

ABOUT THE BACKGROUND OF THE COMMAND TO LOVE YOUR ENEMIES IN THE SERMON OF THE MOUNT

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You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:38–48¹

I. Introduction

These words of Jesus are perplexing. On the one hand, they set before us an ideal that those of us who live in a Western civilization that has been influenced by Christianity understand well. We recognize that if all humanity would act according to these words, our world would be an infinitely better place. But on the other hand, we realize well that even if we ourselves were to act like Jesus said there would probably be others who would not do the same, and then, practically speaking, we would find ourselves at a disadvantage. Of course, to think about it, it is quite obvious that these words were

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¹ Bible translation in this article: The New International Version.

radical from the very beginning and this is precisely why they were said in the first place.

Now, there are many ways of trying to sort out the meaning of the so-called “love your enemies command” – one could employ ethics, psychology, or any other discipline that deals with the issues of human behaviour. As this article is to be published in a journal of the Estonian National Defence College, one can even ask questions about the political and military implications of these ideas. For it may be that in certain circumstances, the actions described by Jesus have at least a tactical value in overcoming one’s enemy.

In the following article I will selectively describe the attempts of different thinkers of Christian tradition and Biblical Studies to make sense of what Jesus said. All these attempts have one thing in common: they all agree that the meaning of these words is heavily dependent on the context of their application. As we will see, two main ways of interpretation will emerge: the command to love one’s enemies can be understood to be either about the behaviour of individual people in their individual differing contexts of life or about group behaviour in the specific political and military context of the Palestine of the 1st century C.E. when Palestine was occupied by the Roman Empire.

2. Loving one’s enemies: what does it mean? Some answers from the Christian tradition

Individualistic interpretations are the most common ones. “Try the method of love on a tiger and see what happens,” was said once to a Christian missionary and writer Eli Stanley Jones.² He agreed that this method does not influence tigers, but then he added that it does influence humans. The question here is of a trust of human nature in general, while the belief that a human being can surrender to the attack of love is the most unique expression of that trust. This trust presupposes that within every human being there are two beings: one that is evil and who must not be fought with his own weapons and another, who is not evil, but who is receptive to the call of the suffering love. And then there is a question of outcomes: it may happen that the method does not work on another, but even then, the one who started “the love attack” is a winner because by self-humiliation, he has grown spiritually. This solution by E. S. Jones is based on the notion of human dignity.

² **Eli Stanley Jones.** *Mäejutus. Praktiline elufilosoofia.* Tallinn: Noored Misioniga, 1991, p. 93 (An Estonian translation of “The Christ of the Mount – A Working Philosophy of Life” from 1931).

He differentiates the outward and inward dignity and stresses that the active “aggressive love” determines the real winner. The one who has been attacked physically is above the attacking person because he sees the inward shortfalls of the attacking person that are compensated by aggressiveness. No doubt there are situations when this approach works well.

In his commencement address at Williams College, Joseph Brodski³ describes the same approach although his interpretation of it is different. It grows out of his definition of evil. Evil today is not only an ethical category only; it is something that thrives on things that are sure. Evil is completely human and that means that nothing is easier to be turned around and successfully propagated than conceptions of social justice, citizenship, better future, etc. The most ordinary common thing that people hold dear can be used against them. So according to Brodski, the surest defence against evil is extreme individualism, originality of thinking, and eccentricity. Besides, the method of turning the other cheek to your enemy can upset the commonality of evil. He uses an example from the Soviet Gulag of the mid-sixties where guards forced the prisoners to cut wood for heating, organizing a “socialist competition in cutting wood” for prisoners. As everybody (guard included) understood it as forced labour, nobody expected the “competition” to really be a competition at all. Suddenly, one young prisoner took the competition literally and when all the others paused for a rest, he continued. When all the others finished their work, he continued for several hours. Later on, the practice of organizing such “socialist competitions” was abandoned as he had by his actions ridiculed the whole idea of “competition.”

Still, as seen from Brodski’s explanations, it is not a ready-made recipe for success. And the most pressing question here is of the extent of the sacrifice: it is one thing to risk “the aggressive love” by yourself, but when there are people who depend on you, the risk may be too great. E.S. Jones is explicit here. Jesus does not say, “If someone strikes your child on the ear, turn to him the other ear of the child also.” In that case, one’s responsibility is to defend the child.⁴

It is precisely the question of responsibility that is addressed in relation to our theme by the Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza, according to whom the words of Jesus are addressed to his contemporaries in the specific political context of military oppression. While discussing the principles of Biblical interpretation, he notes that the command of Jesus to love your enemies is in direct opposition with the principle of retribution (an eye for an eye) of Moses. Spinoza is clear that the meaning of a sentence is dependent on the context where it was said:

³ **Jossif Brodski.** Avakõne Williamsi Kolledžis 1984 (Commencement Address. Williams College 1984). Transl. Doris Kareva. Looming 10/1988, pp. 1376–1379.

⁴ **Jones** 1991, p. 88.

“This was said by Christ, who was not ordaining laws as a lawgiver, but was expounding his teachings as a teacher, because... he was intent on improving men’s minds rather than their external actions. Further, he spoke these words to men suffering under oppression, living in a corrupt commonwealth where justice was utterly disregarded, a commonwealth whose ruin he saw imminent. Now we see that this very same teaching... was also given by Jeremiah in similar circumstances at the first destruction of the city (Lamentations ch. 3 v. 30). Thus it was only at the time of oppression that the prophets taught this doctrine which was nowhere set forth as law; whereas Moses (who did not write at a time of oppression, but – please note – was concerned to found a good commonwealth), although he likewise condemned revenge and hatred against one’s neighbour, yet demanded an eye for an eye. Therefore... this teaching of Christ and Jeremiah concerning the toleration if injury and total submission to the wicked applies only in situations where justice is disregarded and at the times of oppression, but not in good commonwealth. Indeed, in a good commonwealth where justice is upheld, everyone who wants to be accounted as just has the duty to go before a judge and demand justice for wrongdoing..., not out of revenge..., but with the purpose of upholding justice and the laws of the country, and to prevent the wicked from rejoicing in their wickedness.”⁵

What Spinoza is saying here is that the command to love your enemies is simply a practical wisdom of self-preservation in adverse circumstances. If you are in direct danger, then it is best to try to get along with your oppressor. Revenge does not make things better. This wisdom of self-preservation can also be called a social responsibility, and in different circumstances, it compels us to demand justice.

A similar understanding seems to be expressed in the New Testament by Apostle Paul in Romans 12:19–21:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

⁵ **Baruch Spinoza.** *Theological-Political Treatise.* – Baruch Spinoza: Complete Works. Michael L. Morgan (ed.), Samuel Shirley (transl.). Hackett: Indianapolis, 2002, p. 461.

The question here is once more of justice. Loving one's enemies seems to perpetuate evil itself by allowing it to be victorious. Paul's solution is to refer to the Final Judgment: when it happens, everything will be seen in its proper context and justice will be done.

