

## ***The Jesus Movement Part II.***

For the disciples of Jesus and for several generations after them the only recognised Scriptures were a collection of the Jewish Holy books. Apart from these writings, early Christians diligently preserved the *Memory* of Jesus passed on in the oral tradition. They included the *Kerygma* (the faith proclamation-affirmation of the death and resurrection of the Son of God) plus some of the deeds and words of Jesus. It was only as a result of internal and external pressures that some local community leaders took it upon themselves to commit the oral tradition to writing and ‘in an orderly fashion.’ The products eventually reflected more accurately the identity of the community than anything resembling a biography of Jesus. This identity became more and more sharply focused as the Judeo-Christian Movement absorbed large numbers of Gentiles and, as a consequence, became increasingly estranged from Judaism.

### ***Jesus in conflict with the Teachers of the Law***

The Torah was given by God to Israel and God intended that, by following its directives and injunctions, the People of the Covenant would have a sure guide to the maintenance of right relationship with their God.

In the first article of this series two major themes in the Jesus story were examined: the plight of peasant farmers who bore the burden of crippling, in some cases, dual taxation, tithing obligations systems and debt. In addition to this, the peasants were permanently anxious about providing for the daily needs of their families. Jesus’ own family was no stranger to this. It is no wonder that his later preaching is generously laced with references to the trials of the people of the land, the *am ha aretz* who were so looked down upon by the religious authorities. (1) Nor is it surprising that Jesus constantly referred to the poor, the marginalised and excluded on account of human-contrived prescriptions. A principal reason for their treatment by religious officials in particular was their failure to observe fully the laws of ritual separation and purity which ultimately led Jesus into conflict with the teachers of Israel.

Another very serious point of contention between Jesus and the teachers of Israel was the way he often acted on the Sabbath. He repeatedly performed works of healing which were deemed to be a major violation of the great commandment of the Torah. In response to their challenge, Jesus insisted that his authority came from the God of Israel. Jesus claimed that he healed by the power of God’s hand. On both counts, the teachers of Israel found him to be blasphemous.

‘What? The Sabbath, “The Sabbath was made for humans not humans for the Sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mk 2: 27) Jesus’ responses would have sounded to his opponents as coming from one claiming messianic authority and therefore to be son of God.

The *'am ha- 'artez*, both peasant farmers and aristocrat alike, were held in low esteem by the Jewish teachers of the Torah even in Jesus' time 'because of their failure to observe among other things, the tithing laws.' (2)

Yohanan ben Zakkai a contemporary of Jesus had spent years attempting to *re-judaize* the suspect Galileans and bring them into compliance with ritual purity laws and scribal teaching. He failed miserably. Storming back to Jerusalem, he fumed: 'O Galilee, O Galilee, you hate the Torah.' The objects of his rage were the majority of Galileans across the socio-economic spectrum who constantly failed to meet the demands of the laws of ritual purity, the *Halakhah*. The rural people, struggling to survive, found compliance with the obligations of these commandments and regulations a burden. Jesus was keenly aware of this and showed his outrage in the angry 'Woes' of Matthew 23:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the Law, justice and mercy and faith.....You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (23: 23-24)

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (23: 15) (3)

There is a body of historical contextual evidence about the ambiguous relationship between the Galilean Jews, their ongoing affection for the National Shrine and loyalty to the pilgrimages alongside, and their less than scrupulous attitude towards the taxes. See for example what is probably a borrowed Galilean Jewish folkloric story applied to Jesus, Peter, the fish and the shekel, a half shekel for each:"When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, 'Does not your teacher pay the tax?'" (Mt 17: 24-27)

Jesus' solution to the problem of prescriptive Law was to cut through the accompanying controlling ideologies masked as religion and preach a radical apocalyptic ethic based not on the strict requirements of the Law but on love, compassion for and empathy with the other.

Jesus infuriated his opponents by welcoming into his circle precisely those who were made to be outsiders by their punitive laws of separation and ritual purity. The parables of Loss in Luke 15 are powerful illustrations of Jesus' raid on acceptability, reason and good order. His teaching assaulted and overturned the logical expectations of his audience. What they thought was reasonable, he countered with the logic of impertinence and pointed foolishness. Jesus turned people's thinking on its head. He broke into the psyches of his listeners like an intruder and proceeded to rearrange their mental furniture.

The Gospels are quite clear that the opponents of Jesus, perhaps quite early in his ministry, began plotting to get rid of him, even to kill him. The principal characters in this conspiracy came from both secular and religious quarters. Mk 3: 1-6 indicates that the Pharisees and Herodians began to plot against Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath. By doing so, he was creating confusion and scandal among the people by breaking a key commandment of the

Law. Integral to the narrative subtext, however, was the question of authority. By whose authority did Jesus claim support for his actions? In the eyes of his opponents, Jesus was exposing himself to very serious danger by personally claiming the authority of God to break God's Law! The conspiracy against Jesus continued to intensify to the point that he decided to journey to Jerusalem for a decisive show-down with the Teachers of the Law and the Temple Authorities. This final confrontation led to his show trial, engineered conviction and judicial murder at the hands of the Romans.

### ***The Jesus Movement and its conflict with the Synagogue***

After Pentecost, the Jesus Movement quickly took up the call of Jesus to go out into the whole world and make disciples. Unlike the scribes of the Pharisees, the repeaters of Jesus' message, they would not build a hedge or a wall of separation around the Gospel. They drew their inspiration from the conflict stories in which Jesus fearlessly confronted his opponents, contested the ritual purity doctrine of the Jewish and openly shattered the taboos where by those outside the pale of Israel were excluded from God's favour. Jesus welcomed the outsiders and made them insiders of his Movement. His followers did the same and made the marginal ones fully fledged members of their local communities.

