

## MATTHEW 23 AS PROPHETIC CRITIQUE

David L. Turner

### I. INTRODUCTION

David Gushee recently has spoken of the estrangement of the Synagogue and the Church as the Church's "ultimate theological loose end."<sup>1</sup> He acknowledges that the largely Gentile Church's spite against the Jews has historically fostered such activities as the repression of Jewish culture and the coercion of conversions. But can this sorry record of Christian anti-Semitism be properly tied to Jesus himself, as he is portrayed in the canonical Gospels? No honest person—Christian, agnostic, Jew, Gentile, whatever—can deny that the language of Jesus, in Matthew in particular, is severe at times. Among such severe texts is the parable of the tenant farmers, with its conclusion that "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (21:33-46).<sup>2</sup> Another is the eager acceptance of responsibility for Jesus' condemnation by Jews witnessing his trial before Pilate: "his blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). But Matthew 23 is arguably even more notable in terms of sheer sustained caustic polemic directed against the Jewish leaders. And the ironic imperative of Matthew 23:32 ("Fill up the measure of [the sins of] your ancestors [by killing me]") climaxes a pericope already brimming with negativity. Matthew 23 has been called "a unique, unparalleled

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Gushee, "All Things Jewish," *Books & Culture* (Nov/Dec 2000), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> I have argued that Matt 21:33-45 speaks not of the supersession of Israel by the Gentile Church but of the replacement of the current Jewish leaders by Jesus' disciples in "Matt 21:43 and the Future of Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159(2002)46-61.

specimen of invective” and a “masterpiece of vituperation.”<sup>3</sup> Matthew presents Jesus’ disputes with the Jewish leaders in bold relief, and those disputes come to a head with Jesus’ seven<sup>4</sup> pronouncements of woe against the Jewish leaders in Matt 23. These strident denunciations disturb many people today.

But heated rhetoric in the service of religious disputes was quite the norm in ancient times.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it can be argued that such rhetoric was used in Jewish circles since the days of the biblical prophets, and that it continued to be used in the days of the Second Temple as various Jewish groups critiqued the religious establishment in Jerusalem. Davies and Allison bring this fact to bear upon Matthean polemics:

The ferocity of rhetoric in Jewish texts, and especially the volatile language of the Dead Sea Scrolls, shows that Mathew’s polemic need not signal a break with Judaism. So far from that being the case, we indeed deny that Matthew is a Christian critique of Judaism. It is rather a Jewish-Christian critique of Jewish opponents— and therefore no more ‘anti-Semitic’ than the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>6</sup>

If it can be shown that Jesus’ polemical language in Matthew is rather typical of Second Temple Jewish disputes, Matthew should be viewed not as a Christian critic of the Jewish people but as a

---

<sup>3</sup> S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 68; F. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981), p. 452.

<sup>4</sup> The *KJV* presents eight woes, but if 23:14 is textually dubious, there are seven. For this view, see B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 50. But whatever its textual authenticity, 23:14 seems to echo such prophetic texts as Isa 1:23; 5:8.

<sup>5</sup> L. Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *JBL* 108(1989): 419-41; A. Saldarini, “Delegitimation of Leaders in Matthew 23,” *CBQ* 54(1992): 659-80.

<sup>6</sup> W. Davies and D. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*. ICC. Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1997), pp. 260-61.

Jew who is engaged in a vigorous intramural dispute with other Jews over the identity and religious significance of the Jewish teacher Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

This study argues that this is indeed the case— Matthew is not attacking Jews or Judaism as a Gentile outsider who claims that his new religion has superseded the outdated religion of the Jews.<sup>8</sup> This mistaken approach may be traced to the polemical writings of some of the early church fathers, but it is anachronistic to find it in Matthew on the lips of Jesus. To the contrary, Matthew presents the dispute of Jesus with the Jewish leaders as a thoroughly *Jewish* prophetic critique of the Jerusalem religious establishment which calls for a return to the values of the Torah. This thesis is demonstrated by considering the seven woes of Matt 23 in their Jewish context, first by an exposition of the chapter and second by a consideration of three key themes of the chapter. If the argument is persuasive, Jewish people today can view Jesus' teaching as a valid expression of authentic Jewish spirituality, even though they do not believe Jesus to be their Messiah. And perhaps a small step will have been taken toward tying up the Church's ultimate theological loose end.

## II. THE SEVEN WOES OF MATTHEW 23

### 2.1 Introduction to Matthew 23

---

<sup>7</sup> Scholars who take this view include D. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), pp. 303-05; J. Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 302-04; *Matthew's Community and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 148-49, 151; A. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), pp. 59-63; D. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1999), pp. 148-49.