3. Loving one's enemies – what does it mean? The perspective of Biblical Studies

Thoughts described above are but a small selection of different attempts to understand this saying in Christian tradition. In what follows, I will describe some additional problems and attempted solutions in Biblical Studies related to this saying.

In Biblical Studies, the question of the meaning of the command to love one's enemies is intertwined with the question of who said these words in the first place, or, as stated more specifically, with the question of the historical Jesus. I will start with some general observations.

The texts of the Bible are analyzed in Biblical Studies as a part of a historical communication process, and it means that before we are to ask what a Biblical text means to us, we are to try to at least attempt to understand what it meant in its first setting. The presupposition is that the message of the Sermon of the Mount had to be relevant to its first hearer in a social and political sense among other things. It is precisely here that things become interesting; namely, we have to admit that finding out the original setting of this text is not such an easy task to accomplish.

In the following figure, I outline in a schematic way the framework in which the questions about the historical Jesus and his message are stated. This framework states the basic questions each scholar has to answer before going on with a more detailed analysis. So one can say that different scholars "enter" into that framework with their respective methods and that the outcomes of their research projects are correlated to the answers they give to these basic questions. And, as we shall see later, the question of the original meaning of the command to love one's enemies also depends on both the answers to the basic questions and on the answers that are a result of a more specific method employed by a scholar.

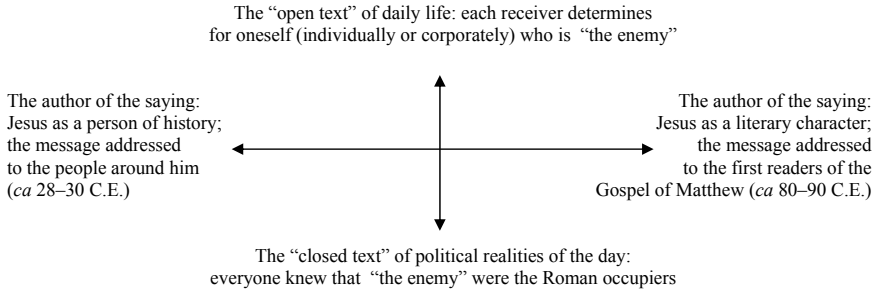


Figure 1: The author of the saying and interpretation of “the enemy” in Matthew 5

The text of the Sermon of the Mount has a complicated history of development, and that means that it is not entirely possible to say with assurance who was its “first receiver.” In the text we find that the Jew Jesus is surrounded by his immediate followers and the larger group of people who had come to listen to him. But the text itself was written down decades later to a community of Christians who were largely already Gentiles (*i.e.* not Jews). Was the message meant to present a pattern of behaviour that was universal and did not bear a specific audience in mind? Or was it addressed to a specific audience in their particular life setting? Was that audience primarily Jesus’ disciples or Jews in general? Or maybe we have to forget the setting presented in the text and ask what the written down version of the message was saying to its first readers instead?

Who is *the author of the saying* is not clear either. Strictly speaking, all we have is a text written by the author of the First Gospel. Even the identity of the evangelist is a mystery, as the designation “The Gospel of Matthew” was added centuries later.⁶ There is a time delay of approximately 50+ years between the events described in the Gospel and the writing down of the Gospel itself, *i.e.*, the lifetime of the whole generation of people.⁷ The evangelist mediates what has been passed to him by tradition (both oral and written). Historically, this means that even if Jesus did speak about the need to love one’s enemies, we cannot be sure that the evangelist has recreated the actual original setting of the saying in his text. Rather the opposite: most of the scholars are convinced that the Sermon of the Mount in its present form in the Gospel is a literary composition. Therefore, the problem can be stated

⁶ For the sake of convenience I refer to him as Matthew in this paper as the question of his personal identity does not concern us here.

⁷ See **John P. Meier**. *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking The Historical Jesus. Volume One. The Roots of the Problem and the Person*. New York: Doubleday, 1991, pp. 43, 407. Meier’s dating follows the customary pattern in the biblical scholarship.

by presenting two opposing statements. The first is that in spite of the text being literature, it still tells us about history. The meaning of the text lies in the world it describes. Therefore, the author of the saying is Jesus, who is a person of history and whose message was firstly addressed to the people surrounding him. The evangelist merely retells the story in an orderly way. According to the second statement, the text gives us the viewpoint of the evangelist and no more. The history behind the text is so much obscured that it is not possible to reconstruct it. The “Jesus” of the evangelist is a literary character who voices the ideas of the author of the Gospel (much like “Socrates” in the later texts of Plato).

The question of who “*the enemy*” is depends on how an exegete determines the relationship between the reader and the reader’s context. Here too we can present two opposing positions. At first we have the so-called “open text” – the idea being that in this case, what we have here is an “open message” (for the individual or a group) in the sense that each listener/reader has to determine for oneself who his or her enemy is in his or her daily life. In that case, “the enemy” is not predetermined, and the text itself presupposes many different answers. On the opposite scale we have the political “closed text”. As an outcome of the political situation of the first century AD, there was a common understanding among the Jews who “the enemy” was. Palestine was occupied by the Romans. An analogy from today is helpful here. Philip Yancey draws a parallel between the situation of the Jews under Roman Empire in the first century and of the Palestinians today in Israel.⁸ As Jews of the day were powerless in front of Roman military might (they had several uprisings against the Romans that were crushed violently) so are the Palestinian Arabs powerless against the Israeli army. During the *Intifada*, rocks and Molotov cocktails, light firearms, and lastly, suicide bombs were used by Arabs, but against the Israeli tanks, they were of little use. Each attack has been answered by a more powerful counterattack, suicide bomb blast by rocket launch, against the houses of supposed enemies of Israel. And as there are innocent Israeli civilians who are killed in suicide bomb attacks, so suffer the bystanders among Arabs too in Israeli rocket fire. And it is clear that Palestinians will not prevail militarily. Moreover, it is not only about weapons: as is today, so in Jesus’ time the Roman power was also perceived in economical terms. Today’s Israelis are generally much more well-off than Palestinians, who are by now largely dependent on foreign aid to survive; similarly in Jesus’ time, the majority of people were living hardly above the poverty line.⁹ Needless to say that if you ask a Palestinian today,

⁸ **Philip Yancey.** *Jeesus, keda ma ei tundnud.* Tallinn: Logos, 2004, p. 69. (An Estonian translation of “The Jesus I Never Knew” from 1995.)

⁹ Most important aspects that contributed to poverty of the majority of the people of Israel of Jesus’ time were the loss of land and heavy taxation – the processes that

“Who is your enemy?” the most probable answer will be, “The Israelis.” Similarly, in the times of Jesus the enemy was perceived to be Romans and their collaborators.

