

SACRIFICIAL SERVICE AND ATONEMENT
IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

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EVEN CLEARER THAN PAUL'S PRESENTATION IS THAT PORTRAYAL IN THE Epistle to the Hebrews of how Jesus Christ in lonely majesty once and for all (*ἐφάπαξ*) won an everlasting atonement. With this clear picture of a complete, exclusive and unique act of atonement at a decreed point of time in history, much in the New Testament can be understood. But not all: some passages still present us with difficulties. For example, the Matthean presentation of Jesus' ministry cannot be interpreted solely in the light of this picture of the atonement.

Certainly Matthew stresses, in quite explicit terms, that Jesus' ministry was for the purpose of taking away sin and creating righteousness. We will briefly call to mind three important passages:

(1) In 1:21 Matthew interprets the name of Jesus so as to characterize his ministry. The aetiologial phrase "for he shall save his people from their sins (*σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν*)" is only found in his Gospel. This is not a set formula which, so to speak, simply flowed from the writer's pen. According to Matthew, Jesus delivers people from many kinds of evil. His redeeming act could have been described in other ways if the writer had so wanted (cf. e.g. 11:4 f.). When he states that Jesus will save his people *from their sins*, he indicates just how much weight he ascribes to the atonement Jesus effects.

(2) In the pericope about the Last Supper Jesus says concerning the cup: "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:27 f.). The explanatory phrase "poured out for many" is taken over by Matthew from the tradition. But the additional words of interpretation "for the forgiveness of sins" (*εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*) are his own. In this way also Matthew underlines the atoning significance of Jesus' activity.

(3) The logion, "the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (*δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν*)" (20:28), is one that Matthew has taken from Mark (10:45). However, as we shall see in a moment, it is an important passage for Matthew as well, though his interpretation differs somewhat from that in the earlier Gospel.

If we look more closely at the significance these three statements have within the framework of Matthew's Gospel, we will notice the following: (1) The interpretation of Jesus' name says nothing about the way in which Jesus saves his people from their sins. There is no suggestion that this is to happen exclusively through his sacrificial death. (2) The words interpreting the significance of the cup are not part of a general doctrinal statement about the death of Christ, but deal rather with the practical benefit participants in the church's Holy Communion can derive from it. (3) The saying about the service and sacrifice of the Son of man does not appear in the context of a discussion on atonement. What is said is not intended to present Jesus as the one, and only, exclusive Saviour. Jesus is here portrayed as the highest ideal for all who want to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven: they must serve those who are of least account in the eyes of men. This Son of man whom they are to emulate (note the Matthean *ὡσπερ*) saw his mission as that of giving his life as a ransom for many. The final words show how far his service extended. We shall come back to this later.

As a matter of fact, Matthew tends throughout his Gospel to present Jesus more as a typical than an exclusive figure, and to play down the historical "once and for all" in favour of heavenly ideals which have a timeless, or more correctly, a general and permanent validity. We shall see below how this tendency manifests itself in Matthew's presentation of the atonement theme. We shall also see that this way of interpreting the ministry of Christ is easy to understand if it is placed in its specific historical context. Matthew was educated by Jewish scribes and uses their way of speaking about "offering spiritual sacrifices" (*λογικῆ λατρεία, πνευματικαὶ θυσίαι*).

I

A well-known rabbinic tradition (ARN 4), which is said to date from the period just after 70 A.D., portrays the reactions of two pious rabbis to the ruined temple. Rabbi Joshua weeps: "Woe unto us, that the place where the sins of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste." But Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai comforts him: "We have another atonement as effective as this, and what is this? The deeds of mercy (*gemilut hasadim*), as it is said: 'For I desire mercy (*hesed*) and not sacrifice (*zebah*)' (Hos. 6:6)."