<sup>8</sup> D. Georgi, "The Early Church: Internal Jewish Migration or New Religion?" *Harvard Theological Review* 81(1995): 35-68. Georgi argues convincingly for the former alternative.

Matt 23 culminates the running dispute of Jesus with the leaders of the Jerusalem religious establishment which has been narrated since 21:12. Jesus argues successively with

- (1) the chief priests and scribes (21:12-17)<sup>9</sup>
- (2) the chief priests and elders of the people (21:23-22:14; according to 21:45 this included Pharisees)
- (3) certain disciples of the Pharisees and certain Herodians (22:15-22)
- (4) certain Sadducees (22:23-33)
- (5) a certain lawyer who was a Pharisees (22:34-46).

These arguments take the form of questions by the various religious leaders (21:16, 23; 22:17, 28; 36), and responses by Jesus which include scriptural quotations (21:16, 33, 42; 22:32, 37, 39, 44), parables (21:28-30, 33-39; 22:1-14), and questions directed back at the leaders (21:16, 25, 28, 31, 40, 42; 22:18, 20, 42, 43, 45). Finally the disputes come to the point where no further dialogue is possible, and the indictments of Matt 23 ensue.

Matt 23 also serves as a sort of introduction to the eschatological discourse of Matt 24-25. Jesus' disputes with the Jerusalem religious leaders end in an impasse (22:46). Jesus then warns his followers against being like those leaders (23:1-12) and pronounces woes upon them (23:13-36). He laments Jerusalem's fate, yet he holds out hope for its future (23:37-39). As he departs the Temple, perhaps reenacting the departure of the Shekinah (Ezek 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:22-23; 43:2), his disciples nervously point out to him the glorious architecture (24:1). At this point he speaks bluntly about the coming destruction of the Temple, and the disciples respond

---

<sup>9</sup> In light of the contextual stress on Jesus' disputes with the Jewish leaders, it is likely that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree (21:18-22) is an acted parable of judgment on the fruitless Temple leaders, not on the nation as a whole. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.153-54; R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 416.

with the question which gives rise to the discourse, “when will these things be and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:2-3). Thus the judgment of Jerusalem, primarily its leaders and its Temple, is justified in Matt 23 before it is predicted in Matt 24-25.

It seems best to view Matt 23 as having three parts. First, Jesus addresses the multitudes and his disciples with concerns about the scribes and Pharisees and urges the disciples to adopt a different model of leadership (23:1-12). Then Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees with seven woes which expose their hypocrisy in crucial matters (23:13-33). The seven woes conclude with the accusation that Israel’s rejection of her own prophets culminates in Jerusalem’s impending rejection of Jesus. The concluding section of the chapter (23:34-39) predicts the rejection of Jesus’ future messengers to Israel, which can only exacerbate her guilt (23:34-36). Nevertheless, Jesus laments Jerusalem and holds out the hope that Israel’s desolation will end when she finally acknowledges him with the words of Psa 118:26 (23:37-39).<sup>10</sup> The present study focuses on the woes of 23:13-39 with the goal of showing their continuity not only with the rebuke of the biblical prophets but also with the criticisms of the second Temple sectarians.

## 2.2 The First Two Woes:

2.2.1 The Scribes and Pharisees Prevent Access to God (23:13). The first two woes go right to the heart of the matter with the charge that the scribes and Pharisees keep people out of

---

<sup>10</sup> Although some take 23:39 as only stressing the certainty of judgment, the image of the mother hen gathering her chicks (23:37) speaks of compassion, not rejection. Rather, there is hope of salvation if only Israel will acknowledge Jesus to be her Messiah. Israel has sinned in rejecting Jesus, and there will be punishment for that sin. But here as throughout biblical history, repentance after sin and judgment brings grace and redemption. See the discussion in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.323-24.

the Kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees “are not leaders but misleaders.”<sup>11</sup> Not only do they not enter the Kingdom— they prevent others from doing so. This language is similar to that of Jer 23:2 and Ezek 34:2-8, which likens the wicked leaders of Israel to shepherds which feed themselves and scatter rather than feed their flock.

