

“WOE TO YOU . . . HYPOCRITES!” RE-READING MATTHEW 23:13–36

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EACH OF JESUS' WOES against the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23 takes a highly stylized form of commendation immediately followed by a clarifying refutation. The first part builds up and the second part puts down. Thus while *against* the scribes and the Pharisees, the woes are all triggered off of their *merits*. Jesus mocked His opponents with their own words or acts.¹ But for the technique to work, the person being attacked should be praiseworthy (otherwise there is no place for the buildup).² The woes are not like the ordinary polemical genre of the day, an all-out frontal attack.³ Lacking many of the insults of the *topos*,⁴ the technique is a reminder that “absent friends can be as conspicuous as present ones.”⁵

In this method, according to Quintilian, a person censures another by means of pretended praise.⁶ The difference between the

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¹ This rhetorical technique is described by Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 5.13.40.

² Ibid., 8.6.54–55; but see ibid., 6.3.33; 57; 8.6.54–56; and Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.238–39 and n 206. Such praise is found in Matthew 5:17–18; 23:2–3. Shabbat 116b seems to know Matthew 5:17–18.

³ That is the genre discussed by Luke T. Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 441, 434–35 and n 50, which Johnson describes by saying, “The Qumran rule of thumb is that you cannot say enough bad things about outsiders.”

⁴ Ibid., 432. Such as ignorant, unlearned, flatterers, charlatans, demagogues, buffoons, prostitutes, nincompoops, fuzzyheaded. The Matthean woes also do not follow the standard rhetorical form of the *psogos* (“blame”) or *koinos topos* of heaping blame, as for example in Cicero’s denunciation of Antony.

⁵ David Daube, “The Form Is the Message,” in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, ed. Calum Carmichael (Berkeley, CA: Robbins, 2000), 2:201.

⁶ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.54–55; Joseph Tartakovsky, “In Praise of Political Insults,” *Wall Street Journal*, Eastern Edition, July 2, 2008, A13: Bill

pat on the back and the shove is the amount of force involved.⁷ Aristotle noted that a similar technique was used by "thoroughly skillful and unscrupulous prosecutors."⁸ By mixing up a person's merits with what is bad, accusers do their best to make use of the person's merits in order to damage them.

Jesus' woes each begin with positive statements, commendations that build up: (1) You hold the keys (23:13). (2) You willingly traverse the sea and land to make but one convert.⁹ (3) You (claim the power to) legislate the validity of oaths (vv. 16–22). (4) You are scrupulous in your tithes (vv. 23–24). (5) Your appearance is radiant (vv. 27–28). (6) Like a whitewashed tomb you are resplendent (v. 27). (7) You build tombs for the prophets and adorn memorials of the righteous (v. 29).

These positive statements are immediately followed by negative ones. (1) Your key locks but does not open (v. 13). (2) Whom-ever you convert is in an even worse exile than yours (v. 15).¹⁰ (3) In legislating oaths you usurp the prerogative of God (vv. 20–22). (4) You are scrupulous with small matters but neglectful of weighty ones (vv. 23–24). (5) Like a half-cleansed dish, you are washed on the outside but dirty within (vv. 25–26). (6) You are outwardly beautiful, but inwardly ugly (vv. 27–28). (7) You build tombs for dead prophets, but you descendants of murderers are murderers yourselves, joining them in their guilt and adding your own (vv. 29, 31).

While the theme seems to be one of outward appearance belied by inner reality,¹¹ on closer inspection it is not quite that. In

Buckley said, "LBJ was a man of his last word." Senator John Randolph said, "He is a man of splendid abilities but utterly corrupt." Norman Mailer commented, "Gerald Ford was unknown throughout America. Now he is unknown throughout the world."

⁷ Mardy Grothe, *Oxymoronica* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 11.

⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1415.5.

⁹ Verse 14 is not included because it is not in some of the better Greek manuscripts. On this woe see Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel according to Matthew," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 666 ("a great back-handed compliment").

¹⁰ Because Babylonia is situated in a low-lying area, it was equated with a grave (Pesahim 34b; Yoma 57a3 and n 23 [dark land]). Jews were exiled to Babylonia, which was considered as deep as Sheol (the grave). The word "sheol" sometimes means "grave," and other times it signifies Gehinnon, the Gehenna of the New Testament. The phrase "child of Gehenna" does not necessarily use the term with the same meaning as fiery Gehenna in Matthew 5.22. It may mean exile.

