

IS THERE ANTI-JUDAISM IN THIS TEXT? SOME REFLECTIONS ON MATT 23*

PREDRAG DRAGUTINOVIĆ

Abstract. I read Matt 23 as a text describing a ‘family conflict’. The speaker of the words in Matt 23 is Jesus, who is a Jew. The text was written by Matthew, a Jew, and the addressees of the text are Jews. This text focuses on Jewish religious authorities and those who suffered under the restrictions and formalities imposed by such leaders. There is no ethnic element in this text. It is not concerned with how one ethnic group—Jews—relates to another ethnic group—gentiles. The polemic is not about differences between two ethnic groups, but about religious behavior within a single ethnic group—Jews. The victims of religious formalism are Jews, not pagans. Every reading of Matt 23 that finds anti-Judaism in the text should be considered inadequate. Such readings fail to grasp the true meaning of the text. This text should be read and understood as a criticism of religious formalism. As such, it has relevance in every time and place, whenever and wherever religion fosters violence and becomes repressive to ordinary people. This text can be helpful in prompting self-criticism, which I consider important for every religious system.

Keywords: Matt 23, Matt 5–7, anti-Judaism, critique of religious formalism, self-criticism.

Teaching at a theological school requires the critical reading of biblical texts that included Jewish characters. It also requires discussion of issues specifically involving Jewish religious authorities. There is an ongoing need to consider the historical, social, political, and cultural context in which these texts were written. We are also required to reflect on the ways in which these texts have influenced our current context, especially how they have fostered anti-Judaism in the home, church, and society. The teacher’s task is to empower students to engage in their own readings and interpretations of biblical passages, and to challenge students to think about how their reading of these texts might have the unintended consequence

* The essay is a slightly revised version of a paper that was read at the conference “Mapping the Theology and Religious Studies Curriculum: Religion and Human Rights” held in December 6 – 7, 2018 in Cluj-Napoca. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Korinna Zamfir for invitation to deliver this paper, and to Prof. Hans Klein for his request to publish it.