2.2.2 The Scribes and Pharisees Make Proselytes for Gehenna (23:15). The second woe builds on the theme of the first. The efforts of the scribes and Pharisees to convert others<sup>12</sup> are tragically ironic. The description of the extent of their efforts (“sea and dry land”) recalls Jon 1:9; Hag 2:6, 21. Since they themselves are not entering the Kingdom, their efforts only result in others not entering it. So far from their converts becoming sons of the Kingdom (8:12; 18:3), they become sons of hell.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 The Third and Fourth Woes: Halakhic Matters

2.2.3 The Scribes and Pharisees Misguide the People concerning Oaths (23:16-22). While the first two woes deal with the general matter of preventing access to the Kingdom, the next two speak of specific legal rulings or *halakhot*. The third woe addresses in some detail the matter of oaths. Although the scribes and Pharisees viewed some oaths as binding and others as non-binding (23:16-19), Jesus teaches that this distinction is empty casuistry and that all oaths are valid (23:20-22). He totally rejects their halakhic distinctions between valid and invalid

---

<sup>11</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.285.

<sup>12</sup> It is not certain whether this should be understood as efforts to convert Gentiles to Judaism or as efforts to convert Jews to Pharisaism. Possibly both are in view. S. McKnight concludes that the Pharisees did not actively pursue new converts from among the Gentiles, but that they urged “God-fearing” Gentiles (cf. Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7) to become full converts to Judaism and to observe the Pharisaic *halakhah*. See McKnight’s *A Light among the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 106-08.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *b. Rosh Hashanna* 17a; *Berachot* 10a.

oaths here. Previously in this Gospel Jesus has flatly denied the need for any oaths at all (Matt 5:33-37).<sup>14</sup>

#### 2.2.4 The Scribes and Pharisee Neglect the Weightier Matters of the Torah (23:23-24).

The fourth woe addresses a second halakhic matter, that of weightier versus lighter matters of legal obligation. Here Jesus does not summarily reject the Pharisaic insistence on the tithing of spices. Rather he contextualizes it as a relatively light matter when one considers the relatively heavy matters of justice, mercy, and faith. This reminds the reader of the citation of Hos 6:6 in Matt 9:13 and 12:7. Tithing is important, but it ought to be done with proper motives and in the context of one's weightier obligations. Here Jesus teaches as did Micah (6:6-8) that justice, kindness, and humility are essential, not religious rituals or duties. Such religious acts are valid only when they are done with the proper spirit and intention.

### 2.3 The Fifth and Sixth Woes: Internal vs. External Matters

2.3.1 The Inside and Outside of the Cup (23:25-26). The fifth and sixth woes together address the matter of Pharisaic neglect of internal matters. In the fifth the scribes and Pharisees are described metaphorically<sup>15</sup> as those who clean the outside of tableware but neglect the inside. Despite their zeal for the Torah and their traditions, they remain people characterized by extortion and self-indulgence.

2.3.2 Whitewashed Tombs Full of Bones (23:27-28). The sixth woe, like the fifth, addresses heart piety as opposed to mere outward piety. Jesus turns from the metaphor of cups

---

<sup>14</sup> It is well known that *halakhah* on oaths and vows was very important in second Temple Judaism. See *m. Nedarim* and CD 15.

<sup>15</sup> Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, 3.296-99) are probably correct, against many commentators, that Jesus is not disputing existing Pharisaic tradition here but is simply using the washing of table ware metaphorically. Pharisaic fastidiousness about such matters renders the metaphor fitting, but Jesus is not attacking that fastidiousness *per se*.

and dishes to the macabre simile of tombs. Tombs are made beautiful on the outside, but on the inside there are only bones and decaying corpses. Similarly, the scribes and Pharisees appear to men as righteous, but their hearts are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

#### 2.4 The Seventh Woe: A History of Rejection of the Prophets (23:29-31)

The simile of tombs from the sixth woe becomes the transitional motif which links the sixth to the seventh. But here the tombs are those of the prophets, which the Pharisees adorn while claiming that they would never have taken part with their ancestors in killing the prophets. But Jesus points out that they have unwittingly implicated themselves in the guilt of their ancestors. Their attempt to distance themselves from their ancestors contains an implicit admission that they are the descendants of murderers. Figuratively, to be a son (בן) of an entity is to be characterized by the ethical traits associated with that entity.<sup>16</sup>

### III. KEY THEMES IN MATTHEW 23

#### 3.1 Prophetic Oracles of Woe

It is well known that the prophets frequently cried woe (הוי, around 50 times, and אוי, around 25 times) against Israel's sins.<sup>17</sup> These oracles spoke with a blend of anger, grief, and

---

<sup>16</sup> Examples of this common Semitic idiom include Num 17:25; Deut 3:18; 13:14; Judg 18:2; 21:10; 1 Sam 14:52; 18:17; 2 Sam 2:7; 3:34; 1 Kgs 1:52; 2 Kgs 2:16; 2 Chron 17:7; Job 28:8; 41:26; Jer 48:45; Hos 10:9