¹¹ The Talmud contains passages that are similar. See Sotah 47b5 and nn 49–52; Baba Batra 98a2 and n 14; Sanhedrin 108a3; and Baba Qamma 60a3–4.

each of the seven woes and five controversies¹² Jesus pointed out a contrast between things of this world and things of the next.¹³

CRESCENDO

The controversies and woes are in the form of a crescendo building to a climax.¹⁴ In the controversies Jesus battled against increasingly more skilled rivals in the art of rhetoric: the chief priests and elders (21:23–27), the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians (22:15–22), the Sadducees (22:23–33), and the Pharisees (22:34–40). In meeting more and more accomplished rivals Jesus increasingly exhibited His own rhetorical skill with each controversy: (a) evading the question about His authority by answering His opponents' question with a question; (b) evading the question about paying taxes by having the coin give the answer; (c) answering head on and refuting the Sadducees' question on the resurrection; and (d) giving the Pharisees the perfect answer to their question as to the Greatest Commandment.

In the first four controversies Jesus had been asked questions, and He triumphantly showed He could parry and answer any question put to Him. In escalating sequence in the fifth controversy, Jesus turned from answerer to questioner (22:41–46). His question is a riddle based on Psalm 110:1. "How can the Messiah be both David's son and (by reason of David referring to him as his 'lord') his father?"¹⁵ Jesus Himself saw no inconsistency in His being the

¹² First, by what authority, by earth or by heaven; second, give to Caesar, give to God; third, God is the God of the living (the resurrected); fourth, the greatest of the commandments is to love God, the second greatest is to love one's neighbor as oneself; fifth, is the Messiah David's earthly son or his heavenly Father? (Matt. 21:23–22:40). The term "God of the living" means "God of resurrection" (Pesahim 118a3.)

¹³ In the first woe Jesus spoke of the Pharisees having the key to heaven but not opening it. In other woes they amass goods and converts in this world, but not for the next; rule on oaths in this world, but not the next; focus on the small (the present life, which in the scheme of things is a gnat), but not the weighty (the next life that by comparison like a camel looms large); worry about appearance seen today, the outside, but not seen in the next life, the inside; build magnificent tombs, for such they appear today, but care not for the fate of what is buried within, whose providence is in the next.

¹⁴ Carol J. Schlueter, *Filling up the Measure: Polemical Hyperbole in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 111.

¹⁵ Jesus' question made fun of His rivals and is a good segue from the controversies to the woes as the woes also involve the incongruous. It is consistent with Jewish humorous tradition of riddles and jokes based on descent. It is also seditious in alluding to messianic vindication and triumph in the face of enemies (the Romans in particular). The equivocal meaning of the second "lord" or "Lord" makes little sense

"Son of David"; it is a favorite appellation in Matthew.¹⁶ But His rivals were incapable of answering His very simple riddle, and they dared not ask Him another question (Matt. 22:46). Their being rendered speechless is important, for it allows the rhetorical form to be ratcheted up further in the woes. While the rhetorical form changes from the controversies to the woes, one thing remains the same. The woes, like the controversies, operate within pharisaic presuppositions.¹⁷

UNDERLYING PHARISAIC PRESUPPOSITIONS

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question in the fourth controversy ("Which is the great commandment?" 22:36) is not a rebuke. It is an endorsement of the Pharisees' position.¹⁸ Similarly in refuting the Sadducees in the third controversy (about resurrection and life in the world to come, 22:23–32), Jesus asserted the Pharisees' position.¹⁹ The third and fourth controversies are also steeped in Jewish presuppositions because they are based on the most important Jewish prayers of the time. The third controversy about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God of the living²⁰ (resurrection) is based on the first two of the Eighteen Benedictions, the central Jewish

in the Hebrew where it almost certainly refers to an earthly not a divine lord and thus apparently as used in the New Testament is based on the Greek κύριος (Herbert W. Bateman, "Psalm 110:1 and the New Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 [October–December 1992]: 448). Psalm 110 is clearly important in the New Testament as pointing to Jesus as the Messiah (ibid., 445–46, citing Matt. 22:43–44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42–43; Acts 2:34–35; Heb. 1:13; 5:6; 7:17; 10:13). But the extension of it to suggest an absurdity or incongruity of the Messiah being both David's son and his father is more clever than profound.

