

The Blood of Jesus in Matthew: A Narrative-Critical Perspective

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"His blood be upon us and upon our children!"--This climactic cry by "all the people" after Pilate has washed his hands and declared that he is innocent of the blood of Jesus in Matthew's gospel is usually interpreted as an expression of full acceptance of the guilt for shedding Jesus' blood.¹ We would like to propose an additional meaning by a narrative-critical, reader-response approach to the Matthean theme of the shedding of innocent blood in the following passages: (1) Jesus' reproach of the Jewish leaders for shedding the blood of the prophets and the righteous in 23:29-36, (2) Jesus' designation of the wine of his last supper as his blood of the covenant to be shed for many in 26:28, (3) Judas' repentance for betraying the innocent blood of Jesus in 27:3-10, and (4) the Jewish people's invoking of the blood of Jesus when Pilate offers to release him in 27:24-25.²

I. Matt 23:29-36: Jewish Leaders Shed the Blood of Prophets.

In the last of his seven "woes" against the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees Jesus sarcastically criticizes their attempt to dissociate themselves from their ancestors' murdering of the prophets. Although they build and decorate tombs for the prophets and righteous men of old (23:29) and declare that "if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have joined them in (shedding) the blood of the prophets" (23:30), they testify against themselves, according to Jesus, that they are truly "sons" of those who murdered the prophets and thus fill up the measure of their ancestors (23:31-32). For killing and persecuting the prophets, wise men and scribes that Jesus, as personified divine wisdom, sends them (23:34), Jesus warns "that there may come upon you all the righteous blood shed upon earth, from the blood of Abel, the righteous one, to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Barachiah, whom you

murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Amen, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation" (23:35-36).

As the Matthean implied reader realizes from the previous narrative, the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem consider Jesus to be a prophet. After Jesus entered Jerusalem the whole city was shaken and inquired, "Who is this?" The crowds replied, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee" (21:10-11). After the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants who killed the servants representative of God's prophets and then the landowner's "son" representative of Jesus, they realized the parable was directed against them (21:45). But when they attempted to arrest Jesus, they feared the crowds, "for they regarded him as a prophet" (21:46). For the implied reader the warning of Jesus' seventh woe (23:35-36) establishes the expectation that "this" present "generation" will incur the consequences not only for shedding "all the righteous blood" shed upon earth, from the blood of Abel, the first righteous one to be murdered in the Hebrew scriptures (Gen 4:8), to the blood of Zechariah, whom Matthew, by identifying with the prophet Zechariah, the son of Barachiah (Zech 1:1), considers to be the last "prophet" murdered in the Hebrew scriptures (2 Chr 24:20-21), but also for shedding the blood of the "prophet" Jesus.

II. Matt 26:28: Jesus' Blood Shed for Forgiveness of All People.

As he had reinterpreted the Passover "bread" of his last supper as his own "body" destined for death (26:26), so Jesus reinterprets the cup of wine that all the disciples are to drink (26:27) as the symbolic and sacramental equivalent of his own "blood" about to be shed in his death: "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). By designating the cup of wine as "my blood of the covenant," Jesus relates the blood to be shed by his death to the sacrificial "blood of the covenant" which Moses threw against the altar, representative of God, and upon the people of Israel (Exod 24:3-8) with the words:

"Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod 24:8). The ceremony establishing the "covenant" concluded with a meal which united the people of Israel in the covenantal relationship with God (Exod 24:9-11).

Through prophecies such as that pronounced by Jeremiah, God promised to establish a new, permanent and definitive "covenant" with his people. This new "covenant" would be internal to the people, "written upon their hearts," and characterized by a universal knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:31-34; 32:37-41). By referring to his blood as "my blood of the covenant," Jesus indicates that the blood of his death will effect the fulfillment of the "covenant" by which God will unite himself permanently with his people in a salvific relationship.³ Jesus thus further transforms his Passover meal into a covenant meal, whereby those who drink the wine designated as his blood of the covenant are profoundly united into this new and final covenantal relationship God establishes with his people through the shedding of Jesus' blood.