In what follows, we will look at the ways different scholars have answered these basic questions and how they “enter” into the scheme with their more specific methods of analysis. Of course, a word of caution is needed here too: not everybody fits neatly into the framework given above. Nevertheless, as this scheme is just a heuristic tool to make sense of a set of rather complicated data, it is to be expected to be so.

4. “Jesus” of the “closed text” of political realities: Robert Eisenman

For understanding this position, some additional remarks about the background of the New Testament are relevant.

If we know anything about the history of Palestine in the 1st Century A.D., it is that Palestine was a rebellious country in tumultuous times. Romans had continuous administrative problems: they had to change rulers of Judea every now and then, and Jews initiated numerous resistance attempts in the form of theocratic movements that proclaimed the replacement of all structures of governance by the governance of God.¹⁰ One of the most important problems was the Jewish conviction that foreigners must not rule the promised land of God. The problem was thus not only of a politically, but of a religiously understood national identity.

These things can be seen from many documents of the era, except one: the texts of the New Testament. If we read only the Gospels, we can have an impression that the life of Jesus takes place in the context of bucolic idyll. Romans are almost not mentioned, and the current political problems are mostly overlooked. British Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby has made an apt comparison: “It is just as if someone were to write a history of France in the time of war between 1940 and 1945 and not even mention the Germans!”¹¹

were the result of the Roman rule. See **Ekkehard Stegemann, Wolfgang Stegemann**. *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, pp. 104–136.

¹⁰ **Gerd Theissen**. *Legitimation and Subsistence. An Essay on the Sociology of Early Christian Missionaries*. – Gerd Theissen. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990, p. 29.

¹¹ Interview with Maccoby in the documentary “The Real Jesus Christ” (1999/2001) 3BM Television, Great Britain, director Patrick McGrady, executive producer Simon Berthon.

The second detail relevant here is that Jesus was a Jew and spoke Aramaic. All the New Testament texts were written decades later and already in Greek. Greek was a lingua franca of the day, much like English nowadays. Moreover, these texts were not only in Greek but they were also written especially for a Greek-speaking audience.¹²

Jesus had several brothers. One of them, James, became the leader of the Jesus-movement in Palestine after the death of Jesus. He was a well-respected man who strictly followed Jewish Law. Pagan Christians with Paul as their leader proclaimed, on the other hand, that the death and resurrection of Jesus meant that Pagans who believed that Jesus was the Son of (Jewish) God would be saved by him, and they would not be required to obey Jewish Law.¹³ Think about it: isn't it at least odd that the leader of Jewish Christians, the very brother of Jesus, was a Law-abiding Jew, and the leader of Pagan Christians, Paul, said that the Gospel of Jesus meant that the Law had been abolished? The Law in this context meant primarily the Jewish customs, like circumcision, dietary regulations, Sabbath observations, etc., that differentiated Jews from other people. The pagan Christians were thus able to believe in a Jewish God without being observably a Jew.¹⁴

In political and cultural terms, this change was expedient: although the Pagan Christians differentiated themselves from the Jews, it was hard for Romans to tell the difference. For them the Christians were a Jewish sect: they believed in a Jewish God. And their Son of God, Jesus, had been crucified as a political rebel. The Christians had a hard time explaining that although they believed in the same God as the Jews and that their Saviour had been executed as rebel, they were all loyal subjects of the Roman Empire. Just one example: the Christians referred to themselves as *ecclesia* (now commonly translated as *Church*), but in common usage in Greek and Latin, *ecclesia* referred to the political assembly of the people of the city.¹⁵

It was in this context, says Robert Eisenman, that Paul and his followers among the Pagan Christianity started to reshape the Jesus-traditions to a more politically correct outlook. According to Eisenman, the Gospels are the result of a deliberate political forgery wherein the message of a Jewish po-

¹² About the Gospel of Matthew in this context see **Bart D. Ehrman**. *The New Testament. A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 84.

¹³ **Robert Eisenman**. *James the Brother of Jesus. The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. New York: Penguin, 1998, pp. 3–12, 126–153.

¹⁴ See **James D.G. Dunn**. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, pp. 354–366.

¹⁵ **Robert Wilken**. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 32–33.

litical rebel Jesus is changed into a spiritual non-historical apolitical faith message.¹⁶

The command to love one's enemies is a polemic transmutation of the Righteousness Commandment that was known among the Jews. It stated that one has to love one's neighbour and practice righteousness towards a fellow man and at the same time hate the Unrighteous and participate in the fight of the Righteous. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus states it as, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." The reversal, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," is clearly political, and it may even mean that one among the enemies to love is Paul himself, who was viewed among the Jews as a political collaborator with the Romans.¹⁷

5. Jesus of the "closed text" of political realities: Gerd Theissen and N. T. Wright

Both Gerd Theissen and Nicholas Thomas Wright agree with Eisenman that the command to love one's enemies had to be interpreted in the context of the political realities of the time. Nevertheless, they do not see the text as a forgery but are convinced instead that the message of Jesus was essentially the same as it is presented by Matthew in his Gospel. The evangelist has simply written down a tradition that has been preserved relatively intact. Both scholars have their differing reasons for believing this: they have to do with their respective scholarly reconstructions about how the tradition was handled in the year between its beginnings and being written down.

According to Theissen, the Jesus-traditions of the Gospels were preserved in different groups of the followers of Jesus: the disciples, the communities and the people. In our case, it is the disciples' traditions that preserved the sayings of Jesus. These disciples were mostly the wandering charismatic prophets in Galilea and Judea, the followers of Jesus who tried to imitate the original lifestyle of their Teacher. Jesus had been a wandering preacher and healer who initiated a movement of followers.¹⁸ In the 40s they were written down¹⁹ and incorporated into the Gospels later on. During all of this time, the political situation remained relevant.

¹⁶ Eisenman 1998, pp. xvii-iii.

¹⁷ Eisenman 1998, pp. 338-339, 426-427.

¹⁸ Gerd Theissen. *The Gospels in Context. Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*. Edinburgh: T&T Clack 1992, esp. p. 58, pp. 291-292. See also Theissen 1990.

¹⁹ Theissen 1992, p. 233.

Tom Wright takes a cue from Theissen's description of Jesus as an itinerant prophet.²⁰ It means that it is in the highest degree probable that "Jesus told the same stories again and again in slightly different words, that he ran into similar questions and problems and said similar things about them, that he came up with the slightly different set of beatitudes every few villages."²¹ Therefore, his message had to be understood in the light of common cultural and political realities of the day. Moreover, those who heard Jesus even on a few occasions would soon find that they remembered what was said. This is a common-sense point even nowadays, and the Palestinian culture was more used to hearing and repeating teachings than we are today. Add to this the observation that much of Jesus' teaching is intrinsically highly memorable and we reach the conclusion that the material available would have been "oral history," that is, often repeated tales of what Jesus had said and done.²² This "oral history" would have been *informal* and *controlled*. The traditions were informal in that they had no set teacher and students. Anybody in the peasant culture could join in – provided they had been part of the community for long enough to qualify. They were controlled in that the whole community knew the traditions well enough to check whether serious innovation was being smuggled in, and to object if it was.²³ This does not rule out the observation that during that time, the Jesus-traditions did change in form, as they had to be relevant to a growing number of people outside of Palestinian villages. But in essence the stories would still not have changed too much as the controlling factors of communal memory would have still been at work.²⁴

²⁰ **Gerd Theissen.** *The Shadow of the Galilean. The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form.* London: SCM Press, 1989.