This vivid picture reminds us of a series of facts which can be verified from other sources: that the desecration and destruction by the Romans of Israel's only legitimate place of sacrifice was a terrible shock to pious Jews. Nevertheless the religious life of the people still continued: its vital nerve was not struck. Much earlier, the teachers in Israel had realized that the decisive factor in Israel's worship of God (*'abodah, λατρεία*) does not

lie in external sacrificial acts conducted in the temple, but in *obedience* to Him who has given the laws concerning the sacrificial services and other holy duties. That is why Israel's *abodah/latreia* could continue after the fall of the temple. However, the old idea that God was to be served by *sacrifices* ran very deep, as may be seen in their tendency to begin classifying all acts of obedience as sacrifices. It is these *spiritual* sacrifices which now bring about expiation for the sins of God's people. Those who pioneered this deepening and ethicizing of Israel's religion were not priests, but prophets, sages and scribes. It was only natural that the rabbis took over the leadership in Israel after the fall of the temple.

In Matthew's Gospel, we find, as is generally known, many direct and indirect traces of the revolutionary events that occurred around the year 70 A.D. Even Christian Jews were shaken at the thought of "the abomination of desolation, standing in the holy place", and their hearts also bled at the thought of what had happened on Mount Zion. However, expressions of their emotional loyalty to the holy city do not stand out so clearly as does their bitterness against those who had brought down God's judgement upon Jerusalem. In some respects, they viewed the matter from the outside. When Matthew's Gospel was written, Christian Jews had been thrust out from Israel's religious community and they too dissociated themselves from it. As they looked back on the destruction of Jerusalem they interpreted it as a logical catastrophe about which Jesus had prophesied and warned. It was the leaders of Israel and the people misled by them who had brought it upon themselves by rejecting Jesus and then hardening themselves against the apostles' message of his resurrection. The bitterness reflected in this attitude stems partly from the fact that it is *basically* not a reaction from outsiders but an essentially Jewish self-criticism of a genuinely prophetic kind.

Much has already been written on this subject and it does not need to be repeated in this connection.¹ I shall here try to answer the positive question as to how, in Matthew's Gospel, the sins of (the true) Israel are expiated. This issue could be approached by asking the complementary question: How, according to Matthew, does (apostate) Israel fill up the measure of its sins? Matthew is in the habit of working with sharp contrasts, and he does so in this case as well. I shall, however, limit myself to the positive side of the matter. Even so, other restrictions have to be made. Thus, only certain aspects of this complex problem will be taken up, and only a few key texts dealt with. An exhaustive treatment of the atonement theme in Matthew would require a whole monograph.²

¹ See particularly H. J. Schoeps, *Die Tempelzerstörung des Jahres 70 in der jüdischen Religionsgeschichte*, CN VI (1942), pp. 1-45; O. H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967); D. R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Cambridge, 1967).

² For some of the problems involved see, besides the works mentioned above, W. Trilling, *Das wahre Israel* (München, 1964), G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit* (Göttingen, 1966).

II

The Matthean Jesus does not disapprove of the temple and its outward sacrificial service, but he puts them in their place. This is most clearly expressed in the pericope about plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath day (12:1-8), where we come across the explicit statement: "Something greater than the temple is here". This rejoinder is part of that section of the pericope which is peculiar to Matthew (vv. 5-7). The argument is a conclusion of the *qal-wahomer* type: the priests in their temple service can work on the Sabbath without incurring guilt. The sacrificial service (*abodah/latreia*) weighs more heavily in God's eyes than Sabbath-keeping, and the weightier matter sets aside the lesser. This traditional argument is now enlarged by Jesus' declaration: "Something greater than the temple is here!" It seems to me indubitable that the comparison here is between two kinds of worship: the *latreia* which the priests perform in the temple, and the *latreia* in which Jesus and his disciples are engaged. These two kinds of service are more closely defined in the Hosea quotation which follows: "I desire mercy (*ἔλεος*) and not sacrifice (*θυσία*)". That which is being contrasted here is, on the one hand, the outward sacrificial service, and, on the other, the perfect spiritual sacrifice that Jesus and his disciples are offering and which is characterized by "mercy".¹