<sup>17</sup> E. g., see the onomatopoeic interjection in Isa 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22; 10:1; Amos 5:18; 6:1, 4; Hab 2:9, 12, 15, 19; Zech 11:17. Closely related are curse oracles introduced by ארור. At times (e. g., Isa 55:1) הוי simply involves a summons with no connotation of impending doom. See the brief syntactical analysis of woe oracles as exclamations in B. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 681-83. Studies of such oracles include R. Clements, "The Form and Character of Prophetic Woe Oracles," *Semitics*

alarm about the excruciating consequences which would come upon Israel due to her sin. After the pronouncement of woe, such oracles contain a description of the persons upon whom the woe will come. This description amounts to the reason why the woe is merited. Thus a woe oracle states the conclusion before the premises on which it is based. Woe oracles may have developed from prophetic announcements of judgment, covenant curses (Deut 27:15) or even from funeral lamentations (Jer 22:18).<sup>18</sup> Perhaps they should be viewed as originating in the context of wisdom literature as the counterpart of blessing (אַשְׁרֵי) oracles.<sup>19</sup> The LXX is rather inconsistent in translating woe oracles, but it often used the word οὐαί, This word is also used in the NT oracles of woe, most of which being viewed by source critics as originating in Q.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note that the prophet's attitude in oracles of woe is not simply one of anger. Such oracles can express both malediction and lamentation, with the context being decisive as to the precise nuance.<sup>21</sup> Clearly the prophet's anger at Israel's sin is tempered at times by his grief and alarm at the horrible price Israel will pay for that sin. The prophet speaks

---

8(1982)17-29; R. Clifford, "The Use of *Hoy* in the Prophets," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33(1966)458-64; E.

Gerstenberger, "The Woe Oracles of the Prophets," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81(1962)249-63; W. Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972); J. Williams, "The Alas-Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 38(1967)75-91.

<sup>18</sup> C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 190 ff.; R. Clements, "Woe," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6.945-46.

<sup>19</sup> Gerstenberger, "Woe-Oracles."

<sup>20</sup> Matt 11:21; 18:7; 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29; Matt 24:19; 26:24 and synoptic parallels; cf. 1 Cor 9:16; Jude 11; Rev 8:13; 9:12; 11:14; 12:12; 18:10, 16, 19.

<sup>21</sup> D. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23*, *NovT Sup* 52 (Leiden; Brill, 1979) 64 ff. Garland concludes (pp. 87-90) that the original intention of Jesus was an anguished appeal for repentance, but that Matthew, writing after 70 C. E., presents the woes with finality as a proleptic final judgment upon Israel.

for God against sin and this explains his anger. But that anger is directed toward his own people, and this explains the grief. The palpable pathos of woe oracles is due to the prophet's dual solidarities. Isaiah, for example, pronounced woe upon himself, not only because he himself was a person of unclean lips but also because he lived among a people of unclean lips (6:5). The prophet must speak for God, but in announcing oracles of judgment the prophets knew that they were announcing the doom of their own people.

Biblical woe oracles against the official leaders of Israel in Jerusalem are most relevant to this present study.<sup>22</sup> These tend to denounce the leaders for their arrogance in failing to fulfill their covenantal responsibilities to Israel, manifested by idolatry and social injustice. The elders and princes of Jerusalem are singled out for judgment in Isa 3:11 ff. because they have led the people astray and have oppressed the poor (cf. 10:1-2). The six woes of Isa 5 (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) also focus on Jerusalem and Judah (Isa 5:3, 7, 17). Isaiah's woe against Samaria (Ephraim; 28:1 ff.) transitions into judgment upon priest and prophet (28:7) and those who rule in Jerusalem (28:14). Isa 29 condemns Jerusalem (Ariel) for its lack of genuine reverence (29:13-14) even while its religious observances continue on schedule (29:1). Isa 30 and 31 alike announce the doom of an alliance with Egypt (30:1-4, 7; 31:1) but speak of a future time of blessing for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (30:19 ff.; 31:4 ff.) when just rulers and values prevail (32:1 ff.).

Jer 4-6 presents the inhabitants of Jerusalem pronouncing three woes upon themselves (Jer 4:13, 31; 6:4) as judgment approaches due to the sins of the king, princes, prophets, and priests (Jer 4:9; 5:13, 30-31; 6:13) which render the people ignorant of God's covenant (4:22;

---

<sup>22</sup> At times Gentile leaders are also singled out for woe, as in Nah 3:1, Isa 33:1, Jer 48:1, 46; 50:27, and perhaps Zech 11:17

5:1-5, 21). Jer 13:27 pronounces woe upon Jerusalem after singling out its kings, priests, and prophets for special rebuke (13:13). Jer 22:13 ff. denounces King Shallum, and Jer 23 pronounces woe upon destructive shepherds, who seem primarily to represent false prophets, although kings and priests are also implicated (23:5, 11, 13 ff., 21, 25 ff., 33-34; cf. 10:21).

