

Jewish-Christian Dialog Series

Professor Matthias Henze, Founding Director of Rice University's program in Jewish Studies

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

Part I – Judaism and Christian Beginnings – January 11, 2018 – Source Sheet

1. Jesus and the Pharisees

A. Jesus Heals a Man on the Sabbath - Mark 3:1-6

¹ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians* against him, how to destroy him.

* "Herodians, members of the court of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee installed by Rome, and those who supported them." *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 65

B. Rabbis permit healing on Shabbat to save a life – Mishnah Yoma 8:6

If one is seized with a pathological craving [for food], he is to be fed even with unkosher food, until he recovers. A person who is bitten by a mad dog must not be fed any of the dog's liver, but Rabbi Matya ben Charash permits it. Moreover, Rabbi Matya ben Charash said, If a person has a sore throat, it is permitted to put medicines into his mouth on the Sabbath, because of possible danger to his life, and whatever threatens to endanger life supersedes [the observance of] the Sabbath.

AND NOTE YOMA 85b (!!)

Rabbi Yonatan ben Yosef says that it is stated: "For it is sacred to you" (Exodus 31:14). This implies that Shabbat is given into your hands, and you are not given to it to die on account of Shabbat. [*cf.* Mark 2:27 "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath."]

C. Jesus teaches that he has not come to abolish the law – Matthew 5:17-20

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

D. Some general things Jesus had in common with Pharisees.

- Pharisees believed in life after death (unlike the Sadducees).
- They specifically believed in resurrection of the dead.
- They also believed they inherited an oral tradition of interpretation of Scriptures that dated back to the time of Moses. (The Sadducees believed only in what was expressly written in the Scriptures.)
- Pharisees seem to have been a more populist movement. Sadducees seem to have been generally a party of the priests and aristocracy.

2. Jesus and the Dead Sea Sect/Essenes

A. Fellowship of Jesus' Followers – Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and

possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

B. Entering the Fellowship Among Dead Sea Sect – IQS 6:18-23

¹⁸ When he has completed a year within the Community, the Many will be questioned about his affairs, concerning his insight and his deeds in connection with the law. And if the lot results in him ¹⁹ entering the inner council of the Community according to the priests and the majority of the men of their covenant, his possessions and his earnings will also be joined at the hand of the ²⁰ Inspector of the earnings of the Many. And they shall credit it to his account, but they shall not use it for the Many. He must not touch the drink of the Many until ²¹ he completes a second year among the men of the Community. And when this second year is complete he will be examined by command of the Many. And if ²² the lot results in him joining the Community, they shall enter him in the order of his rank among his brothers for the law, for the judgment, for purity and for the placing of his possessions. And his advice will be ²³ for the Community as well his judgment.

3. Interpreting Troubling Passages in the New Testament

A. An example from Matthew 27:24-25

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but that instead a riot was breaking out, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “You shall bear the responsibility.” ²⁵ All the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!”

- B. **Amy Jill Levine**, in her book *The Misunderstood Jew* (p. 100) makes the argument that Matthew may have had in mind “Jerusalem” Jews (or, I would say, perhaps *some of the Jewish leadership* in Jerusalem) who cry out “let his blood be upon us”. According to her, Matthew has several passages that inveigh against the Jerusalemite Jews. And, the claim that his blood should also be on their children could then be explained as a reference to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem during the lifetime of the children of those who would have been present at Jesus’ crucifixion.
- C. **Historical context** that Christians between 64 and 313 CE were, at times, being persecuted by the Romans for their beliefs, and at the same time were trying to preach the Gospel as they understood it to a Roman audience. Accordingly, they would have every reason to try and minimize Rome’s culpability for Jesus’ death.
- D. **And there was no doubt antagonism on both sides** between the Jewish/Rabbinic community and the early Christian community.
- E. **The question for all of us today is: How do we interpret our sacred texts in ways that promote tolerance, pluralism, and respect for others’ beliefs?**

For further reading:

- Matthias Henze, *Mind the Gap: How the Jewish Writings Between the Old and New Testament Help Us Understand Jesus*. (Fortress Press, 2017)
- Amy-Jill Levine: *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (Harper/Collins, 2006)
- Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* (Yale University, 2nd Ed., 2000)
- Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford, 2001)