How deeply this conception of sacrifice is involved in the Matthean view of Israel's duty towards God, we find in a passage such as the pericope about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in 6:1-6, 16-21. The Matthean Jesus is here giving instruction about the right way of "doing one's righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*)". His three examples are examples of worship which is carried out with the heart (prayer), with the soul (fasting) and with one's property (almsgiving). A single idea is brought out here: these acts are to be carried out in such a way that from an earthly point of view they are "losses" i.e., they are to be pure *gifts* which do not bring in returns from men. It means simply this, that they are to be pure, whole, and unlimited *sacrifices* to God.² That every true sacrifice to God would receive its "reward" from the heavenly Father, was self-evident to Israel.³

¹ Cf. A. Cole, *The New Temple* (London, 1950), pp. 8-22, and Hummel, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-44, 90-103.

² To Matthew a sacrifice is basically a *gift* (*δῶρον*): 5:23 f.; 8:4; 15:5; 23:18 f. Cf. Hummel, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 f.

³ See further my article "Geistiger Opferdienst nach Matth. 6, 1-6. 16-21", in *Neues Testament und Geschichte*, Festschrift O. Cullmann, ed. B. Reicke & H. Baltensweiler (Zürich & Tübingen, 1972, pp. 69-77).

R. Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* (München, 1966), esp. pp. 76-108, and S. van Tilborg, *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew* (Leiden, 1972). For other aspects of the theme of spiritual service, cf. also J. R. Brown, *Temple and Sacrifice in Rabbinic Judaism* (Evanston, 1963), B. E. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1965), and R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple* (Oxford, 1969).

When duties towards God are interpreted as spiritual sacrifices, it naturally follows that serving God tends to merge with serving one's fellowmen. Where are these sacrifices to be made—the giving, the "losses"—if not among men? *Latreia* tends to coincide with *diakonia* (cf. such passages as 7:12 and 19:16-22). They may, however, not completely coincide; one's duty to serve God does not cease when man is alone with God. The Matthean presentation is not inconsistent on these points.

III

In other studies I have tried to clarify the ethical dimension of Matthew's Christology. The model of thought can be stated in a short formula: Jesus is "the Son of God" who takes it upon himself to be the perfect "servant of God" in all things. The inmost secret of his attitude is love (*'ahabah, ἀγάπη*). Here we will only briefly deal with Jesus' "service". This is a serving of God (*λατρεία*) which becomes an ideal serving of man (*διακονία*). The opposite of this is "to seek one's own".

That Jesus, because of his origin, is the "Son of God" in a different sense than other "sons of God", is underlined in the story of the annunciation to Joseph (1:18-25), and his divine election is confirmed in the narrative describing his baptism (3:13-17). Then comes the temptation narrative (4:1-11). Here Jesus is tested in his capacity as "Son of God". The devil tries to provoke him into committing three acts: (1) To give in to the evil inclination in his heart and use his exousia to procure miraculous means of sustenance for his own benefit, (2) to force God to allow his angels to serve the "Son" and save his life from death, (3) to secure at the ordinary worldly price—service of Satan—power and riches in this world, indeed all the kingdoms of this world and their glory. But the answers Jesus gives show that he wholeheartedly places himself in subjection to what God has commanded in his law: (1) "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God", (2) "You shall not tempt the Lord your God", (3) "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve (*λατρεύειν*)". The principle behind these answers is not hard to find. Jesus, "the Son of God", does not intend to "seek his own", but to "seek the things of God" (the Rule of God and his righteousness), to hear and do the will of his heavenly Father. This is the import of the Son's way of "serving" his Father. Notice how the term *latreuein* comes as a concluding climax in Jesus' last answer to the tempter's questions.

If, in the temptation narrative, we find Jesus' way of serving God (*λατρεύειν*) so interpreted, elsewhere we find demonstrations of his service of man (*διακονεῖν*). This theme is present in a concise but concentrated way in one logion we have already touched on, namely that

God's word as it is now sounded in Israel and "do the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21-27). The decisive requirement of love to God (obedience) is so indissolubly fused with the requirement of love for one's neighbour (22:35-40) that the final inspection can turn out to be a question of how one has behaved towards one's fellowmen in need: in the final judgement "deeds of mercy" are asked after (25:31-46). *Diakonia* is counted as *latreia*.