²¹ **Nicholas Thomas Wright.** *The New Testament and the People of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 422.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 423.

²³ **Nicholas Thomas Wright.** *Jesus and the Victory of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God Vol. 2.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 134. The description of informal and controlled traditions is based on the work of Kenneth Bailey whose article from 1991 "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels" (*Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1), pp. 34–54) is summarized by Wright.

²⁴ Wright makes a comparison in a footnote: "A well-known brand of malt whisky makes advertising capital of the fact that it is stored in casks formerly used for sherry. This gives the product its characteristic bouquet and flavour. But it remains whisky. The early Christian casks in which the Jesus-stories were stored for a generation have flavoured them in all sorts of ways. But they remain Jesus-stories." (**Wright** 1992, p. 435.)

5.1. Gerd Theissen

Gerd Theissen places the command to love one's enemies into the cultural and political context of Antiquity. On a more general level, "It is obvious," says Theissen, "that it makes an ethically relevant difference whether the victor is the one who is supposed to 'love' his defeated enemy and to renounce vengeance, or whether it is the person who has been vanquished who wins through this attitude."²⁵ A typology whose distinguishing criterion is the real-life situation places the renunciation of vengeance into three different contexts. Firstly, a defeated person was to accept the situation without rancor. This was an expression of slavish mentality, with there was no contradiction: it was quite openly accepted that there were different rules of conduct for the dependent and free. Secondly, for the victor it was honourable to renounce revenge. Thirdly, the philosopher's ideal was to suffer wrong rather than commit it.²⁶ Looking closely at a Matthean text, Theissen observes that experiences of the Jewish War (66–73 C.E.) and the post-war era are reflected in the way traditions about loving enemies are formulated. The reference to a mile ("If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles") is a special pointer to the Romans, as the foreign word *milion* occurs only here in the New Testament (the usual term was *stadion*). The same can be said about the word *aggareusei* – it was a technical term that was used for services to the state rendered under duress. While nonresistance to the victor was a cultural norm, the command to love one's enemies goes beyond that. Here we find that Matthean communities distanced themselves from the prejudice that the Jews help each other and hate foreigners.²⁷

The transmitters of this Tradition before it was written down were likely the wandering charismatics. The Christian who was settled down in one place would have become increasingly dependent if he gave in to his enemy, for he had to expect that their paths would cross again and again. In this situation, nonresistance would have increased the likelihood that the attacks would be repeated. A wandering charismatic, on the other hand, was free. He could leave the place where he had been defeated and humiliated, not expecting to meet his opponent again. Like itinerant Cynic philosophers who would suffer all insults without vengeance as a part of their message, so the

²⁵ **Gerd Theissen.** *Social Reality and the Early Christians. Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament.* Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993, p. 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.* The typology Theissen uses here is from Luise Schottroff ("Gewaltverzicht und Feindesliebe in der uhrchristliche Jesustradition Mt 5, 38–48; Lk 6, 27–36". – *Jesus in Historie und Theologie: Festschrift für H. Conzelmann.* Mohr-Siebeck: Tübingen, 1975, S. 197–221).

²⁷ **Theissen** 1993, pp. 133–136.

wandering charismatics could practice the love of enemies vicariously for their friends in the local congregations.²⁸

At the same time, demonstrative nonresistance was a behaviour strategy that was known to have been successful on several occasions. Around 39 or 40 C.E., Emperor Gaius Caligula had a plan to set up his statue in the Temple of Jerusalem. This was a violation of everything that was sacred to the Jews. The Syrian governor Petronius was entrusted with the setting up the statue. The crowds gathered in front of him pleading to stop the action. Philo records the words of Jewish representatives:

Ours was the first temple which received sacrifices for the happy reign of Gaius. Did it do so that it might be the first or the only temple to be deprived of its customary modes of worship? We have now left our cities, we have abandoned our houses and our possessions, we will cheerfully contribute to you all our furniture, all our cattle, and all our treasures, everything in short which belongs to us, as a willing booty. We shall think that we are receiving them, not giving them up. We only ask one thing instead of and to counterbalance all of them, namely, that no innovations may take place in respect of our temple, but that it may be kept such as we have received it from our fathers and our forefathers. And if we cannot prevail with you in this, then we offer up ourselves for destruction, that we may not live to behold a calamity more terrible and grievous than death. We hear that great forces of infantry and cavalry are being prepared by you against us, if we oppose the erection and dedication of this statue. No one is so mad as, when he is a slave, to oppose his master. We willingly and readily submit ourselves to be put to death; let your troops slay us, let them sacrifice us, let them cut us to pieces unresisting and uncontending, let them treat us with every species of cruelty that conquerors can possibly practise, but what need is there of any army? We ourselves, admirable priests for the purpose, will begin the sacrifice, bringing to the temple our wives and slaying our wives, bringing our brothers and sisters and becoming fratricides, bringing our sons and our daughters, that innocent and guiltless age, and becoming infanticides. Those who endure tragic calamities must need make use of tragic language. Then standing in the middle of our victims, having bathed ourselves deeply in the blood of our kinsfolk (for such blood will be the only bath which we shall have wherewith to cleanse ourselves for the journey to the shades below), we will mingle our own blood with it, slaughtering ourselves upon their bodies. And when we are dead, let this com-

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 141–149, esp. pp. 148–149.

mandment be inscribed over us as an epitaph, ‘Let not even God blame us, who have had a due regard to both considerations, pious loyalty towards the emperor and the reverential preservation of our established holy laws.’²⁹

That the emotions were high is quite obvious. Petronius was so impressed by the readiness of the Jews to sacrifice themselves that he formally requested that the command be withdrawn. Gaius refused, but luckily, he was killed soon after.³⁰

When Jesus formulated the commandment to love one’s enemies, the people around him had another earlier public incident readily available in memory. When in 26 C.E. Pilate took up his new post as prefect of Judea, he too attempted to introduce images of emperor into Jerusalem. Crowds surrounded Pilate’s palace in Caesarea and knelt outside for five days and nights without intermission, without moving. Pilate threatened to put them to death and ordered his soldiers to draw their swords.³¹ Josephus relates:

But the Jews threw themselves down on the ground (as they had previously agreed to do), stretched out their necks to the swords, and cried that they would die rather than disobey the laws given them by their fathers. Profoundly astonished by the fervor of their piety, Pilate ordered that the standards should at once be removed from Jerusalem.³²

Theissen is not saying that Jesus was influenced by the events of Caesarea. It is possible, but it cannot be proved. Jesus’ listeners were not bound to reject his words as ridiculous either. Nevertheless, Jesus’ command goes beyond politics. It takes no account of effectiveness or noneffectiveness. It does not merely demand the renunciation of violence. It demands that the enemy be loved, without any reservation. Just because it was formulated generally and apodictically, it could continually be brought up to date.³³ In this regard it is an “open text.”