Ezekiel similarly inveighs against false prophets (13:3, 18) and the destructive shepherds of Israel (34). The oracle of Ezek 16 speaks of the sin of Jerusalem with pervasive sexual metaphors and pronounces a double woe against the city (16:23). Ezek 24 twice pronounces woe upon Jerusalem (24:6, 9), characterized as a bloody and rebellious city, as the Babylonian siege of the city begins (24:2).

There are also significant woe oracles against the leaders of Jerusalem in the “Book of the Twelve.” The woe of Mic 2:1 against those who scheme iniquitous social oppression comes in a context which singles out the leaders, priests, and prophets of Jacob and Jerusalem for special judgment (Mic 1:5; 2:9, 12; 2:7, 12; 3:1, 5, 9-11). In Mic 7:1 the prophet acknowledges his own woe because of the absence of righteous leaders when princes and judges seek bribes (7:3). The five woes of Hab 2 (2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19) speak against sins which elsewhere are laid at the door of Israel’s leaders— social oppression, violence, drunkenness, and idolatry. Zephaniah speaks of the woe which is coming to the corrupt princes, judges, prophets, and priests of the tyrannical city, Jerusalem (3:1-7).

Woe oracles are also found in second Temple Jewish literature. Several are found in the Apocrypha.<sup>23</sup> 1 Enoch contains four series of woes (94:6-95:7; 96:4-8; 98:9-99:2; 100:7-9). 2 Enoch 13:64-70 contains a series of seven paired blessings and curses (cf. Luke 6:20-26).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> *E. g.*, Jdt 16:17; Sir 2:12-14; 41:8; 2 Esdr 13:16, 19; 1 Macc 2:7.

<sup>24</sup> See also the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra 1:9, 24 etc.

Josephus describes the eight-year denunciation of Jerusalem by Jesus son of Ananias which ended with his death by a Roman *ballista* (*The Jewish War* 6.301-11). Jesus was killed immediately after he added the words “and to me” to his customary “Woe to the city and to the people and to the temple.” The Qumran literature has notable woe oracles, including some against Jerusalem and its leaders.<sup>25</sup> 1QpHab 10:5; 11:2 cites the woe oracles of Hab 2:12, 15 and interprets them as referring to the wicked priest in Jerusalem who opposed the teacher of righteousness. 4Q162 2:2-10 comments on Isa 5:11-14 and interprets those implicated in that woe as the men of mockery in Jerusalem who reject the Torah. 4Q169 f3-4ii:1 interprets Nah 3:1 as a reference to the flattery seekers in Ephraim, which likely means the Pharisees in Jerusalem. Though it was redacted long after NT times, the Talmud also contains exclamations of woe.<sup>26</sup>

Two important conclusions flow from this brief sketch of prophetic woe oracles. First, Jesus’ pronouncements of woe upon the Jewish leaders who were entrenched in Jerusalem were not innovative. His severe language must have sounded familiar to the Jewish leaders, given their ostensible acquaintance with the Tanakh. To the extent that these leaders were aware of second Temple sectarian literature, Jesus’ woes would have sounded rather contemporary. Second, Jesus’ pronouncement of woe oracles was not merely an exercise in spite against his enemies. Rather, as is made clear in 23:37, his lament comes from at least as much grief as anger. Perhaps the anguish of the book of Lamentations best captures the mood of Matt 23. Lam acknowledges the woeful state of Israel after the destruction of the first Temple due to the sin of

---

<sup>25</sup> See also 4Q179 f1i:4, ii:1, lamentations for Jerusalem). 1QpHab 12:5 (on Hab 2:17), 14; 4Q185 f1-2i:9; 4Q511 f63iii:5. 1QS 2:5-9 and 4Q286 ii.2-12 use אָרָרָה (accursed) and זָעִיִּם (damned).

<sup>26</sup> E. g., b. *Berachot* 3a, 24b, 33a, 61a; *Shabbat* 10a; *Pesachim* 65a, 87b; *Yoma* 72b, 86a; *Sanhedrin* 7b.

Israel's leaders (Lam 5:16; cf. 1:4, 6, 8, 19; 2:6-7, 9, 14, 20; 4:13, 16; 5:7). Jesus announces the woeful state of Israel prior to the destruction of the second Temple, again due to the sin of Israel's leaders.