According to Matthew, Jesus enjoins all children of the Rule of Heaven to be and behave as he does. In the Sermon on the Mount he sums up the requirements for citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven in the command to be perfect (*τέλειοι*, 5:48). The term undoubtedly retains its cultic associations. The word is an old characterization of the whole, spotless and blameless sacrifice (*tamim, tam, shalem*). And this requirement of "perfection" is made a general one for all who want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Nowhere does Matthew state or assume that Jesus' sacrifice makes other offerings superfluous. The reflections in Matthew about Christ's death "as a ransom for many" are never given such an exclusive character that Christ's death has to be set against, and distinguished from, the violent deaths of other innocent and righteous people. On the contrary, the Matthean Jesus stresses forcefully that every true follower must be prepared to make even the utmost sacrifice, i.e. to give his life for Jesus' (the Rule of Heaven's) sake. The spiritual service of sacrifice must continue, even in its most extreme form. This is most clearly seen in the predictions about the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of man. Throughout the synoptic tradition, predictions of the Son of man's rejection and violent death are connected with instructions to his followers to humble themselves and serve. The bearing of the cross in imitation of Christ is part of the lot the disciples have to take upon themselves. In Matthew, however, this theme has been outlined with exceptional clarity, particularly in the pericope concerning the first prediction of suffering (16:21-28; cf. also 10:16-39).

We have already been reminded that Matthew does not let Jesus distinguish the suffering of the actual atonement itself from that service of sacrifice into which the disciples must enter. He does not balk at the thought that the great mystery of the atonement has a communal aspect. This is in itself nothing strange, if one takes into account Matthew's background. Sacrifice was of old a collective concern. It was an ancient conviction in Israel that sacrifice expiated sin, and that as a rule, this expiation held for a whole community. The sacrifice was not meant to just benefit the one who brought it, but also the family, relatives, tribe, people, town or land to which one belonged and which one wanted to represent. We are hardly true to historical circumstances if we understand spiritual sacrifices as being a purely individual matter.

I myself do not reckon that even the speech about a heavenly "reward" for such simple spiritual sacrifices as prayer, fasting and alms (6:1-6, 16-21) should be taken purely individualistically. When it comes to the advanced spiritual sacrifices, the sacrifice of life, the death of the martyrs, the communal aspect is undeniable. From early times the conviction was that the "death of the saints" was precious in the eyes of God and bore much fruit for others. This thought seems to lie behind certain elements in the Jesus-tradition, and not only in the logion about the grain of wheat in the Gospel of John. Also the parables about the mustard seed and the leaven (Matt. 13:31-33), and the metaphor about the salt which "dies" in the sacrificial meat in order to make the meat into a sacrifice pleasing to God (5:13), seem to deal with the secret behind the death of the saints for the sake of the Rule of Heaven.¹ In spite of his eagerness to demonstrate that Jesus' death was in all points perfect, Matthew shows no inclination to clearly distinguish Jesus' sacrificial death from the martyrdom of his followers.

V

We have seen that Matthew, by interpreting Jesus' ministry as a spiritual service of sacrifice, takes away the demarcation between Jesus and his followers, "the true Israel", the church, and between Jesus' work in the past and the church's work in the present. Jesus is primarily depicted as the perfect prototype for all "children of God" who want to be "servants of God". To balance the picture, however, we must remind ourselves that Jesus is in no less decisive a fashion portrayed as supremely exalted above the church, and that, according to Matthew, his activity constitutes the foundation upon which the church stands or falls. It is certainly true that the church has an extraordinary exousia. It can "bind and loose" (16:19; 18:18), it can forgive sins (9:8), it can heal the sick and cast out demons (10:1-8; cf. 7:21-23) etc. But it is quite typical that the church has received its exousia through Jesus, and that its mighty deeds are done "in the name of Jesus". When the church comes together for divine service it is "in the name of Jesus" and with Jesus as invisibly present (18:20; 28:20), and when one at the Holy Communion receives the forgiveness of sin, it is in remembrance of Christ's death (26:28). The Matthean baptismal formula - "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" - is also worth considering from our point of view. Jesus' position as the church's incomparable *Kyrios* appears in countless ways in the Gospel of Matthew. What then, according to Matthew, constitutes the decisive differences between Jesus and his followers?