¹⁶ See, for example, Graham Stanton, "Matthew's Christology and the Parting of the Ways," in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 108. In Matthew "Son of David" occurs nine times compared with only three times in Mark.

¹⁷ "Q (Gospel Source)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 570 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:570. Jesus and His opponents were from the same background.

¹⁸ Luke does not present Jesus agreeing with the Pharisees; Luke moves the Greatest Commandment from the controversies (from between Luke 20:40–41) to 10:25 and combines it with the Good Samaritan story. The Good Samaritan story is very much in the Pharisaic tradition. See Ta'anit 21a2–3 and n 20; Sanhedrin 108b5–109a1; Sotah 45b5 and n 40; 45b7 and n 65; 46b1, 46b3, and nn 27, 65–66; 46b5 and nn 39–42; Hagigah 12a5. But Luke does not seem to have had the same feel for rabbinic material that Matthew did.

¹⁹ The Sadducees' question is of a sort attributed in the Talmud to the Jews of Alexandria (David Daube, "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation of Hellenistic Rhetoric," in *Talmudic Law*, vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of David Daube*, ed. Calum M. Carmichael [Berkeley, CA: Robbins, 1992], 337 and nn 14–15).

²⁰ The expression "God of the living" means God of life after death (Pesahim 118a3).

daily prayer.²¹ And the fourth controversy is based on the *Shema*, the morning and evening prayer.²²

The first two controversies are also anchored in Pharisaic rules. In the second controversy (about tribute to Caesar, 22:17–21) in order to answer correctly within the pharisaic system, Jesus would have to rest His ruling on Jewish law from the Torah, or at least in some way related to it.²³ But there is nothing in the Torah to legitimize paying taxes to foreign despots. So Jesus said the coin should go to him whose likeness it bears, and He suggested that God should be given what bears God's likeness, alluding to Genesis 1:26 and Exodus 13:9–16 (man is created in God's likeness).²⁴

In the first controversy ("Who gave You this authority?" 21:23) there is an underlying assumption that a proper teacher or rabbi is supposed to be able to rule on any question of law, but to do so he must be properly ordained.²⁵ They said to Him, in essence, "If you are not ordained, either your doctrines or your actions are ridiculous or you may be a false prophet."²⁶ Jesus' evasive answer in verse 24 manages to navigate this seemingly impossible dilemma. While Jesus could have simply rejected the rules and teachings of the Pharisees, He did not do so. In every instance in the controversies and woes He adhered to every pharisaic rule no matter what kind or how minute or how difficult it was to follow.

In the woes the pharisaic presuppositions include opening and closing (binding and loosing; entry into the world to come), seeking converts to Judaism,²⁷ rules relating to oaths,²⁸ lore relating to the

²¹ David Daube, "The Old Testament in the New: A Jewish Perspective," in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, 2:45–46.

²² The parallel version in Mark 12:28 indicates that the first and greatest commandment given by Jesus is based on the most famous and important of Jewish prayers, the *Shema*, which begins, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord." Jesus' Great Commandment instructs, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second commandment, "love your neighbor as yourself," is most associated with Akiba (Herbert W. Basser, *Christian Critiques of Jewish Law and Rabbinic Responses 70–300 C.E.* [Boston: Brill, 2002], 79). However, it was a celebrated pharisaic concept earlier (Shabbat 31a).

²³ David T. Owen-Ball, "Rabbinic Rhetoric and the Tribute Passage (Mt. 22:15–22; Mk. 12:13–17; Lk. 20:20–26)," *Novum Testamentum* 35 (1993): 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11, 13–14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, quoting David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956), 221.

²⁷ Yoma 71b1 and nn 2–3; Gittin 57b1; Pesahim 87b3. (God chose exile as the pun-

gnat,²⁹ purity of utensils,³⁰ tithing, and matters involving the Jewish prophets. Presuppositions are a powerful rhetorical tool that may be used to mark an in-group versus an out-group. They identify the substance as intra-group and assume the correctness of intra-group practice and implicitly the error of outside-group practice. "In the substance of the teachings there is for the most part little hostility."³¹

LESSENING THE SPEAKER'S RESPONSIBILITY BY TRADING PLACES

The woes employ ridicule and taunt. But this presents a problem. As a rule, insults are not arrows or spears; they can boomerang back on the insulter, and the insulter becomes guilty of precisely that with which he or she charges others.³² Thus there is the danger that by insulting His enemies, Jesus may seem guilty of what He condemned, namely, haughtiness. As Aristotle pointed out, a person cannot say certain things about his opponent without seeming abusive or ill bred. As a result the speaker's words might expose him to opprobrium. This problem may be significantly, if not entirely, obviated by having the words said by a third person, or even the opponent himself.³³ Hence mimicry, parody, or self-condemnation is appropriate.³⁴ The technique of trading places, by

ishment so that knowledge of the true faith would spread among the nations.)