²⁹ **Philo of Alexandria**. *On the Embassy to Gaius 233–236*. – *The Works of Philo. Complete and Unabridged. New Updated Edition*. C. D. Yonge (transl.), Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997, p. 779.

³⁰ **Theissen** 1993, p. 152.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.

³² Josephus. *Jewish War* 2.174. Quoted in **Theissen** 1993, p. 151.

³³ **Theissen** 1993, p. 154.

5.2. N. T. Wright

How could that “open text” appear in the first place? However puzzling it is, the command to love one’s enemies had to make sense in some general and appealing way; it had to mean something in the framework of the general attitudes, behaviour models, self-understanding, and hopes of Jesus’ listeners. Tom Wright is a scholar who has worked out a model of describing the worldviews in general and especially of the people of the New Testament era. According to Wright, worldviews have to do with the presupposition, pre-cognitive stage of a culture or society. He says:

Wherever we find the ultimate concerns of human beings, we find worldviews. [...] ‘Worldview,’ in fact, embraces all deep-level human perceptions of reality, including the question of whether or not a god or gods exist, and if so what he, she, it or they is or are like, and how such a being, or such beings, might relate to the world.³⁴

There are four things which worldviews characteristically do, and in each, the entire worldview can be glimpsed.

First, worldviews provide the *stories* through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark. Second, from these stories, one can in principle discover how to answer the basic *questions* that determine human existence: Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? and What is the solution? All cultures cherish deep-rooted beliefs which can in principle be called up to answer these questions. All cultures have a sense of identity, of environment, of a problem with the way the world is, and of a way forward--a redemptive eschatology, to be more precise – which will, or may, lead out of that problem. Third, the stories that express the worldview, and the answers which they provide to the questions of identity, environment, evil and eschatology, are expressed in cultural *symbols*. These can be both artefacts and events--festivals, family gatherings, and the like.³⁵ All cultures produce and maintain such symbols; they can

³⁴ **Wright** 1996, pp. 122–123.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123. Wright gives an example of how symbols work: “In modern North America, the New York victory parade after a successful war brings together two of the most powerful symbols of the culture: the towering skyscrapers of business-orientated Manhattan, and the heroes of battle. Both, in their own fashion, demonstrate, promote and celebrate The American Way. In first-century Palestine, celebrating the Passover functioned similarly, with Jerusalem and the Temple taking the place of Manhattan, and the Passover sacrifice and meal taking the place of the victory parade. The buildings, instead of speaking of economic/ethnic goals, spoke of

often be identified when challenging them produces anger or fear. Such symbols often function as social and/or cultural boundary markers: those who observe them are insiders; those who do not are outsiders. And these symbols, as the acted and visible reminders of a worldview that normally remains too deep for casual speech, form the actual grid through which the world is perceived. They determine how, from day to day, human beings will view the whole of reality. They determine what will, and what will not, be intelligible or assimilable within a particular culture. Fourth, worldviews include praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world. The implied eschatology of the fourth question ('what is the solution?') necessarily entails *action*. Conversely, the real shape of someone's worldview can often be seen in the sort of actions they perform, particularly if the actions are so instinctive or habitual as to be taken for granted.³⁶

With that theoretical model in view, it becomes possible to analyse the command to love one's enemies in its first century C.E. setting by combining the relevant historical data (texts, artefacts, etc.) especially with structural analysis of reconstructed narratives of the Judaism of the era and of its different subgroups. After a detailed analysis, Wright can say that story, symbol and praxis, focused in their different ways on Israel's scriptures, reveal a rich, but basically simple worldview. That worldview can be summarized in terms of the four questions and answers to them: (1) Who are we? We are Israel, the chosen people of the creator God; (2) Where are we? We are in the holy Land, focused on the Temple; but paradoxically, we are still in exile; (3) What is wrong? We have the wrong rulers: pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or, half-way between, Herod and his family. We are involved in a less-than-ideal situation; (4) What is the solution? Our God must act again the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials (a true priesthood; possibly a true king); and in the mean time Israel must be faithful to his covenant charter.³⁷

The dominant motif here is the idea of still continuing exile. According to this motif, the Jews believed that God promised all sorts of blessings to accompany the restoration of Israel after Babylonian exile.³⁸ Deuteronomistic History had conceived the event in terms of God's promises to be faithful to the obedient and punishing to the disobedient (Dt 28). As many of the

religious/ethnic ones; instead of the celebration speaking of triumph achieved over the forces of darkness, it spoke of vindication yet to come." (*Ibid.*, pp. 123–124)

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁸ Started in 597/6 and 587/6 (see **Alberto J. Soggin**, *A History of Ancient Israel. From The Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt A.D. 135*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985, pp. 231–257).

promises were yet to be fulfilled, so arose the idea that the exile was not yet fully over. This in term lead the people of Israel of the 1st century C.E. to several differing and competing consequent strategies of dealing with the problem of disobedience and covenant renewal.³⁹

Still, one vital element of both the basic Jewish worldview and of the consequent strategies of different groups within Judaism was a specific Jewish racial identity of elect people who are meant to be different from the rest of the nations. Wright stresses that it has to be understood in the terms of a symbol, along with other similar symbols, as were Temple, Land and Torah.⁴⁰ The national solidarity functioned as a major boundary-marker.⁴¹ This is precisely the context in which the command to love one's enemies has to be understood.

When we look at the words and the actions of Jesus in the matrix of worldview analysis, we can see that Jesus offered a significant modification to the basic Jewish worldview. According to Jesus, the main problem of the people of Israel is not the wrong human rulers but what these rulers represent instead: the rule of Satan.⁴² Israel's symbolic battle was thus redefined by him with some major consequences. Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah who is the focal point of the people of God. Through him, the return from exile and the new covenant with all sins being forgiven was to occur.⁴³ Jesus went voluntarily to his death on the cross, and one reason for that was his conviction that Satan cannot be defeated with his own weapons of violence. Jesus, as the representative Israel, had to lose that battle instead on Israel's behalf. And, with that, he believed that God would vindicate him.⁴⁴

So when we come to the command to love one's enemies, it has to be understood in the light of events that actually happened later – namely the crucifixion of Jesus. But it is still part of the same redefined worldview. The real revolution would not come about through the non-payment of taxes and the resulting violent confrontation.⁴⁵ The Jewish racial identity was a symbol that had to be overcome. A blow on the right cheek is given with the back of the hand, implying insult as well as injury. To offer the left is not mere passivity, but the affirmation of one's equality with the aggressor. Of course, these guidelines would apply to local village disputes as much as anywhere

³⁹ **Wright** 1992, pp. 244–338.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 230–232.

