

ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE CRY OF "ALL THE PEOPLE" (MT 27:25)

In a recent article Dominic M. Crossan, O.S.M., discussed "Anti-Semitism and the Gospel."¹ He analyzed New Testament data bearing on the subject under four headings: the meaning of the term "the crowds" in the Lucan Gospel, the expression "the Jews" in the Johannine Gospel, the phrase "the mob" at Jerusalem in the Passion accounts, and the confrontation of Diaspora Judaism and Paul the Apostle. His purpose was to examine the question whether "the vast majority of the Jewish people conspired to oppose or to crucify Jesus," and he concluded "that the often-repeated statement that the Jews rejected Jesus and had Him crucified is *historically* untenable and must therefore be removed completely from our thinking and our writing, our teaching, preaching, and liturgy."² "A small hard core of Palestinian Jewish authority opposed Him and had Him crucified, and in so doing they opposed the mind of their people."³ More specifically, "for the crucifixion to have taken place, the co-operation of three simultaneous forces was needed . . . : the treachery of Judas, who was a Christian; the hatred of Annas, who was a Jew; and the indifference of Pilate, who was a Gentile."⁴

Crossan's method in interpreting the Gospel texts in the first three sections of his article is laudable and makes many telling and noteworthy points. It is inspired by the Form-Critical interpretation of the Gospels and has much to commend it.

But the delicate issue which he sets out to discuss must be handled adequately and take into consideration all of the New Testament data. It may very well be that his thesis is ultimately quite tenable and should be the basis of a genuine Christian attitude toward our Jewish brothers today. It will certainly show that many of the New Testament texts need reconsideration before one appeals to them to justify any anti-Semitic position. But in fairness to the question itself, Crossan should have considered a number of other New Testament texts. It is not our purpose here to bring up all the passages that should have been discussed,⁵ but rather to focus on the one crucial text which Crossan should not have neglected. It is Mt 27:25: "And all the people answered, 'His blood be upon us and upon our

¹ THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 26 (1965) 189-214.

² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵ For a discussion of some other passages, see the note in this same issue by G. G. O'Collins, S.J., "Anti-Semitism in the Gospel," pp. 663-66.

children! ” Probably no other New Testament text has been so often quoted against the Jews since it was first written. And precisely because it has, it merits some examination to see what its meaning and function are in the Matthean Gospel.

Verse 25 forms part of the Matthean trial scene before Pontius Pilate. Along with v. 24 it is a characteristic Matthean addition to the Synoptic Passion account. There is no parallel to the washing of the hands or to the cry uttered by all the people in either Mk or Lk (not to mention the Johannine Gospel). But vv. 24–25 fit the pattern of additions to the Passion Narrative material which are found only in Mt.⁶ This immediately puts us on our guard, because such Matthean additions to the Gospel material are usually indicative of the redactional activity of the first Evangelist and often expressive of theologoumena.⁷

Crossan has already pointed out a difficulty that is found earlier in the Matthean account of the trial scene before Pilate and that bears on the problematical v. 25. In v. 20 we read: “The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd (*tous ochlous*) to ask for Barabbas and to do away with Jesus.” But if it is true that the authorities in Jerusalem feared that the people might cause a riot (*thorybos*) if something was done to Jesus (26:5), then how could they assemble the crowd in 27:20?⁸

Then in 27:24 we are told: “When Pilate saw that he was achieving nothing, but rather that a riot (*thorybos*) was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd (*katenanti tou ochlou*), saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’ ” Pilate’s action and words allude to Dt 21:1–9 and are clearly a theologoumenon to express his religious innocence in the blood to be shed (cf. Ps 26:6; 73:13).⁹

Verse 25 presents the antithesis to Pilate’s protestation of innocence in

⁶ See further Mt 26:3b (the identification of the high priest as Caiaphas); 26:52–54 (Jesus’ words at the striking of the high priest’s servant in Gethsemane); 27:3–10 (the death of Judas); 27:19 (the message of Pilate’s wife); 27:51–53 (the earthquake at Jesus’ death and the opening of the tombs); 27:62–66 (the guard at the tomb); 28:2–4 (the earthquake and the rolling back of the stone by the angel of the Lord); 28:11–15 (the bribing of the guards); 28:16–20 (the mission of the disciples to teach and to baptize).