²⁸ "For a variety of reasons the biblical and early post-biblical provisions concerning witnesses had an extraordinary fascination for rabbinic thought" (David Daube, "The Law of Witnesses in Transferred Operation," in *Talmudic Law*, 397).

²⁹ Gittin 56b3; Yoma 9b5 and n 45. Titus, the destroyer of the temple, had a gnat crawl up his nose and eat his brain. Gnats were thought to have an orifice for eating but not one for excretion so by the time of Titus's death the gnat had grown to an enormous size (Shabbat 77b2 and n 25).

³⁰ Jacob Neusner, " 'First Cleanse the Inside', The Halakhic Background of a Controversy Saying," *New Testament Studies* (1975–1976): 22:486–95; Abodah Zarah 13a, 33a1–2 and n 8; 34a1 and n 6; 52a, 75b; Shabbat 46a2 and n 16–b1; 84a2–3 and n 17, 25; 84b2 and n 12; 95b1 and n 8; 96a2; Baba Mesi'a 47a4; Pesahim 30b3 and nn 25, 28.

³¹ Bassar, *Studies in Exegesis*, 7, 9, 12, 18–19, 32; David Daube, "Ye have heard—but I say unto you," in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, 2:171 ("Matthew's is a rabbinic gospel").

³² Baba Mesi'a 59b; Qiddushin 70b; Baba Qamma 92b1; Andrew R. Simmonds, "Measure for Measure: Two Misunderstood Principles of Damages, Exodus 21:22–25, 'Life for Life, Eye for Eye,' and Matthew 5:38–39, 'Turn the Other Check,'" *St. Thomas Law Review* 17 (2004–2005): 123, 158.

³³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 16.24 (Aristotle, *Poetics and Rhetoric* [New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005], 495–96); and Joseph Tartakovsky, "In Praise of Political Insults," A13.

³⁴ The crowning example in literature of managing to get away with apparent insult by ascribing the words to another is Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*.

various forms of imitation, allows the insulter to avoid being unduly tarred by his own insult.

One method to avoid the boomerang effect of insults is the use of *pluralis sociativus ironicus*. This refers to the speaker speaking in place of the person spoken to, even to the extent of superficially seeming to join the listener. *Pluralis sociativus* might be translated “two as one.” For example a doctor walks into a child’s hospital room and says, “How are *we* doing today?” By using “we,” a community is created. Or a mother says to her child, “What shall *we* make together? Shall *we* bake a cake?” In these examples *pluralis sociativus* is sincere though exaggerated (as the doctor is not sick, and the mother, not the child, really makes the cake).

Ironicus of course refers to irony. It is an insincere form; it is an exception so large as to rival or surpass the rule. While the language is of association (“we”), it actually denotes its opposite.³⁵ Association is introduced only to show disassociation, that the speaker does not take the other person seriously; it is done to emphasize the speaker’s superiority.³⁶ Often the purpose is to display contempt by being condescending. The tone of voice and facial expression (often of sarcasm) clarify that the words mean the opposite of their literal meaning.³⁷ For example the statement, “Oh, yea! For sure. By all means,” may represent a wholehearted endorsement or an ironic sarcasm. One simple example of *pluralis sociativus ironicus* is the statement, “Now, aren’t *we* clever?”

In Deborah’s taunt song the mother of the enemy’s general frets that her son has not returned from battle. And she is assured that he has been delayed with Israelite women who were taken as spoils. Her mind turns to what she will receive of the spoils, a beautiful embroidered shawl she would like (Judg. 5:28–30). Deborah’s song gives voice to both the mother of Sisera and her companions. In a sense Deborah speaks in their place. Meanwhile the king has not bedded an Israelite woman or two. *He* has been “bedded” by one. *She* has nailed *him* to the floor (4:17–22). This is a role reversal of several dimensions.