⁴¹ **Wright** 1996, pp. 398–340.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 451–463.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 595.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

else. But the overall thrust of both text and context is much wider: Jesus' people were not to become part of the resistance movement.⁴⁶

6. Jesus of the “open text” of daily life: the Jesus Seminar

There are still different ways of reconstructing the context of the message of Jesus besides what has been done by the authors described above. While Gerd Theissen analyzed the message of Jesus in its socio-political context and Tom Wright attempted to reconstruct the general worldview of Judaism of the 1st Century C.E. (and the worldview of Jesus within it), the scholars of the Jesus Seminar have tried to describe the words and deeds of Jesus from the viewpoint of the uniqueness of the historical Jesus.

The two most important criteria used by the Jesus Seminar have been the criterion of dissimilarity and the criterion of multiple attestation. The criterion of dissimilarity seeks those aspects in which Jesus is different from common expectation, whether Jewish or Christian. Multiple attestation builds its case based upon independent occurrences of items, downgrading those that occur only once.⁴⁷ Especially the criterion of dissimilarity is important here. The main question is: what does the historian expect to find behind the traditions one studies? How much of the tradition has been shaped by the common cultural perspectives and the specific ideology of its carriers? Does the historical Jesus as the object of a historian's reconstruction stand in continuity or in discontinuity with the traditions about him? As we saw, both Gerd Theissen and Tom Wright stressed the ways of continuity of Jesus' actions and message with the tradition, and Robert Eisenman opted for the discontinuity. The Jesus Seminar stands closer to Robert Eisenman here, but for different reasons. The criterion of dissimilarity looks for what was unique. A quotation from Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover is apt here:

Jesus undoubtedly said a great many very ordinary things, such as 'hello' and 'goodbye,' and whatever he hollered when he hit his thumb in the carpenter's shop or stubbed his toe on a rocky road. But if we are to identify the voice of Jesus that makes him the precipitator of the Christian tradition, we have to look for sayings and stories that distinguish his voice from other ordinary speakers and even sages in

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 291.

⁴⁷ **Bernard Brandon Scott.** *How Did We Get Here? Looking Back at Twenty Years of the Jesus Seminar. – Jesus Reconsidered. Scholarship in the Public Eye.* Bernard Brandon Scott (ed.), Santa Rose: Polebridge Press, 2007, pp. 47–64, 50–51.

his day and time. We have to be able to pick out a distinctive voice in a Galilean crowd.⁴⁸

That distinctive voice in a Galilean crowd can be distinguished from common lore; it is in the sayings and parables that cut against the social and religious grain. They surprise and shock, characteristically calling for a reversal of roles or frustrating ordinary, everyday expectations. They are often characterized by exaggeration, humour, and paradox. Jesus' images are concrete and vivid, his sayings and parables customarily metaphorical and without explicit application.⁴⁹ Altogether, 18 % of Gospel materials (The Gospel of Thomas included) are thus rated by the Jesus Seminar as belonging to historical Jesus.⁵⁰ This is a Jesus who is not yet Christianized. He is a Galilean Jew who is remembered exactly because of the uniqueness of his message and behaviour. Different fellows of the Jesus Seminar have used slightly different ways of describing Jesus and his message.

Robert Funk calls him "a comic savant." A comic savant is a sage who embeds wisdom in humour, a humorist who shuns practical advice. "If someone sues you for your coat, give him the shirt off your back to go with it." That is not practical advice: to follow it is to go naked. Comic wisdom refuses to be explicit.⁵¹

Marcus J. Borg describes Jesus as an ecstatic or mystic and wisdom teacher among other things (healer, social prophet and movement catalyser). Teachers of wisdom fall in two categories: teachers of conventional wisdom, and teachers of a subversive and alternative wisdom. The former pass on the received tradition or conventions of a community or a group. The latter speak of an alternative path – a way – that leads beyond convention. Typically, their alternative path is grounded in their own firsthand experience of

⁴⁸ **Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar.** *The Five Gospels. The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus.* New York: HarperCollins, 1997, p. 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–32.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, percentage is given in **Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar.** *The Acts of Jesus. The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus.* New York: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 1. Most of Matthew 5: 38–48 is considered authentic by the Jesus Seminar. The antitheses ("You have heard... But I tell you") are considered to be Matthean creation, as they are missing in a parallel text in Luke (**Funk et al.** 1997, p. 141). Also, as Matthew and Luke do not agree on the wordings of the commands to pray for the persecutors, to greet everybody and to be perfect, these sentences fall short of the criterion of multiple attestation and are considered to be later emendations.

⁵¹ **Robert W. Funk.** *Jesus: A Voice Print. – Profiles of Jesus.* Roy W. Hoover (ed.) Santa Rose: Polebridge Press, 2002, pp. 9–13, 12.

the sacred.⁵² For ecstasies, religious conviction is not the result of strong belief acquired from others. Cognition is the product of firsthand religious experience: such people know God.⁵³ And such people speak differently because they have seen differently. Jesus also offers an alternative wisdom. Borg points out that the usage of aphorisms and parables by Jesus can be understood in terms of their function in the communication process. Jesus used aphorisms and parables as perception-altering forms of speech. Aphorisms are compact crystallizations of insight that invite further insight; parables invite the hearer to enter into the world of story and to see something differently because of the story. The primary purpose of both was to invite hearers into a different way of seeing – of seeing God, themselves, and life itself.⁵⁴

Technically, what we have in our text according to the Jesus Seminar, is a trio of case parodies and aphorism coupled with the description of the ultimate otherness of God. The case parodies are non-literal but stand, nevertheless, on the edge of the possible. In contrast, the hyperbole represents something impossible to achieve: a camel cannot pass through the eye of the needle (Matthew 19:23). But one *can* turn the other cheek; one *can* give the additional shirt; one *can* go another mile. These responses are possible, but just barely. That is what gives them a punch. The admonition, “love your enemies,” is a memorable aphorism because it cuts against the social grain and constitutes a paradox: those who love their enemies have no enemies. All of this is put into a specific perspective: the love of enemies identifies one as a child of God, and God does not restrict divine love to those whose moral performance is superior.⁵⁵

According to James M. Robinson, we have here an undomesticated Jesus, a real idealist, a committed radical who proposed a solution to the human dilemma. What Jesus had to say centred around the ideal of God’s rule (“the kingdom of God”), the main theological category Jesus created.⁵⁶

The human dilemma is in large part that we are each other’s fate. We are the tool of evil that ruins another person, as we look out for our social, political and individual self interest, having long abandoned any

⁵² **Marcus J. Borg, N. T. Wright.** *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions.* New York: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 68. See also **Marcus J. Borg.** *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship.* Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 147–152.