⁷ This judgment is based on the recent mode of Gospel interpretation called *Redaktionsgeschichte*, which has been particularly fruitful in the study of the first Gospel. See G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London, 1963); W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964); W. Trilling, *Das wahre Israel: Studien zur Theologie des Matthäus-Evangeliums (Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 10)*; Munich, 1964); R. Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* (Munich, 1963).

⁸ Cf. Crossan, *op. cit.*, p. 203. His treatment of the Barabbas episode is, in general, well done.

⁹ See W. Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

the cry of "all the people." "Then all the people (*pas ho laos*) answered, 'His blood be upon us and upon our children.'" The antithesis is clear in the play on *haima* ("blood") in both verses, and in the contrast of "the crowd" and "all the people." But the real problem here is to explain why the Evangelist has shifted from "the crowd" (*ochloi* or *ochlos*) to "all the people" (*pas ho laos*). Does he not thereby give the impression that he is extending the responsibility which the phrase implies¹⁰ to all the Jewish people? It would be naive to try to explain the shift by maintaining that the Evangelist realized that in the crowd there were not only Jerusalemites but also pilgrims from abroad.¹¹ The shift seems to be deliberately intended, for the responsibility is to affect "the children" as well.¹²

This intention seems to be further indicated by the use of *laos* in the first Gospel. For unlike its use in Mk (11:32; 14:2)¹³ or in Lk (*passim*), where it normally means only the "people" in a generic sense (often equaling "the crowd"), the use of it in Mt has in most instances an ethnic connotation (equaling the Jewish people). This is seen in such expressions as "the chief priests and scribes of the people" (Mt 2:4), "the elders of the people" (21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1).¹⁴ See further Mt 1:21; 2:6 (*ton laon mou Israēl*, in a quotation from Mi 5:1); 4:16; 13:15; 15:8. However, the generic sense is found in Mt 26:5 (*en tō laō*), but here it is obviously derived from Mk 14:2. The generic sense is probably intended in Mt 27:64 and 4:23. Given, then, the ethnic sense in the great majority of instances in the Matthean Gospel, it is likely that *pas ho laos* in Mt 27:25 is also intended in this sense.

But then the further question arises: Why does the Evangelist have "the whole people" (*pas ho laos*) utter the cry? Since vv. 24–25 are a Matthean addition to the Synoptic Gospel material, the reaction of commentators to them varies. P. Gaechter will insist on the historicity of the

¹⁰ The phrase is an OT expression for responsibility incurred in the death (especially the violent death) of a person. See Jer 28:35 (LXX); Ez 18:13; Lv 20:9 (MT). A fuller form of the expression, X's blood on the head of Y, is found in 2 S 1:16; 3:29; 1 K 2:33; Jos 2:19 (MT); *Testament of Levi* 16:3. Cf. Dt 19:10; Jer 26:15; Acts 18:6; J. Scharbert, "Blut," *Bibeltheologisches Wörterbuch* 1 (ed. J. B. Bauer; Graz, 1962) 131–38; H. Reventlow, "Sein Blut komme über sein Haupt," *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960) 311–27.

¹¹ So the recent commentary of P. Gaechter, *Das Matthäus-Evangelium* (Innsbruck, 1963) p. 913.

¹² The additional phrase involving the offspring is also an OT trait; see 1 K 2:33; 2 S 14:9. Cf. Mt 2:18; Lk 23:28; Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4:5.

¹³ The word also occurs in Mk 7:6 in a quotation from Is 29:13, where it is rather used in the ethnic sense. Indeed, it is parallel to Mt 15:8.

¹⁴ To appreciate the ethnic connotation of *laos* in the Matthean texts, contrast Mt 26:3 (*hoi archiereis kai hoi presbyteroi tou laou*) with Mk 14:2 (*hoi archiereis kai hoi grammateis*); similarly Mt 26:47 with Mk 14:43; Mt 27:1 with Mk 15:1.

cry;¹⁵ P. Winter will label it a "legendary accretion."¹⁶ But it is likely that these verses fit a pattern that is otherwise discernible in the first Gospel. This Gospel was written for Jewish Christians, possibly of Palestine or of Syria. This is the conclusion of many scholars, who have arrived at it from a study of the style, the vocabulary, and the customs which reflect the Palestinian milieu in which Jesus of Nazareth lived and worked. This Jewish-Christian destination explains the Matthean verses which direct the mission of Jesus to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 15:24; cf. 10:5), depict His respect for the Mosaic Law (Mt 5:18-19), and so on.

