

Chapter 5

The Jewish leaders

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The Jewish leaders function as the antagonists in Matthew's narrative. The function of the antagonist in a narrative is usually the obstruction of the protagonist's mission (cf i a Vandermoere 1976:30). He tries to prevent the protagonist's mission from reaching a successful conclusion.

We have already pointed out that the commission of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is aimed at the Jewish crowd, and that the Gentiles are not excluded from the object of the commission. This mission of Jesus can, from a certain viewpoint, be described as the 'act of forgiveness of sin'. This mission is driven by the motif of 'compassion' as the manifestation of the will of the Father in heaven (the 'law and the prophets'). Jesus' love concretizes more particularly in his didactic and healing activities, as the fruit of the *δικαιοσύνη* – a term expressing his obedience to the law and the prophets in another way.

In the Gospel of Matthew the role of the Jewish leaders as antagonists concretizes in:

- * the questioning of the purpose of Jesus' mission;
- * a striving to alter the response of the object of his mission, the Jewish crowd, from 'uncertainty' to 'aversion';
- * the killing of both his 'prototype', John the Baptist, and Jesus himself;
- * the concealment of his resurrection from the dead;
- * and the persecution of the disciples as the continuing 'prophets' in the post-paschal period.

In order to portray this opposing perspective of the Jewish leaders in their relations with Jesus (and John the Baptist), the Jewish crowd and the disciples, the narrator uses, among other things, a variety of names for the Jewish leaders in Jesus' speech.

Among these names, the expressions Φονεῖς (= ‘murderers’) and Πονηροί (= ‘Evil Ones’) in the Synoptic gospels occur only in Matthew.

5.2 Οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ Πονηροῦ

With the names Πονηροί, οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ Πονηροῦ (Mt 13:38), γενεά πονηρά (Mt 12:39; 16:4) and υἱοὶ γέννης (Mt 23:15), Matthew takes up the theme of the Jewish leaders as the puppets of Satan who oppose Jesus as *God-with-us*. On the grounds of Matthew 13:19 and 13:38 it is clear that the Πονηροί are very closely related to – and are indeed the henchmen of – the ὁ Πονηρός. Sjef van Tilborg formulates as follows:

The Evil One is at the origin of the evil of the world. He is the great antagonist of...(Jesus) who sows the good seed. Thus the conception of Mt is really very simple: what is good, comes from (Jesus) and what is bad comes from the Evil One. When the wickedness of man becomes manifest, the work of the devil becomes visible.

(Van Tilborg 1972:167)

In precise contrast with the disposition of the Father in heaven, who allows the sun to rise over πονηροὺς and ἀγαθοὺς, and the attitude of the υἱοὶ τοῦ Πατρὸς who, like their Father, must love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Mt 5:43-48), we see that the Jewish leaders find Jesus in no way acceptable. ‘...in their eyes he cannot be a healer, nor an exorcist, nor a teacher’ (Van Tilborg 1972:167). The Jewish leaders are called Υἱοὶ τοῦ Πονηροῦ and Πονηροί because, ironically, they say that Jesus is committing blasphemy (Mt 9:4) and is possessed of the devil (Mt 12:34), while they, like Satan himself (Mt 4:1-11) *test* him and expect him to provide a sign from heaven (Mt 12:38; 16:1; 22:18, 34).

5.3 Φονεῖς

With the name Φονεῖς Matthew takes up the theme of the ‘killing of the prophets’. This theme touches on the essence of the Jewish leaders’ opposition to Jesus who, as *God-with-us*, is the embodiment of absolute obedience to the ‘law and the prophets’. Just as their fathers persecuted and killed the Old Testament prophets (Mt 5:12b; 23:29-32), so do the Jewish leaders act towards Jesus (Mt 21:46), John the Baptist (Mt 14:5) and the disciples (Mt 5:11-12; 10:17; 23:34-35) – that is, also against those (the disciples) who have been sent by Jesus as προφηταὶ, σοφοὶ and γραμματεῖς (Mt 23:34; cf 13:52) to continue his mission (Mt 21:28-46; 23:29).