⁵³ **Marcus J. Borg.** *Jesus: A Sketch. – Profiles of Jesus.* Roy W. Hoover (ed.) Santa Rose: Polebridge Press, 2002, pp. 129–136, 131–132.

⁵⁴ **Borg et al.** 1998, p. 68.

⁵⁵ **Funk et al.** 1997 pp. 144–147.

⁵⁶ **James M. Robinson.** *What Jesus had to Say. – Profiles of Jesus.* Roy W. Hoover (ed.) Santa Rose: Polebridge Press, 2002, p. 15.

youthful idealism we might once have cherished. But if I would cease and desist from pushing you down to keep myself up and you for your part would do the same, the vicious circle would be broken. Society would become mutually supportive, rather than self-destructive. Count on God to look out for you, to provide people that will care for you, and listen him when he calls on you to provide for them. This radical trust in and responsiveness to God is what makes society function as God's society. This is, for Jesus what faith and discipleship were all about.⁵⁷

All this is as far from today's Christian coalition and even mainline Christianity as it was from the Judaism practiced in Jesus' day, and sounds incredibly naive. Once Jesus launched himself into this lifestyle, practicing what he preached, he did not last long. Yet the bottom line is not necessarily so cynical: the point here is not longevity but integrity.⁵⁸

As we see in the Jesus Seminar's view, the command to love one's enemies can include specific behavioural strategies towards specific enemies (Romans), but it is much more about the general attitude towards life and therefore an "open text".

7. "Jesus" of the "open text" of daily life: the Context Group

Scholars who apply the models of social-scientific criticism to the Bible stress that in order to understand the ancient text of the Bible, we have to familiarize ourselves with the social and cultural values of these particular communities who produced the texts. Biblical texts, when they were written, were part of a complex process of social communication that took place in what is called a high-context culture. In contrast with our Western low-context cultural milieu where we are accustomed to detailed texts that spell out as much as possible, high-context societies produce characteristically sketchy and impressionistic texts, leaving much to the reader's or hearer's imagination. In these cultures few things are spelled out. This is so because people have been socialized into shared ways of perceiving and acting and hence much can be assumed.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 15–16.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁹ **Bruce J. Malina.** *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels.* London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 24–25.

So Diane Jacobs-Malina stresses that the command to love one's enemies represents not only a reversal of former traditions based on Mosaic Law, but more significantly, of the image of God that is part of the Moses epic.⁶⁰ We can compare our text with the words that are part of the Ten Commandments:

I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.
(*Exodus 20:5–6*)

According to Jacobs-Malina, the crucial idea that is not explicitly spelled out in the Sermon of the Mount is that it is not only the mental image of God that is changed by Jesus, but more importantly, the patterns of social thinking that are associated with particular images of God. The passage from Exodus reflects a God who is no different from any other powerful “patriarch” for whom blood vendetta and revenge set one family against another for generations. It is an image of God that is created from the analogy of patriarchal society in the likeness of the elite who ruled. The idea that human beings are to reflect the Father who allows the sun to rise and set and the rain to fall on both the just and unjust is based on a radically different image of God.⁶¹ How is this accomplished?

First, the concept of “love” is a specific concept of social value in the Mediterranean culture.⁶² It is the value of group attachment and group bonding that may or may not be coupled with feelings of affection. Such a group attachment and group bonding are one type of social glue that keeps groups together. Thus, to love someone is to be attached and bonded to the person. One can also be attached to behaviour patterns or abstract values, but normally it is to persons. Often such contrast is made between what one loves and what one hates that not to love is to hate and vice-versa, with no middle ground.⁶³ The saying, “Love your neighbour and hate your enemy,” captures

⁶⁰ **Diane Jacobs-Malina.** *Beyond Patriarchy. The Images of Family in Jesus.* New York: Paulist Press, 1993, p. 65.

⁶¹ **Jacobs-Malina** 1996, p. 66.

⁶² In social-scientific studies the word “value” refers to the quality (“of what sort?”) and the goal or purpose (directionality) of human behaviour in general or of some aspect of human behaviour. They are embedded in social institutions that mark the general boundaries within which certain qualities and directions of living must take place. (**John J. Pilch, Bruce J. Malina** (eds.), *Handbook of Biblical Social Values.* Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, 1998, pp. xvi-xvii).

⁶³ **Pilch et al.** 1998, pp. 127–130.

well the general understanding of love as a value of group bonding for it relies on an understanding that although one's ingroup is bonded by love (at first between family members; then between neighbours who form the close society, and then between the people of the same ethnic group/religion), there are also the outsiders with whom the relationship is perceived in terms of hate. Consequently, when Jesus says, "Love your enemies," we can already guess that behind it must lie a vision of a different kind of society where one can, at least in principle, be bonded with an outgroup person. That the outgroup still exists is exemplified by the presence of tax collectors and pagans as the categories of negative comparison in the text.

Secondly, the idea of "perfection" in connection with God is related to purity rules. Purity rules seem quite hard to understand for us today, but in the Biblical Mediterranean society they were all-pervasive. Following Mary Douglas' groundbreaking work⁶⁴ Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey explain it: simply said, purity is about systematic classification. The existence of dirt, for example, points to purity. Dirt is a matter "out of place." For there to be dirt, there must be a system of places sufficiently marked off so that matter can be assessed to be "out of place." Dirt entails a system of related places so that everything can be seen to belong some place. Cleaning a place is a purification process in which things are returned to where they belong. "Dirt" points to and implies disorder; "purity" points to and implies order/system. It is not only about matter, of course. Societal classifications and the sense of "law and order" deriving from them are concerns of purity.⁶⁵ "Order," "purity" and "perfection" go hand in hand; as for the religious worldview of Judaism of the day; in all its varieties, God was the source of all perfection. The closer one was to God, the closer one was to order. The same goes for the idea of holiness. Holiness is the attribute of God. Its root means "set apart," thus the creation of order.⁶⁶ In spatial terms, the Temple of Jerusalem was the place where God was closest to humans, Jerusalem was a holy city, and Israel was a holy land, surrounded by the lands of the pagans. The farther away from the temple, the less holy the space becomes. Mary Douglas has shown that the dietary laws and the classification of animals in the Hebrew Bible follow the same pattern. The most fit animals for consumption are unblemished animals of domestic herds of the right age or quality that are suitable for offering on the altar in special cases. Then there are the same animals without special requirements – they are fit for the altar but not in special cases; these are followed by the animals of the land (do-

⁶⁴ See **Mary Douglas**. *Purity and Danger*. An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo. London: Routledge, 2005.

⁶⁵ **Bruce J. Malina, Jerome H. Neyrey**. *Calling Jesus Names*. The Social value of Labels in Matthew. Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1988, p. 9.