The speaker sometimes goes to great lengths to honey-coat the insult. “If I were to say to you (thus-and-such), you would say to me, ‘Fool! Don’t you know (the correct answer).’” In this form the speaker has the addressed person call the speaker a fool, but it is

³⁵ David Daube, “Three Notes Having to Do with Johanan ben Zaccai,” in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, 1:426.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:427.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

understood that the speaker is calling the person spoken to a fool, not the other way around.

A closely related form is "you say" (or more accurately the speaker, acting out the other person speaking) and then there follows the implication or words to the effect, "Oh, for sure, you are right. It is so, it must be. No one could disagree for it is witnessed and proven."³⁸ In this form the speaker, speaking in the place of the listener, puts an absurd statement in the mouth of the other person, and then sarcastically and insincerely agrees with it, putting the other person in a doubly ridiculous position. The "agreement" of the speaker buries the barb by stating the opposite of what is intended.³⁹

In each case language is being manipulated to soften the natural inclination of an insult to ricochet back on the speaker, while at the same time keeping the insulting effect. That is why Jesus in His woes always has the scribes and Pharisees condemn themselves through their own speech or actions. The theme is always *them* and *their* words or conduct by which *they* condemn themselves. The technique is to pay in their own coin, carry the battle into the opposing camp, give them a dose of their own medicine. Thus Jesus avoids being haughty, abusive, or ill-bred.⁴⁰ For this reason in all seven woes Jesus used the scribes' and Pharisees' superficially meritorious appearance to display them in a most negative light. Jesus did not disagree with the meritorious part; that would undermine the effect of the rhetorical device He was using to avoid being tarred by His own insult.

JESUS' RHETORIC

In His first woe Jesus said, in essence, "(You say) you have the keys to heaven, (and indeed it is so). That the door is shut and neither you nor the multitudes seeking entrance can get in bears witness to the 'truth' of what you say."

In the second woe He said, "(You say) you go to most extraordinary lengths to convert just one person! (For sure it is so!) He then receives a double share (the inheritance of the firstborn) in hell."

In the third woe, trading places, Jesus said that the Pharisees

³⁸ For one example, "Counselor, I have read your brief, and I am no more enlightened than before." "Yes, your lordship, but better informed."

³⁹ Dan Hurley, "The Science of Sarcasm (Not That You Care)," *New York Times*, June 3, 2008, F6.

⁴⁰ Daube, "The Form Is the Message," 1:196.

taught that an oath by *the gold in* the temple is valid, but an oath by *the temple* is not; an oath by *the gift on* the altar is valid, but an oath by *the altar* is not. Jesus corrected them. He said, in essence, “Which is greater, the gold in the temple or the temple itself; the gift on the altar or the altar that makes it sacred? The temple subsumes the gold in it; the altar subsumes the gift on it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne and God who sits on it.”

This argument is patently absurd and is designed to parody the rhetoric (though not the actual teaching) of the Pharisees. Despite an enormous amount of rabbinic law dealing with oaths and witnesses, there is nothing to indicate that the Pharisees espoused the nonsensical rules Jesus put in their mouths about the temple and the gold *in* it and the altar and the gift *on* it. Jesus said that it is better not to swear at all. “Let your ‘yes’ be yes and let your ‘no’ be no” (Matt. 5:34–37).⁴¹ Moreover, the sequence is totally absurd: the temple and gold *in* it; the altar and the gift *on* it; the throne and God *on* it. The temple is greater than the gold *in* it; the altar is greater than the gift *on* it; but the throne is certainly not greater than God seated *on* it. This is designed to make a mockery of pharisaic logic and argumentation.

In the fourth woe Jesus referred to the fact that the scribes and Pharisees were punctilious. They missed not even the tiniest thing, straining out gnats while swallowing camels! Swallowing camels is obviously absurd.

The form of the fifth and sixth woes is like the taunt song. “(You say,) ‘What a beautiful tomb I have.’ (So true!) Anyone who looks on it must proclaim its beauty. And what of that which we cannot see, what is inside?” In the rhetorical schools there are many examples of taunts on death and burial. “Told a nasty fellow was dead, ‘He will then at length cease to stink.’”⁴² It is clear that Paul’s use of the term “whitewashed wall” (Acts 23:3) was extremely insulting. (Paul used it in response to having been struck in the face.)