The second generation of Christians or the in-between generation were those living after the time of Jesus but before the post-Apostolic Church. This generation found in the teaching and behaviour of Jesus, the ministry of Paul and the 'Council of Jerusalem' an extraordinary authority. They discerned in these reference points in the developing tradition the inspiration and encouragement they needed to go beyond the symbiosis of Judaeo-Christianity to the osmotic absorption of the Gentiles. Out of this they created in the mission to the Gentiles an atmosphere of tolerance and co-existence in the urban centres of the Greco-Roman world.

Matthew's community, reflected in the Gospel narrative, never desisted from an intense conversation with its orthodox Jewish neighbours. Its Gospel narrative was composed in such a way that it paralleled the structure of the Five Books of Moses. Integral to the genius of Matthew's community was the creative way they appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures to provide legitimacy to their claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of Israel and that sadly, his own people had rejected him. Israel was now doing the same to the brothers and sisters of the Messiah. In short, the evangelists retold the story of Jesus within the perspective of their own particular community narrative.

The community of Matthew believed that Jewish Messianic expectation had been realised in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Jew of Nazareth. Their contemporary interlocutors rejected these claims on the grounds that Jesus failed to meet the criteria of the Davidic Messiah: 1) he was constantly tainted by ritual purity; 2) he was condemned by the Sanhedrin for leading the people astray with false doctrine; 3) he not only died, he was actually executed as a criminal disturber of the peace.

Matthew's Narrative structure, literary and theological genius was to write his narrative in a literary form readily recognisable to his own community and to curious Jews from outside. The Pentateuch format including five cleverly composed "books" of teaching with supporting action (miracles) was geared to attract and engage the reader into a novel, compelling and persuasive re-telling of the History of Salvation.

Matthew's story makes it perfectly clear that, with the great End (Eschatological) signs of Jesus' death, Resurrection, Ascension followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost, the old age of the Law comes to an end as its promises are fulfilled. The Age of Israel is now eclipsed by the Age of the Church.

Integral to Matthew's narrative structure and theological intentions in the Gospel narrative were the use of numerous fulfilment quotations, formulae and citations from the Torah. (3) These fulfilment texts signal the transition from Israel's history of Salvation to the new era of grace and reconciliation which began with Jesus Christ. To strengthen the credibility and authority of the Matthean narrative, the supporting fulfilment and formula quotations appeal directly to the prophetic tradition: Mt 7: 28; 11: 1; 13:53; 19: 1; 26: 1. (4)

Furthermore, in the first great discourse of Matthew's narrative, Jesus the teacher takes up the central elements of the *Decalogue*, re-contextualises their doctrinal and moral weight then reinterprets them in terms of the Gospel imperatives: *You have heard that it was said.....but I say to you....* (Mt 5: 17-48).

The concluding verses of Matthew's Gospel are clear and emphatic. The Gospel of Jesus to the disciples had eclipsed the Torah and the revelation at Mt Sinai and its message was to be extended beyond the borders of Israel to all nations:

"All authority in heaven and on earth (*the Lord's prayer*) has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and I am with you always, even to the close of the age." (Mt 28: 18-20)

In the next article in this series, the textual record of the final rupture in the relationship between the early Jesus Movement and Judaism will be examined. The final essay will focus on Paul of Tarsus, his Gospel message especially his theology of a new humanity in Christ and his justification for the outreach to and embrace of the Gentiles.

## Endnotes

- 1) Sean Freyne, *Galilee – From Alexander the Great to Hadrian 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E. A Study of Second Temple Judaism*. Wilmington, DE, Glazier, 1980. 306.

*The people bound themselves*, "to bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord; also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the ... firstlings of our herds and of our flocks; and to bring the first of our coarse meal,

and our contributions, the first of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our rural towns, ... For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary and the priests that minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.” (Neh 10: 32-39)

“In this framework, the perception of limited economic good could in fact delineate any possible economic initiative, due to the fact that all productive resources, material and symbolic, were finite in number and limited in quantity. Given the underdeveloped character of subsistence economies, the economic interplay was conceived as a zero-sum game, where any apparent improvement in someone’s position with respect to material goods was viewed as a real threat to social and communal cohesion, in other words, any individual or group advancement was feasible only to the detriment of others.” Bruce J. Malina (2001), *The New Testament World. Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, London, SCM, 76. Esler 1994).

- 2) *Ibid*, 287, 307). A certain indulgence was extended to the Galilean peasantry during the observance of sacred times, “...our rabbis taught that the impurity of the ‘*am ha-‘aretz* was purified on a festival.’ *Ibid*.,
- 3) It was this same Yohanan ben Zakkai who, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, secured Roman permission to set up a forum of Pharisees to bring stable leadership to the Jewish people. His group created the Council of Yavneh (Jamnia). It was this group who establish what is now normative Judaism and who hastened the development of the Jewish oral Law, known as the *Mishnah*. They also finalised the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures and set up mechanisms to exclude Jewish Christians from the synagogue. More of this in Part V.
- 4) “Matthew’s fulfilment passages,” *C21 Online*. (Linked [here](#)) Tim Gallant “Fulfilment in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Biblical Studies Center*. (Linked [here](#))

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More stimuli:

Sean Freyne, the great Irish biblical scholar and historian delivered three lectures in the US just before his death: “Galilee, Jesus and Christology,” The Shaffer Lectures, Yale Divinity School, *Zwingli Redivivus*, Summer, 2013. (Linked [here](#))

For an excellent article on the moral weight of the Decalogue see, Brian Lewis, “The Ten Commandments,” in *www.v2catholic.com* (Linked [here](#))