⁶⁶ **Douglas** 2005, p. 62.

mesticated or not) that are clean for table use. At the bottom are unclean animals and abominations (off the purity scale entirely).⁶⁷ Of course, if the animals are already categorized, the same must be true for people. And here it is: Bruce Malina has shown that the classification of people in ancient Judaism is exactly parallel to the classification of animals. On the top are the priests, followed by Levites who are allowed to perform some duties in the temple. Then there are several categories of full-blooded Israelites (“laymen”), followed by some exceptional categories who are considered to be part of Israel but who cannot have sexual relations (like hermaphrodites) and are therefore incapable of transmitting Israelite status. They are analogous to the unclean animals. And in the bottom we find abominations: all the persons of other ethnic groups.⁶⁸ So by definition, the outgroup person, the stranger, and especially the non-Jew is the one you cannot love. Hate comes more naturally. The foreigners are most easily associated with dirt and chaos, easily “the enemy.”

These considerations in mind, it seems obvious that “to love one’s enemy” while being “perfect, as God is perfect” can happen only when the whole purity system (its spatial and dietary aspects included) is envisaged in a new way. According to Bruce Malina, what Jesus did was to question the intent of the purity rules (while still accepting them). Are they to keep unsuitable people out, thus creating for insiders (especially the people on top) the confidence that “everything is in order”? No, they are to facilitate access to God. The purity rules are to make this access easier, not close it off. God is perfect because God is open to all Israelites, both the good and the bad. Relative to God’s distinctive people in God’s holy land, “he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Since God is open to all the covenanted people of Israel, to do God’s will is to be open to one’s fellow Israelites, whether good or bad, just as God is open to them. Hence, any interpretation of the purity rules should be in the direction of the welfare of Israel, not in the direction of simply maintaining the system in some mechanical way.⁶⁹ And we know from the career of Jesus that he deliberately addressed his message to those people in Israel who were in one way or another left out by the purity regulations: the sick, the sinners, etc.

At this stage of our analysis, the “enemy” of our text seems to be more a fellow Israelite than Roman occupier, therefore, the text is an “open text” of daily life. What about the Romans and other Gentiles? The new image of God presented by Jesus had an inherent potential of relativising the purity

⁶⁷ Douglas 2005, pp. 51–71.

⁶⁸ Bruce J. Malina. *The New Testament World. Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993, pp. 159–166.

⁶⁹ Malina 1993, p. 173.

rules and accompanying societal classifications to a great degree. While according to the gospel traditions Jesus spoke to non Jews only sporadically, the book of Acts, written decades later from the perspective of Pagan Christianity, relates that the purity rules were indeed set aside. In the story of the baptism of Cornelius (he was the first Roman convert to Jesus-movement), the Apostle Peter received three times a vision about unclean food that he was ordered to eat. Two days later he visited Cornelius' house, and the Holy Spirit came on all who heard him speaking. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Acts 10: 46–47). It is not only the dietary regulations and the social conventions about people that are relativised here: the understanding of spatial categories has been changed also. God's place, the most "pure" and "perfect" place, is the place where God chooses to reveal himself.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, this change does not mean that the concept of outgroup is eliminated. Cornelius and his people were baptized. Baptism became a new initiation rite for the people belonging to the Jesus-movement; a new kind of ingroup fellowship was created, composed of both Jews and non-Jews. And in the case of the Matthean text of the Sermon of the Mount, we can detect that whatever its earlier implications may have been, now the text of the Sermon speaks directly to this new social group, Jesus faction (or Christianity).

We have to consider the Gospel of Matthew as a whole for the moment. Dennis Duling's analysis has shown that the gospel was written from the perspective of a classically educated scribal group that dominated a mixed community of Jews and non-Jews who referred to themselves as "brothers." At the same time, they were considered (and they felt themselves) to be marginalized by the larger society, especially by the rival Pharisees within Judaism.⁷¹ According to the study of Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, the Matthean community felt itself under attack from two directions.

From without they were challenged by Pharisees with whom they were competing to reform post-Jewish War Judaism and who disparaged allegiance to Jesus and his teaching. The characteristic of a society that feels itself under attack is boundary making and boundary maintenance, and the Matthean Gospel is concerned greatly with the boundaries: the world is completely divided between the inside and outside. The initial action that creates boundaries for those Jews who made up the Jesus-movement group is

⁷⁰ See also *ibid.*, p. 175.

⁷¹ **Dennis C. Duling.** *The Matthean Brotherhood and Marginal Scribal Leadership – Modelling Early Christianity.* – Social-scientific studies of the New Testament in its context. Philip F. Esler (ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 159–182.

the alternative group awareness deriving from the group's preaching. Believers are the insiders who accept the preaching and the preacher and by "change of heart" restore those limit markers setting off sin from behaviour befitting God's coming kingdom. Fellow Israelite unbelievers, who reject the preacher and the preaching, are the outsiders who do not enter the kingdom but go down to destruction.⁷² The text of Matthew 5: 38–48 is preceded by a more general admonition that gives the text we are considering a more specific meaning: "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (5:20) Turning another cheek, going another mile and loving one's enemy is all part of being perfect and therefore surpassing the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The category of "enemy" remains within the ingroup.

From within, the Matthean group felt itself attacked by those members who were perceived as not living up to Torah perfection. Behaviour rooted in undisciplined enthusiasm threatened to displace Torah observance as a group ideal. Against these, it was imperative to say that, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21).⁷³ And it is precisely here where the command to love one's enemies fits in. The upright members of the community needed to be reminded of the vision of Jesus that God is open to all of his people and cares about every member of the community.

Who is this Jesus who speaks the words of the Sermon of the Mount? While the tradition behind the text goes back in time to Jesus, the "Jesus" of the Sermon of the Mount clearly speaks from the viewpoint of the scribal leaders of the Matthean community. In comparison with the original situation, the community around "Jesus" has changed a bit – now anyone who wants to accept the preacher and the preaching can join in much more easily than in the times of Jesus. Then he or she can be loved, even if as an enemy. But as Pharisees and other non-Christians are excluded from the community of the people of God, it must be said that in comparison with what was probably the case with Jesus (the principal openness of his message); the Matthean "Jesus" is a much more sectarian fellow.

8. Conclusion

As we saw, the command to love one's enemies can be understood as pertaining to the specific circumstances of the military, political and cultural

⁷² Malina *et al.* 1988, pp. 11–12.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

situation in Palestine of the first century C.E. At the same time, the same command transcends the original situation, whatever it was, becoming a challenge for both groups and individuals to define their own enemies to be loved. The image of an “enemy” is often a constituent part of both personal and group identities, even if one tries to live without enemies. It seems inevitable that the boundaries of our being and identity are created by the “outsiders.” Maybe the relevance of this command for us today is in recognition that it is actually up to us whether we let ourselves be determined by our “enemies” or we try to live and act as the ones who are trying to positively overcome the boundaries around us.

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