The form of Jesus’ seventh woe is “(You say) you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the memorials of the righteous. You say, if we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would

⁴¹ A large amount of rabbinic law concerns taking oaths so as *not* to have to give testimony. The giving of testimony usually did not involve giving an oath. Also these oaths to avoid giving testimony are related to the covenantal and ordeal oaths. See Shebu’ot 35a4 and n 39 (similarity of testimonial and covenant oaths); 35b4–5 and nn 46–48; 54–58 (similarity of ordeal and testimonial oaths); Yoma 74a1 and nn 5–11.

⁴² Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 6.3.64.

not have joined (partnered with) them in shedding the blood of the prophets. (For sure it is so) for you are witnesses against yourselves that you *are* the sons of those who murdered the prophets. And, while you are right: you are not liable for what they did, you will (be given the opportunity to) fill up the (full) measure of your fathers' crimes. [Or alternatively] Therefore behold, Fool, you will be sent prophets of your own to kill and persecute (and what will *you* do?). They are sent so that you will be responsible (and what is *more*, not just for the prophets you killed and the prophets your forefathers killed but) for all the righteous blood shed on the earth from beginning to end, from the very first to the very last, from Abel to Zechariah, slain between the temple and the altar."

Here again is the familiar form in which the speaker at first seems to praise the opponent. Jesus put words in the mouth of the opponent whereby the opponent bore witness against himself; the criticism is self-directed. Here the opponents absurdly admitted that they were the descendants of those who killed the prophets. And the claim that they would not have joined in their forefathers' murders is backhandedly acknowledged. It would not be enough for them to join in their forefathers' murders, for no, they require *their own* new prophets to kill and persecute, both to satisfy their own perversity and to carry on their family tradition.

Interestingly the seventh woe treats the scribes and Pharisees as though they were foreign despots (which of course they were not). "Fill up the measure" (23:32) typically refers (e.g., Gen. 15:16; 1 Macc. 6:14) to a foreign conqueror and explains that God allows foreign domination to continue until it has reached the tipping point when He will destroy the foreign conqueror and liberate His chosen people (an event associated with the Messiah). In this context the reference to "this generation" does not extend to the entire populace; it means an "imminent" or "immediate" generation. The sentence "Fill up the measure of the guilt of your fathers" is therefore not a command to do it. It is an ironic statement, for if they go ahead and follow in the footsteps of their ancestors by killing prophets, they will suffer the consequences. When Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees "sons of those who murdered the prophets," He was following a familiar formula of the son following in the father's footsteps or profession and it insults by reference to ancestry.⁴³ The so-called killing of the prophets was very much a phe-

⁴³ Another similar expression is that persons are "stiffnecked" and "doing just as your fathers did" (Acts 7:51) as stiffnecked children of stiffnecked parents (2 Kings 17:14). The concept is, "You are no good, but why should that be any surprise considering from whom you are descended?" and "You fit the mold your parents made."

nomenon of Jewish folklore of the times. This is not because the prophets were actually killed (though some were) but rather because it was popularly imagined that most were killed and each in his own distinctive way.⁴⁴

No evidence exists that the scribes and Pharisees had been involved in killing the prophets; nor that they built or adorned any tombs of the prophets, as Jesus said in verse 29.⁴⁵ Nor is there evidence that the scribes and Pharisees in particular had been involved in persecuting Jesus' followers.⁴⁶ Pharisees are nearly absent from Matthew's record of the trial and death of Jesus; they are mentioned by name at 27:62. However, Jesus' statement in the seventh woe is extremely insulting even though understood to be grossly exaggerated. When Jesus said His hearers were "sons of those who murdered the prophets" (23:31), this was a strong insult (cf. 5:12; Luke 6:22–23; 1 Thess. 2:15–16). Stephen hurled a similar insult when he said, "You are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" (Acts 7:51–52). Stephen's hearers promptly chased him out of the city and stoned him to death (vv. 54, 57–58).

When Jesus then said (Matt. 23:35) that His hearers were guilty of "all the righteous blood shed on earth," from Abel (the first) to Zechariah (the last), He was using an old Hebrew legal form, based on "an obvious exaggeration" to produce maximum breadth.⁴⁷ Jesus' seventh woe exaggerated the notion that the scribes and Pharisees were responsible for *all* the bloodshed from the first murder in all history, before there were any prophets or Pharisees.