That Jesus' blood "will be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" indicates that his death is a covenantal sacrifice for the atonement of sins. As the blood of animals was "poured out" by priests on the altar as a sin offering to atone for the sins of the people (Lev 4:7,18,25,30,34), so the blood which will be "shed" or "poured out" by the death of Jesus represents a sacrifice for the atonement of sins "for," that is, "on behalf of" (peri) "many" people. The forgiveness of sins brought about by the death of Jesus is part of the new and definitive "covenant" God establishes with his people (Jer 31:34). That the blood of Jesus will be poured out on behalf of "many" (pollon), a common Semitic expression for "all" people,⁴ indicates the universal nature of the covenant which brings forgiveness to "all." This develops Jesus' previous pronouncement that the offering of his life will effect a liberation for "many"="all" people: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and

to give his life as a ransom for many (pollon)" (20:28). The covenant established through the atoning blood of Jesus is intended to include "all" people.

At this point in the narrative, especially through the connection established by the image of the "shedding of blood" in 23:35 and 26:28, the reader realizes that the Jewish leaders, in bringing upon themselves "all the righteous blood" of the prophets "shed" (ekchynnomenon, 23:35) upon earth, including the blood of the "prophet" Jesus (21:11,46), whom they are seeking to kill (12:14; 21:33-46), are also bringing upon themselves the covenantal blood of Jesus to be "shed" (ekchynnomenon) for the forgiveness of all people's sins (26:28).

III. Matt 27:3-10: Judas Repents Betraying Jesus' Innocent Blood.

In contrast to the resolve of the Jewish leaders to deliver Jesus to death (27:1-2), Judas, after witnessing their condemnation of Jesus, "repented" his betrayal and returned the "thirty pieces of silver," the paltry price of the betrayal (26:15), back to the chief priests and elders (27:3). His confession that "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood" (27:4) joins the "innocent blood" (haima athoon) of Jesus to the "blood" of the prophets Jesus predicted the Jewish leaders would shed, as did their ancestors (23:30). In shedding the "innocent blood" of the "prophet" Jesus (21:11,46) the Jewish leaders are already beginning to fulfill Jesus' prophetic warning that the responsibility for "all the righteous blood (haima dikaion) shed upon earth, from the blood of Abel, the righteous one, to the blood of Zechariah" (a prophet) (23:35), "will come upon this generation" (23:36). The juxtaposition of Judas' confession that "I have sinned" (hemarton) with his recognition that Jesus' "blood" is innocent recalls for the reader that Jesus' "blood" will be shed for many for the forgiveness of "sins" (hamartion) (26:28). Judas exemplifies the need that he and all other sinners have for the forgiveness the innocent blood of Jesus will effect.

But the chief priests and elders refuse to sympathize with the repentance of Judas, as they reply, "What is that to us? You see to it" (27:4). Their desire to place

all responsibility for the "innocent blood" of Jesus upon Judas rather than accept it themselves sharply contrasts with their previous determination (26:59-68; 27:1-2) to put Jesus to death unjustly. Their failure to be moved by Judas' acknowledgement of Jesus' innocence illustrates Jesus' parable of the two sons (21:28-32): The first son refused to work in his father's vineyard but later "repented" (metameletheis) and went (21:29). But even when the Jewish leaders saw tax collectors and prostitutes believing in John the Baptist and thus entering the kingdom of God, they did not "repent" (metemelethete) and believe him (21:31-32). Now, even after they have witnessed that Judas "repented" (metameletheis), the recalcitrant leaders do not themselves repent.⁵

Judas, however, forces the Jewish leaders to take responsibility for the innocent blood of Jesus, as he flings the pieces of silver back to their source, the temple "sanctuary" (27:5) administered by the chief priests who had paid them to him (26:14-15). That he "departed" and "went away" to hang himself advances the theme of withdrawal from the unjust death of Jesus. Just as Peter repented his denial and "went outside" (exelthon exo) of the place where the Jewish leaders were condemning Jesus to death (26:75), so Judas repented his betrayal and "departed" and "went away" (apelthon) from the murderous Jewish leaders. That Judas "hanged himself," taking his own life rather than participate in the unjust taking of Jesus' life, indicates the extreme seriousness not only of his betrayal but of the Jewish leaders' deadly design for the innocent Jesus. Judas' suicide confirms Jesus' declaration that it would have been better if his betrayer had never been born (26:24). Like Ahithophel, the traitorous counselor of David (2 Sam 17:23), Judas, the traitorous disciple of Jesus, hanged himself in disgrace. But Judas did repent and confess his sin, so that he can ultimately receive the forgiveness to be effected for the sins of all by the innocent "blood" of Jesus (26:28).

