Sabbath observance, etc.) that were controversial among Jewish teachers in the first century CE.
Moreover, he and his fellow Christian Jews were involved in an ideological and theological struggle over which movement best preserved and represented the heritage of Israel after the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple in 70 CE. His audience seems to have been predominantly Christian Jews like himself. Matthew tried both to confirm them in their Christian Judaism and to encourage them to join in the mission to non-Jews (see 28:19).

On the basis of possible allusions to Matthew’s Gospel in early patristic writings it is customary to set the latest possible date of composition at 100 CE. And the apparent references to Jerusalem’s destruction by the Romans in Matthew 21:41, 22:7, and 27:25 establish 70 CE as the earliest possible date. Most scholars today place its composition around 85 or 90 CE and regard it as a revised and expanded version of Mark’s Gospel.

The place of the Gospel’s composition is generally assigned to a large city in the eastern Mediterranean, most likely in Palestine or Syria. The city must have had a large Jewish population that could accommodate Matthew’s Christian Jewish community and its Jewish rivals who controlled “their synagogues.” Moreover, the city must have been a place where Greek was spoken and written widely, since the Gospel was composed in Greek. The most popular candidate among modern scholars is Antioch in Syria. Other possibilities include Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, Tyre or Sidon in Phoenicia, and Pella in the Decapolis in Transjordan.

**WHY, WHAT, HOW?**

Mark’s Gospel seems to have been composed in Rome around 70 CE. Matthew had access to that Gospel, plus the Sayings Source Q and other oral and/or written traditions designated as M. In producing his second edition of Mark’s Gospel, Matthew served as a careful editor by correcting minor mistakes, omitting what he regarded as extraneous details, and including more teachings of Jesus.

In writing his Gospel Matthew also responded to the crisis facing all Jews after 70 CE. The three great pillars of ancient Judaism were the Jerusalem Temple, the land of Israel, and the Mosaic Law. But the Temple had been destroyed, and the land was even more firmly under Roman military and political control. The question fac-
ing all Jews at that time was: How will the Jewish heritage continue, and who will carry it on?

There were several answers to that question. The militant Zealots promoted an insurgency against the Romans and worked toward a Second Jewish Revolt in 132–135 CE (the Bar Kokhba Revolt). The apocalypticists represented in works like 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch hoped for a future divine intervention. The early rabbis worked at developing a new form of Judaism focused on the exact observance of the Torah and the traditions associated with it. And Christian Jews like Matthew regarded Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah and the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes for a Davidic Messiah. According to Matthew, the best way to preserve the heritage of Israel was to follow the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth, and to celebrate him as the Son of David, Messiah, Son of man, Son of God, and Lord.

Matthew’s Gospel is a narrative about Jesus of Nazareth—his birth, his adult activity as a teacher and healer, and his death. While the Gospel looks like a biography and would have been considered as such in antiquity, it is really a form of preaching (kerygma) about a person who early Christians believed had been raised from the dead and now lives on with God and yet is somehow still among us as Emmanuel (“God with us”).

In writing his Gospel the evangelist incorporated most of Mark’s Gospel and used it as his narrative framework. Besides adding an infancy narrative in chapters 1—2, Matthew created an alternating sequence of narratives and discourses (mainly from Q and M material), and appended to Mark’s passion narrative accounts of appearances by the risen Jesus to his followers. The five great speeches represent the most distinctive feature of Matthew’s narrative. They are the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5—7), the missionary discourse (10), the parables of the kingdom (13), the community discourse (18), and the eschatological discourse (24—25). While originally composed for a Christian Jewish community perhaps in Antioch, Matthew’s Gospel quickly circulated among other Christian communities and soon became the most important and influential Gospel, largely because it contains so many of Jesus’ teachings.

The evangelist whom we call Matthew adopts the stance of an omniscient narrator informing interested readers about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The chief character is Jesus, and he is