### 3.2 The General Charge of Hypocrisy

Matthew speaks explicitly of hypocrites fourteen times in his Gospel (6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51). All but one (23:16) of the seven pronouncements of woe in Matt 23 speak of the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. The various words in the "hypocrite" group come not from the Hebrew Bible but from the Graeco-Roman world, describing someone who gave an answer, interpreted an oracle, mimicked another person, or acted a part in a drama.<sup>27</sup> At times the idea of pretending in order to deceive is present, but the word itself does not have a negative connotation. This word is used at times in the LXX to translate the Hebrew word **פִּנְיָן**, which refers to a wicked or profane but not necessarily "hypocritical" person (*e. g.*, Job 34:30; 36:13).<sup>28</sup>

In Matthew hypocrites are more specifically those who live for fleeting human applause rather than for eternal divine approval (6:2, 5, 16). Hypocrites honor God outwardly but their hearts may be far from God (15:7-8). A hypocrite pretends sincere religious interest when questioning Jesus with evil intent. Further, such a person says one thing but does another (23:3;

---

<sup>27</sup> BDAG p. 1038; LSJ pp. 1885-86; TDNT 8.559-71.

<sup>28</sup> BDB 338, but for examples in post-biblical Jewish literature of this word connoting insincerity or hypocrisy, see M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica, 1971), pp. 484-85.

cf. Rom 2:21-24). Thus in Matthew hypocrisy involves religious fraud, a basic discrepancy or inconsistency between one's outwardly godly behavior and one's inner evil thoughts or motives.<sup>29</sup> Do the prophets similarly condemn religious fraud?

Isa 29:13 may be the most important text from the prophets which condemns religious fraud. This passage, cited by Jesus in Matt 15:7-9, concerns the religious leaders (Isa 29:1, 10, 14, 20-21) of Jerusalem ("Ariel;" 29:1, 2, 7). The fraud being perpetrated here involves seemingly pious words and traditional rulings which in reality disguise hearts which are far from God and plans which are thought to be hidden from God's sight (29:14). Israel's charismatic leaders, the prophets, are mute (29:10-12) and its judges are corrupt (29:20-21). But in spite of this, Israel's outward religious observances go on (29:1). Jesus applied this passage to certain Pharisees and scribes, who insisted on the ritual washing of hands before meals but dishonored their parents by the fraudulent claim that what might have been given to the parents had already been promised to God (Matt 15:5). For Jesus, this *korban* practice (Mark 7:11), evidently sanctioned by the "tradition of the elders," violated and set aside God's law (15:6). Additionally the practice of ritual washing of hands made the fundamental error of viewing defilement as coming to humans from external sources rather than coming from humans due to an internal problem, an evil heart (15:11-20).<sup>30</sup>

Jesus' rebuke of hypocrisy is not only deeply rooted in the Tanakh, it is also similar to rebukes found in second Temple Jewish literature. For example, the Psalms of Solomon 4 presents a withering critique of hypocritical religious and political leaders, including the wish

---

<sup>29</sup> R. Smith, "Hypocrite," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green *et al.* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 353.

<sup>30</sup> Space does not permit additional discussion of prophetic critique of hypocrisy, but other relevant passages include Isa 48:1-2; 58:1 ff.; Jer 3:10; 7:4-11; 12:2; Ezek 33:30-33; Mic 3:11; Mal 1:6 ff.; Psa 50:16-23; 78:36-37.

that crows would peck out their eyes and that their corpses would not be buried (4:19-20). This critique may date from the first century B. C. E., when the Roman rule superseded the pro-Sadducee Hasmoneans.<sup>31</sup> The Assumption of Moses, an apocalyptic work dated variously from 165 B.C.E. to 135 C.E., predicts in chapter seven the demise of hypocrites who behave unjustly and sensuously while at the same time being concerned for ritual purity. 1QS 4:10 divides humanity into the righteous who will be eternally rewarded and the deceitful who will be eternally punished, and includes “much hypocrisy” (רַיב חַנְיָה) in a list of the vices of the deceitful. Philo in his *Embassy to Gaius* (162), speaks of the Alexandrians’ flattery of Gaius as deception and hypocrisy. Josephus styles John of Gischala as a liar who hypocritically pretended to love humanity (*Jewish War* 2.587; cf. 1.520; 2.255; *Antiquities* 16.216). Other second Temple Jewish works condemn the sin of hypocrisy.<sup>32</sup> It is well known that later Rabbinic literature was also sensitive to the problem of hypocrisy, even among the Pharisees.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.3 The Charge of Rejecting the Prophets

The charge that Israel has rejected its own prophets (23:29-31) is perhaps the most serious accusation found in Matthew 23, since it addresses the root cause of the other problems confronted there. If Israel had listened to its prophets, Israel would not have prevented people

---

<sup>31</sup> J. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 2.640-42, 655-56.