The chief priests' announcement that "it is not lawful" to deposit the silver pieces into the temple treasury because they are the "price of blood" (27:6) is drenched with

irony for the reader. Their concern for what is lawful or proper for God's temple stands in ironic contrast to their blatant disregard for what was lawful when they sought false testimony to put Jesus to death (26:59). They unwittingly indict themselves as the ones who transformed the silver pieces into the "price of blood" and rendered them unworthy for the temple treasury when they paid Judas with them (26:15)! Their designation of the money as the "price" or "value" (time)⁶ of "blood" begins their tragic underestimation of the true "price" and "value" of Jesus' blood. The dramatic irony heightens as the chief priests attempt to dispose of the blood money by purchasing "the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners" (27:7). In deeming the price/value of Jesus' blood as unworthy for the temple and fit only to buy an unclean burial place for unclean people, the Jewish leaders are unwittingly disclosing for the reader the true "value" and "price" of Jesus' innocent blood. They show the salvific "value" of Jesus' blood, which purchases a burial place for the "foreigners" or "strangers" (xenois) with whom Jesus identified himself: "I was a stranger (xenos) and you welcomed me" (25:35,38,43-44). They thus use the price/value of Jesus' blood ironically to perform the kind of hospitable behavior toward foreigners that Jesus taught and exemplified (5:43-48; 8:5-13; 15:21-28). And they show the tragic "price" of Jesus' blood, which purchases a burial place for the "foreigners," who will replace the people of Israel in God's kingdom (8:11-12; 21:43), because the Jewish leaders undervalued the "blood" of Jesus.

Although the chief priests attempted to rid themselves of Jesus' blood money, its "price" and "value" continues to haunt them. The potter's field they purchased to dispose of the price of Jesus' blood is ironically called the Field of Blood "to this day" (27:8), an enduring reminder of both the tragic "price" and the salvific "value" of the "innocent blood" (27:4) of Jesus.

But the Jewish leaders' tragic underestimation of the price and value of Jesus' blood is encompassed within God's scriptural program. Just as the tragedy of the

shedding of the innocent blood of the infants in Bethlehem by the Jewish leader, King Herod, in his devious endeavor to eliminate Jesus "fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet" (2:17), so now the tragedy of the Jewish leaders' futile attempt to dispose of the price and value of Jesus' innocent blood "fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet" (27:9). Although most of the quotation to follow derives from Zechariah 11:12-13, it is appropriately attributed to Jeremiah (see Jer 19:1-11) as the prophet most closely associated with the tragic low point of Israel's history, the Babylonian Captivity (see 1:11-12,17) which resulted from their rejection of God and his prophets.⁷ Jesus has already been insufficiently but aptly identified as "Jeremiah" (16:14), the preeminent prophet of persecution and tragic rejection by his own people.⁸

The chief priests fulfill the tragedy prophesied by Jeremiah (27:9-10) as they took the thirty pieces of silver, the paltry "price/value" (timen) with which they, as "some of the sons of Israel," tragically "set a price" (etimesanto) upon the Jesus they ironically reject as the truly "valued/priced" one (tetimenenou) of God's people of Israel. As "sons" of Israel they confirm Jesus' reproach that they are truly "sons" of those who murdered the prophets and fill up the measure of their fathers (23:31-32). In giving the silver pieces for the potter's field, which became the Field of the innocent "Blood" of the truly "valued/priced" one, they unwittingly do precisely as the Lord directed "me," the prophet. The Jewish leaders' futile and ironic endeavor to rid themselves of responsibility for the innocent blood of Jesus thus fulfills God's scriptural plan.