The name 'murderers', apart from the physical putting to death of the 'prophets', also refers to the Jewish leaders' invalidation of the true meaning of the 'law and the prophets' as the will of the Father. Matthew 5:17-19 is in fact applicable to the Jewish leaders (and to the disciples who are sometimes inclined to show the same attitude), while in this section Jesus is implicitly accused of falsifying the 'law and the prophets' and teaching the Jewish multitude accordingly.

5.4 Ὑποκριταί

This irony, that the Jewish leaders pretend to be what they are not, is reflected in the derisive use of names such as οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας (= 'sons of the Kingdom') (Mt 8:12). In fact, they are οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ Πονηροῦ (= 'sons of the Evil One' – Mt 13:38; cf also Mt 16:4; 23:17). This hypocrisy is reflected in the name γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν (= 'generation of vipers' – Mt 12:34), τυφλοὶ ὀδηγοὶ (= 'blind guides' – Mt 15:14; 23:16-22, 24) and particularly ὑποκριταί (= 'hypocrites' – cf i a Haenchen 1951:59). Grundmann (1968:193) calls a ὑποκρίτης an 'actor' – someone who plays a part in which he pretends to be something he is not. '[T]his contrast is the essence of hypocrisy' (Garland 1979:99). It is a contrast between 'preaching' and 'doing' (cf Mt 23:3b), between 'lips' and 'hearts' (cf Mt 15:7-9); between 'outside action' and 'inner attitude' (cf i a Mt 23:27-28).

According to Van Tilborg (1972:166) the name ὑποκριταί expresses four facets of the Jewish leaders' perspective in the Gospel of Matthew:

- * the ὑποκριταί are the *godless* who do not obey the 'law and the prophets';
- * they are the *double-hearted* whose inner conviction and behavior do not correspond with their outer formal actions;
- * they are the *hypocrites* who act with a view to fame and reward;
- * and they are the *two-faced*, allowing 'the human forum to prevail over the divine forum' (Van Tilborg 1972:166); they pretend to be 'sons of the Kingdom', while opposing Jesus as Son of God on the strength of their own insight.

These aspects can be summarized in, inter alia, the concepts of *formalism* and *particularism*. Both matters directly or indirectly concern the relationship between the Jewish leaders and the Jewish crowd. Unlike that of Jesus, the Jewish leaders' attitude towards the Jewish crowd – based on exclusivity and loveless formalism – evidences the approach of a 'shepherd' who does not care for his 'sheep', a 'blind leader' leading a 'blind nation', with the result that both 'shepherd' and 'sheep' fall into the ditch (Mt 15:14; 27:20).

5.5 CONCLUSION

Does the eventual coincidence of the perspective from which the Jewish crowd is narrated with that of the Jewish leaders mean that the antagonist in the Matthean narrative has succeeded in aborting the mission of the protagonist? The answer is no. The commission of Jesus is the 'act of forgiveness of sin' which concretizes in the pre-paschal period in his conduct as *God-with-us*, even when the Jewish leaders react adversely by blasphemously handing him over to be killed. The cry of 'abandonment by God' (Mt 27:46f) is not an indication that the Jesus-commission has failed (cf Reimarus 1970:95). It is, rather, an indication of the narrator's evaluation of Jesus as the absolutely obedient Son of God: '...the cry is not evidence that Jesus in the hour of ultimate rejection succumbed to temptation and lost all faith. Rather it is a confident prayer – even in the depths of suffering – of ultimate triumph' (Holst 1972:288); a prayer to 'an active God who shows himself in passive reality' (Van Tilborg 1988:894).

Jesus rises from the dead and the disciples continue his mission in the post-paschal period, until the coming of the parousia. The disciples' continuing mission is the concretization of the risen Jesus' continuing role of *God-with-us*. His resurrection thus represents the execution of his mission, because it is precisely on these grounds that he remains *God-with-us* until the parousia, and is proclaimed as such by the mission of the disciples.