<sup>32</sup> E. g., TestBenj 6:5; 2 Macc 6:21-28; Philo, *Her.* 43; *Ios.* 67; Sir. 32:15

<sup>33</sup> The Talmudic discussions of seven types of Pharisees, of whom only the one who acted out of love was approved, is illuminating. See *y. Berachot* 14b and *Sotah* 20c and *b. Sotah* 22b. The “shoulder” Pharisee, who conspicuously carries his good deeds on his shoulder so that people can see them, is particularly relevant to the charge of hypocrisy in Matt 23. See also *b. Sotah* 41b and 42a which affirm respectively that hypocrites will go to hell and never see the *Shekinah*.

from entering the Kingdom. If Israel had listened to its prophets, casuistry in oaths and the elevation of trivial duties over basic duties would not have become commonplace. If Israel had listened to its prophets, matters of the heart would have remained primary, not the external appearance of righteousness. But Israel had rejected its prophets throughout its history, and that rejection would reach its horrible culmination in the rejection of its Messiah (23:32) and his messengers (23:34). This would bring the guilt of innocent blood shed from the first to the last book of the Tanakh upon Jerusalem (23:35-36).

This is not the first time Matthew points out that Israel has rejected its prophets. The genealogy of Jesus stresses the exile to Babylon, which of course was due to rejection of the prophets (1:11-12, 17). The ministry of John the Baptist is presented in terms of prophetic rebuke (3:7-12), and Israel's rejection of John is explained as the rejection of an Elijah-like figure who is more than a prophet (11:7-18; 17:12; 21:32). When Jesus' disciples are persecuted, they are to be encouraged because the prophets were similarly persecuted (5:12). Rejection or reception of the ministry of Jesus' disciples is described as that of a prophet (10:41-42; 25:35-45). Jesus also repeatedly cites prophetic literature, some times with an introduction which stresses Jesus' incredulity at the Jewish leaders' ignorance of the prophets' message (9:13; 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:7-9; 21:13, 16, 33, 42). The prophets are certainly meant by the murdered servants who had been sent by the vineyard to his evil tenants (21:34 ff.) All these factors combine to make it clear to the reader of Mathew that Israel has rejected its prophets, and that by rejecting them Israel has failed to obey the law of Moses (5:17-48).

Jesus' charge that Israel has rejected its prophets clearly echoes many similar charges in the Tanakh itself. The Chronicler's sad commentary on the end of the southern kingdom stresses Israel's obstinance not simply in ignoring but in mocking God's messengers. It had come to the

place where there was “no remedy,” and the exile to Babylon ensued (2 Chron 36:15-16; cf. 24:17-22). Daniel’s great prayer of confession is centered on the admission that “we have not listened to your servants the prophets . . .” (Dan 9:6, 10; cf. Jer 25:4; 26:5; Neh 9:26, 30). In terms of the “deuteronomistic” theology of the Tanakh, Israel’s travails are Israel’s own fault—Israel abandoned the Torah and rejected the prophets whom God sent to remind her of her obligations (Deut 28:15 ff.; 1 Kgs 8:46 ff.).<sup>34</sup> Notable examples of the rejection of the prophets include Ahab and Jezebel’s rejection of Elijah and Micaiah (1 Kings 18-19, 22), Amaziah’s rejection of Amos (Amos 7:10-17), Pashhur’s persecution of Jeremiah (Jer 20), Jehoiakim’s murder of Uriah son of Shemaiah (Jeremiah 26:20-23), and Zedekiah’s imprisonment of Jeremiah (Jer 37-38). Even Jesus’ “ironic imperative” telling the Jewish leaders to fill up the measure of their ancestors’ guilt by killing him (23:32) has a prophetic ring to it (Isa 8:9-10; Jer 7:21; Amos 4:4-5; Nah 3:14-15).<sup>35</sup> His allusion to the murders of Abel and Zechariah effectively sums up the entire history of the murder of God’s prophets in the Tanakh, from Genesis (בראשית) to 2 Chronicles (דברי הימים ב; 23:35; cf. Gen 4:8 ff.; 2 Chron 24:21).<sup>36</sup>

Israel’s rejection of the prophets is also mentioned in second Temple literature. The book of Jubilees, probably to be dated around 150 B.C. E., predicts the judgment which will come to Israel when they refuse to listen to the prophets (here called “witnesses”) but instead kill them (1:12-14). The Paraleipomena of Jeremiah, which is probably a Jewish work with Christian interpolations or a Jewish Christian work, mentions at the outset that the prophet Jeremiah must

---

<sup>34</sup> 11Q19, the Temple Scroll from Qumran, clearly expresses this “deuteronomistic” theology in column 59, 2-13.