¹ See my article, "The Seven Parables in Matthew XIII", *NTS* 19 (1972/73), pp. 21-23.

There is one difference that Matthew is anxious to indicate: in all Jesus' followers is found a frailty and mortality – in the transferred meaning of the word – which was not found in Jesus. They are therefore required to repent, which Jesus never was (cf. 3:11, 14). They daily have to pray a prayer which Jesus did not need to pray: Forgive us our trespasses (6:9a, 12). They have to fall back on the perfect sacrificial service Jesus made whereas he never had to rely on anyone else's merits.

This theme is an authentic and common feature of the synoptic passion tradition, but it is Matthew who brings it out with particular clarity in his depiction of Jesus' ministry. Jesus enjoins it upon his followers to confess him before men (10:32 f.) and, when required to do so, to give up their lives for his (the Rule of Heaven's) sake (16:24–26; 10:38 f.). The twelve also promise to fulfil this requirement of faithfulness unto death. With Peter at their head, they protest that they would rather die than desert him (26:30–35). But when the test comes they all fail him and let him down (26:36–56), and Peter denies Jesus as coarsely as is at all possible (26:69–75). Thus even the church's leading men have forfeited their lives with Jesus and the heavenly Father (cf. 10:32 f., 39; 16:25). When Jesus gives up his spirit on the cross, the disciples are therefore in such a position that they need absolute forgiveness for themselves. This they also receive. That the risen Lord does not reject them after what has happened, but reveals himself to them and gives them his renewed confidence (26:32; 28:10, 16–20) signifies, *de facto*, fundamental forgiveness. It is striking that Matthew does not feel it necessary to comment explicitly on this. For him it was somehow self-evident that the repentant church can fall back on Jesus' mercy.

Throughout the whole passion narrative Jesus has a dark shadow behind him: the frail and failing church. One can ask oneself why the early Christian teachers so unsparingly told of how Jesus' foremost men – pillars in the church – failed in the moment of trial. Sometimes when the rabbis contemplated the great falls in the history of Israel, both that of the nation (worship of the golden calf) and that of individual great men (David's adultery), they drew the conclusion that this happened and was recorded in order to show coming generations that the road of repentance and atonement was open for the people of God, even for the vilest sinner.¹ Perhaps there was a similar consideration behind the early Christian teachers' presentation of the apostles' denial and failure. Matthew has no illusions about the church's infallibility. The church has an extraordinary exousia, but this has its source in Jesus, and it stands or falls on Jesus' position and presence (28:18–20). This is presented in symbolic form in the pericope relating Peter's attempt to walk on the water. Though he

¹ Ab. Zar. 4a, 5b. Cf. S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Schocken, New York, 1961), pp. 317 f.

can control the dangerous waves, he needs Jesus' command and Jesus' help (14:22–33).¹

If we were to ask for the ultimate reason for this difference between the sinless Jesus and his imperfect followers, Matthew would presumably refer to what is said about Jesus' unique divine origin (1:18–25). Presumably this inherited conviction of Jesus' heavenly origin fills this function. We recognize this thought from Paul: The children of Adam are from the earth, men of dust; Christ is from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47). It was a deeply engrained idea in Israel that man's weakness and mortality was due to his earthly origin: "dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return" (Gen. 3:19). Over against this, Matthew – as does the tradition before him – sets the conviction that the "Messiah, the Son of the living God" was of heavenly origin. This mystery was able to explain why Jesus could carry out his service unto death without the least stain, and thus effect an atonement in which the church – all who want to be "the true Israel" – can trust.

¹ Cf. Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–53.