The dominant theme in Mt is to present Jesus as one to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. Having in a sense come into His kingdom, Jesus now instructs His disciples to go forth and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:18-19). This climax of the Gospel is prepared for in many ways throughout the work, and not least by the emphasis on Jesus as the Son of Man, which prepares for the allusion to Dn 7:13 in Mt 28:18-19. He is the Son of Man to whom the kingdom has now been given; it is the kingdom of heaven, and those who enter it constitute the new Israel, which replaces the Israel of old.

But there is a subsidiary, secondary theme in Mt which aims at explaining to the Jewish-Christian readers for whom the Evangelist was writing why it is that the "nations" are taking over the kingdom of heaven. In his own way the Evangelist wrestles with the problem of "the rejection" (Rom 11:15) of Israel, with which Paul in a different way wrestled in Romans (9-11). The chord of this secondary motif is struck in the Infancy Narrative, the overture to the Gospel proper, when the pagan Magi are led by their profane and secular lore of astrology to come and worship Him over whom "Herod and all Jerusalem with him were troubled" (Mt 2:3). As the chord is struck, the contrast between the Jews and the Gentiles is obvious. The theme is pursued throughout the Gospel. This is why we find in the Matthean Gospel the stress on "fulfilment" (cf. Mt 5:17: "I have come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them"; and the ten *Reflexionszitate*: 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10). There is further the stress on the Gentiles who are inevitably taking over the kingdom (Mt 8:11-12; 21:43; 22:6-10). And the climax of this secondary theme is reached precisely in 27:25, when "all the people" (*laos* in the ethnic sense) call down upon themselves and their children the curse of old. And this because it is the blood of Him to whom all power and authority in heaven and on earth have been given.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 914: "An der Geschichtlichkeit des Ausrufs ist nicht zu zweifeln."

¹⁶ *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin, 1961) p. 55.

The Evangelist does not develop the theme of the "rejection" of Israel in the theoretical way that Paul does. The latter relates it to the Father's plan of salvation and to the "mystery" of Christ; his perspective is that of salvation history, and of Israel's place in it. Instead, Mt utilizes the material or stuff of the Gospel tradition (the sayings and stories of Jesus) to depict His own "people" failing to accept Him. One incident after another is thus presented, and commented on theologically in Mt's own way, by the pattern provided in the secondary theme. In this way the Evangelist gets across to his Jewish-Christian readers why it was that the Gentiles were now coming into the kingdom in greater numbers than their own people—to whom it was first preached and who did, indeed, first accept it. His perspective is that of the period roughly A.D. 80–85, after the great crisis of the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. It is the time when the early Church is fully aware of itself as *ekklēsia*, and the Evangelist is at pains to depict Jesus' work and mission as a preparation for the *q'hal Yahweh* ("the congregation of the Lord") that is now in existence in a new sense. For this reason Mt has often been regarded as the "ecclesial Gospel" par excellence.

When, therefore, one makes an effort to understand Mt 27:25 in the context of this secondary theme, and especially as the climax of a motif running through the Gospel, one sees that the main purpose of the verse is not per se condemnatory. It was not the Evangelist's aim to point his finger at all the Jews of his own period—much less at the Jews of all ages since—and brand them as *deicides*.¹⁷ His shift from "the crowd" to "the people" has rather the purpose which we have tried to set forth above. When this is not kept in mind, then the verse wrenched from its Gospel context becomes the springboard for the Christian anti-Semitism which has been all too frequent.

If this interpretation is valid, then it would seem to support Crossan's thesis; it would be another reason for rejecting the idea that "the Jews" crucified Jesus. But it is also a reason why this crucial verse should not have been omitted from the discussion of that thesis.

Since it is impossible that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council will delete Mt 27:25 from the New Testament, or even tamper with its wording, seeing that it is the inspired Word of God, an effort will have to be made by Christian exegetes to bring the proper focus to the understanding of this crucial verse. If the few ideas which we have expressed here are not entirely correct, then perhaps they will serve at least as the occasion of further refinement in this delicate matter.

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¹⁷ Contrast Origen, *Hom. in Matt.* 27, 25 (GCS 38, 260); Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.* 3, q. 47, a. 5, ad 3m.