JESUS VICTORIOUS

The traditional interpretation that the Matthean woes are an embarrassing overdose of hateful invective reflects a lack of appreciation for rhetorical methods of the first century and the culture in which Jesus lived and taught.⁴⁸ The misinterpretation of the

⁴⁴ Viviano, "The Gospel according to Matthew," 667. See also 1 Kings 19:10, 14; and Romans 11:3.

⁴⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 131.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁷ Jacob Rabinowitz, *Jewish Law: Its Influence on the Development of Legal Institutions* (New York: Block, 1956), 263.

⁴⁸ Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sources and Sitz im Leben of Matthew 23* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 65; and Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 138, 177. The woes

Matthean woes is a prime example of what Daube calls the "fall-out of forced exegesis" or "bend(ing) the evidence to the advantage of treasured convictions."⁴⁹ Jesus' seemingly extraordinarily harsh vituperation is "from a society in which controversy was not viewed as negative and hostile but as didactic and as an art form."⁵⁰ And saying that Jesus was just doing what others in the Greco-Roman world did⁵¹ is insufficient. The woes are a much more narrow set than Greco-Roman or Jewish invective generally. Jesus was the unrivalled master of verbal duels, whose extraordinary prowess against the best competition demonstrated that He is indeed the Messiah.

Jesus' woes are part of a rhetorical pattern in which He debated and defeated His rivals. The word "woe" is sarcastic.⁵² As ridicule, the woes are probably the most powerful and effective of all rhetorical weapons when properly used.⁵³ They are part of a sequence in which Jesus was highly vocal and assertive⁵⁴ and was victorious, which balances the following sequence in which He is meek and silent in His trial and execution, a lamb to the slaughter.⁵⁵ "Jesus victorious" not only balances "Jesus defeated" in death

are often thought to be related to the crowd's blood oath in Matthew 27:25, but this verse has often been misunderstood. See Andrew R. Simmonds, "Uses of Blood: Re-reading Matt. 27:25," *Law and Critique* 19 (2008): 165–91.

⁴⁹ David Daube, "Judas," in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, 2:795.

⁵⁰ Bassler, *Studies in Exegesis*, 6–7. Other excellent examples of similar vituperative rhetoric are Johanan ben Zakkai's defeat of the Sadducees in Baba Batra 115b1 and nn 7–8 and Paul's attack on his rivals in Galatians 2:11–14; 3:1–4; 5:7–15; 6:11–14. See David E. Fredrickson, "Amatory Motifs in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians," *Word and World* 20 (summer 2000): 257–64. A related rhetorical technique is found in Paul's superb "Fool's Speech" in 2 Corinthians 11–12. Rhetorical ridicule is still highly esteemed, at least in politics (Tartakovsky, "In Praise of Political Insults," A13).

⁵¹ Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander," 432–39.

⁵² Joseph Jensen and William H. Irwin, "Isaiah 1–39," in *New Jerome Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 243. The taunt form may be called a satirical dirge. It may sound like a lament of doom, but it is rejoicing at the destruction and lampooning of a cruel tyrant.

⁵³ Tartakovsky, "In Praise of Political Insults," A13 (In great personality contests nothing stains the opponent's character better than ridicule.)

⁵⁴ He began with the violent driving of the money lenders from the temple, and then He continued with the cursing of the fig tree.

⁵⁵ The words "assault" and "insult" have common etymological origins (Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 2). Johan Huizinga suggests that a chief purpose of insult matches is to establish identity and that they may have started with the substitution of verbal boasting for heroic deeds. Competitive boasting developed into competitive insult

but also presages Jesus' final victory in His resurrection.

The controversies and woes represent a public retort followed by a private explanation given to Jesus' disciples.⁵⁶ This form was commonly used by New Testament and rabbinic writers.⁵⁷ In this form the teacher gives his opponents an answer that the teacher's disciples realize is not to be taken completely seriously, for it is a rhetorical response designed to put down, defeat, and silence the opponents; to show superiority, but not to enlighten fully. Afterwards, when the opponents were not present, the disciples asked in private for proper elucidation, seeking to be told the true, fully revealing answer. Jesus then gave the truly profound explanation to the disciples.