IV. Matt 27:24-25: Jewish People Invoke Blood of Jesus.

Pilate's knowledge that it was out of "envy" for Jesus' popularity with the crowds (21:11,15-16,46) that the Jewish leaders "delivered" him (27:18; see 27:2) continues the theme of withdrawal from the guilt of the Jewish leaders in putting Jesus to death. Judas separated himself from the guilty Jewish leaders when he realized that he had sinned in "betraying/delivering" (paradous) to them the "innocent blood" of Jesus (27:4-

5). Pilate likewise dissociates himself from the unjust Jewish leaders, as he tries to release the innocent Jesus whom they have "delivered/betrayed" (paredokan) to him out of envy (27:17-18).

As Judas had pointed out the "innocent blood" of Jesus (27:4), ironically, the wife of Pilate, the Gentile governor, confirms through the divine guidance of a "dream" (see 1:20; 2:12,13,19,22) that Jesus is indeed a "righteous one" (27:19).⁹ That Jesus is not only a "prophet" but also a "righteous one" (dikaio) further associates him with all the "righteous" (dikaion) blood shed upon earth, beginning with the blood of Abel, the "righteous one" (dikaion) (23:35). But while she is warning Pilate to have nothing to do with the Jewish leaders' conspiracy to put "that righteous man" to death, the chief priests and the elders are deviously persuading the crowds to request the release of Barabbas but the destruction of Jesus (27:20). This represents a critical turning point in the narrative. Although the Jewish leaders had been cautiously unwilling to involve the Jewish people in their deadly design (21:46; 26:5), Pilate's maneuver to release Jesus now forces them to sway "the crowds" against the enviously popular Jesus.

As Pilate realizes the futility of his stratagem to release the innocent Jesus, his concern that a "tumult was beginning" (thorybos ginetai, 27:24) signals for the reader the Jewish leaders' failure to prevent a "tumult" from "beginning" (thorybos genetai, 26:5) among the people. They have not been able to avoid the involvement of the Jewish people in the death of Jesus within the context of this salvific Passover feast.

Pilate then brings the theme of withdrawal from guilt for the unjust death of Jesus to a climax. That "he took water and washed his hands before the crowd" (27:24) serves as a symbolic protestation of his innocence with scriptural allusions (Deut 21:1-9; Pss 26:6; 73:13; Isa 1:15-16). According to the ritual recorded in Deuteronomy, when a corpse was found between two cities, "all the elders of the city nearest the corpse shall wash their hands over a heifer whose throat was cut in the wadi, and shall declare, 'Our hands did not shed this blood...'" (Deut 21:6-7). When

Pilate similarly declares, "I am innocent (athoos) of this man's blood (haimatos)" (27:24; see LXX 2 Kgs 3:28), he joins Judas' separation from the Jewish leaders' unjust killing of Jesus, when he confessed, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood (haima athoon)" (27:4). And when Pilate tells the crowd, "You see to it" (hymeis opsesthe), he ironically throws back upon the Jewish people the guilt for Jesus' blood that their leaders tried to shun when they told the repenting Judas, "You see to it (sy opse)" (27:4).

In startling contradiction to the Jewish leaders' refusal to accept responsibility for the "price/value" of Jesus' innocent blood (27:6-10), "all the people (laos)," representative of the entire covenant people of Israel (1:21; 2:6; 4:16,23; 13:15; 15:8; 26:5), solemnly accept full responsibility for the shedding of Jesus' blood: "His blood be upon us and upon our children!" (27:25; see 2 Sam 1:16; 1 Kgs 2:33; Jer 26:15). By boldly invoking the innocent "blood" of the "righteous man" (27:19) Jesus, whom they regarded as a "prophet" (21:11,46), "upon us" (eph' hemas) and "upon our children," the Jewish people are fulfilling Jesus' prediction that "upon you (eph' hymas) may come all the righteous blood shed upon earth, from the blood of Abel, the righteous one, to the blood of Zechariah" (a prophet) (23:35). They even extend to future generations Jesus' warning that "all these things will come upon this generation (epi ten genean tauten)" (23:36), as they invoke his blood also "upon our children" (epi ta tekna hemon).