<sup>35</sup> The motif of sin coming to its full measure is found in Gen 15:16. Cf. Jubilees 14:16; 1 Thess 2:16.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen, Paul, and the author of Hebrews also reflect on Israel’s sad history of rejecting its own prophets (Acts 7:52; 1 Thess 2:14-16; Heb 11:32-38).

leave Jerusalem before God can allow the Babylonians to destroy it due to its sins. This is because Jeremiah's prayers buttress the city against its enemies (Par Jer 1:1-1:1-8). This same work ends with a note about the desire of the people to kill Jeremiah as they had previously killed Isaiah (Par Jer 9:19-31). The first century C.E. Jewish work *The Lives of the Prophets* recounts how twenty-three prophets died. Most are reported to have died peacefully, but seven are reported to have been martyred (chapters 1-3, 6-7, 15, 23). The composite Jewish-Christian book *The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* is obviously relevant here also. The book of Tobit describes Tobit's belief in the words of the prophets, and his conviction that the second Temple would be destroyed and Israel scattered, and then finally that Israel would be restored, the Temple rebuilt, and the nations converted (14:3-7).

Materials from Qumran also refer to Israel's rejection of the prophets. 4Q166 f1i1-6, commenting on Hos 2:10, states that Israel forgot the God who gave them commandments through his servants the prophets and blindly revered false prophets as gods. 4Q266 f3i18-19 states that Israel despised the words of the prophets (cf. CD 7:17-18). 4Q390 f2i5 predicts a coming time of evil when Israel will violate the statutes given to them by God's servants the prophets.

The mention of the martyrdom of Zechariah son of Berechiah in Matt 23:35 causes some problems in identification, but clearly Matthew has in mind the murder of Zechariah the son of Jehoida in 2 Chron 24:21. This murder is recounted in the *Midrash Rabbah* on Lamentations (Proems 5, 23; cf. 1.16.51; 2.2.4; 2.20.23; 4.13.16) and in other Rabbinic works.<sup>37</sup> Mathew's use of this story is not unlike that of the Rabbinic materials in that the murder of Zechariah is a

---

<sup>37</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma Yelamdenu* on Lev 4:1; *Qohelet Rabbah* 3:16; 10:4; Targum Lam 2:20; y. *Taanit* 69a, b. *Gittin* 57b and *Sanhedrin* 96b.

particularly egregious sin, one for which the victim implored God's retribution. For Matthew as well as for the rabbis, that retribution is put into the context of lament over the destruction of Jerusalem.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

No one can doubt that the language of Matt 23 is severe, and that it castigates certain first century Jewish religious leaders in terms that make us extremely uncomfortable in the twenty-first century. And no one can deny that during the intervening centuries many Christians have used this language as a confirmation of anti-Semitic attitudes and, worse yet, inquisitions, pogroms, and even the *shoah*. But all this is due to a misunderstanding of Matt 23 by the early Gentile Church, a misunderstanding borne out of the arrogance against which Paul warned in Rom 11:18-21. Such arrogance ignores the Jewishness of Jesus' woe oracles and his concerns about hypocrisy and the rejection of the prophets. Jesus' denunciation of the Jewish leaders in Matt 23 is in keeping with both the spirit of the prophets and the rhetoric of the times. This denunciation should not be minimized by denying its essential historicity, but neither should it be extrapolated to apply to the Jewish people as a whole, either then or now.

In terms of Jewish-Christian relations, this Christian argument will doubtless fall on deaf Jewish ears unless it is conveyed in a sensitive, repentant spirit. In light of the sorry history of Jewish-Christian relations, the Church has much to live down. Christians must acknowledge that Matt 23 was directed first to themselves, (23:8-12), and only secondly to the religious leaders (23:13 ff.). At several places in his Gospel Matthew warns the disciples of Jesus that they too must be on guard against the sins charged against the religious leaders in Matt 23 (7:1-5, 15-23; 19:30-20:16; 20:20-28; 22:1-14). Unless the Church takes this to heart and grieves for the sad

state of Jewish-Christian relations, as did Jesus (Matt 23:37) and Paul (Rom 9:1-3), there is no reason to think that the arguments made here will make any difference at all, or that the Church's ultimate theological loose end will begin to be tied up.