At the same time the objects of this rhetorical invective are to be considered literarily.⁵⁸ The Pharisees' role is as the foil for Jesus' unmatched rhetorical skills. They earned this role because they were known as otherwise unmatched rhetoricians, because of their merits, not because of their faults. Much as in a prize fight or any other competition, they were there because they were the most *worthy* opponents against which Jesus demonstrated His vocal pugilistic skills.⁵⁹

rituals, both being ways of pursuing honor and distinction (*Homo Ludens* [Boston: Beacon, 1950], 64–70, 155; see also Neu, *Sticks and Stones*, 73). The metaphor "argument is war" explains terms commonly used to describe argumentation, such as "attack, defense, counterattack, line of attack, ambush, your claim is indefensible, attack the weak point, his claim was right on target, it demolished his argument, wiped it out, shot it down, gaining ground, he won" (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 3–6).

⁵⁶ David Daube, "Private Retort, Public Explanation," in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, 2:307; and Matthew 24:3 and Mark 13:3.

⁵⁷ Ibid. This is found, for example, in Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees and scribes over the washing of hands before meals (Matt. 15:17–20; Mark 7:17–19).

⁵⁸ Rhetoric has a tendency to dazzle with its technical cleverness, stretching metaphors, and imaginative similes. Compare, for example, the use of "dog" in Matthew 15:11–17 and Mark 7:15–19 to 2 Samuel 9:7–8. But as Quintilian pointed out, invective, which does not depend on whether the statement is true or false, has as its purpose to demonstrate the orator's talent and arouse the audience, but not to be believed by them (Schlueter, "Filling up the Measure," 98–99). Polemic by its nature tends to oversimplify, caricature, exaggerate, and generalize rather than strive for accuracy (Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 137–38, 153, 174).

⁵⁹ Bassar, *Christian Critique of Jewish Law*, 7. The mere fact that a rival questioned Jesus does not mean they were enemies or that the questions were illegitimate. In one of the earliest controversies about Jesus' disciples and fasting (Matt. 9:14) the questioners were disciples of John the Baptist, but Luke, who was much less sympathetic to Jewish groups, notes that the questioners were Pharisees (Luke 5:33) (David Daube, "Responsibilities of Master and Disciples in the Gospels," in *The Collected Works of David Daube*, 2:752).

CONCLUSION

The controversies (Matt. 21:23-22:46) are a crescendo in which Jesus took on the Pharisees, the greatest masters of rhetoric in His day. In the controversies Jesus endorsed the Pharisees' doctrines and employed some of the same rhetorical techniques that they used. The woes (23:13-36) that follow the controversies are all keyed off of the Pharisees' merits and premised on pharisaic presuppositions. The rhetorical form is public retort, and as such the message is not religious dogma, which is reserved for the private explanation that immediately follows. The woes are dazzling rhetoric whose purpose was to demonstrate Jesus' oratorical talent and superiority and to arouse the audience. The form is hyperbolic and includes intentional absurdities that ridicule the opponents. In the woes Jesus spoke for and in the place of His opponents, all based on the opponents' words and acts: "You say," "You do." It is verbal martial arts in which Jesus, the speaker, defeated the opponents by using their own weight to topple them.

Rather than antipathy, perhaps a degree of sympathy and commonality in these rhetorical forms is evident. Jesus and the Pharisees were rivals in the same or similar verbal martial-arts form. The use of a style that employed biting, stinging retorts should not mask the affinities between the speaker, Jesus, and His hapless opponents. Viewed in this light, the woes do not support the suggested Matthean paradox of the Gospel being overall very sympathetic toward Judaism but in some places being very hostile. The woes should be removed from the latter category and viewed as in the former.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ The two chief places in which Matthew's Gospel has been thought paradoxically anti-Jewish and indeed anti-Semitic are in the woes and the crowd's blood oath in Matthew 27:25. The misreading of the crowd's oath is discussed in Simmonds, "Uses of Blood: Re-reading Matt. 27:25," 165-91. It is noteworthy that the Pharisees disappear from the Gospel after the woes and are conspicuously absent from the narrative of Jesus' trial and execution. The only exception is that the Pharisees joined with the chief priests in requesting that Pilate post a guard over Jesus' tomb because they recalled that Jesus had said He would rise from the dead on the third day (27:62-64). The presence of the Pharisees on this occasion is appropriate and perhaps an endorsement of Jesus' prophecy because in rabbinic exegesis identification of a person who had died was to be made by the third day (Yebamot 120a3 and nn 16-18). But when the guards reported that the tomb was empty (28:11-12), the Pharisees were once again absent.