But by invoking "his blood" (haima autou) upon themselves and their future generations (27:25), the covenant people of Israel are also, ironically and unwittingly, invoking "my blood (haima mou) of the covenant to be shed for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). This brings to an apex the Matthean theme of the paradoxical "price" and "value" of the innocent blood of Jesus (27:3-10). In calling down upon themselves the "blood" of Jesus, the Jewish people not only accept the tragic "price" for the unjust shedding of this blood, the loss of their special prerogative

as a people to the kingdom of God which "will be given to a people that will produce its fruit" (21:43), but also play their paradoxical part in establishing the salvific "value" of Jesus' covenantal blood to effect the forgiveness of sins for all peoples (26:28). The Jewish people's acceptance of the full responsibility for the price/value of Jesus' blood ironically places them and all their future generations within the embrace of the forgiveness that the atoning blood of Jesus offers to all.

Conclusion

Our investigation of the theme of the blood of Jesus in the Matthean narrative has led to the proposal of a new, additional meaning to the whole Jewish people's calling down of the blood of Jesus upon themselves and their children (27:25). The innocent "blood" of Jesus that all the Jewish people are willing to accept the full responsibility for shedding is the same "blood" that Jesus at his last supper designated as "my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). Precisely and paradoxically because the whole Jewish people brought upon themselves the tragic "price" as well as the salvific "value" for shedding the innocent blood of Jesus as a "prophet" and the suffering "righteous one" of God, they make possible the forgiveness of the sins of all people, including Peter who wept bitterly in remorse after denying Jesus (26:59-75), Judas who repented his sin of betraying Jesus' innocent blood (27:3-10), and the whole Jewish people who invoked his atoning blood upon themselves and their future generations.

NOTES

¹ D. Senior, The Passion Narrative According to Matthew: A Redactional Study (BETL 39; Leuven: Leuven University, 1975) 257; J. P. Meier, Matthew (Wilmington: Glazier, 1980) 342; R. H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 565; A. Sand, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1986) 554; J. Gnllka, Das Matthäusevangelium: Kommentar zu Kap. 14,1 - 28,20 und Einleitungsfragen (HTKNT 1/2; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1988) 458-59.

² We shall employ the type of reader-response criticism that focuses upon the "implied reader" within the text; see B. C. Lategan, "Reference: Reception, Redescription and Reality," Text and Reality. Aspects of Reference in Biblical Texts (ed. B. C. Lategan and W. S. Vorster; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985) 67-75; J. L. Staley, The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel (SBLDS 82; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 21-49; R. W. Funk, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1988) 34-38; W. S. Vorster, "The Reader in the Text: Narrative Material," Reader Perspectives on the New Testament (Semeia 48; ed. E. V. McKnight; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 21-39; J. P. Heil, "Reader-Response and the Irony of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in Luke 22:66-71," CBQ 51 (1989) 272.

³ Note the liberating effect of the "blood" of God's "covenant" in Zech 9:11: "As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your captives free from the waterless pit."

⁴ J. Jeremias, "polloi," TDNT 6.536-45.

⁵ The similarity of Judas' repentance to that expressed by the same verb in Matt 21:28-32 plus his confession of sinfulness demonstrate that his repentance is full and genuine, against those, who, like O. Michel, "metamelomai," TDNT 4.628, devalue Judas' "repentance" as only "remorse" or merely a change of heart, since the term

metanoein is not used.

⁶ M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor, A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1974) 1.92: "in time, timao lurks the same ambiguity as in Eng. 'value'."

⁷ R. H. Gundry, The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel (NovTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 122-27; D. J. Moo, The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives (Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 189-210; Senior, Passion Narrative, 343-97.

⁸ The identification of Jesus with Jeremiah is unique to Matthew, who exploits the tragic associations of this prophet to characterize the destiny of Jesus (2:17; 16:14; 27:9).

⁹ R. Gnuse, "Dream Genre in the Matthean Infancy Narratives," NovT 32 (1990) 97-120.

