

PROCESSING REJECTION IN CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS

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Abstract. This paper explores the way in which New Testament writers responded to the experience of rejection, its grief and sometimes resultant anger, both by those who refused to respond positively to the message of the gospel and by those who ceased to continue to believe and left the faith communities. It does so initially by giving attention to the Parable of the Sower in the context of Jesus' ministry, then as interpreted in the context of the early Christian movement and finally in its Markan context. It then considers the processing of rejection in Mark as a whole, the responses to Jesus' rejection both in a sense of solidarity and going beyond it. The paper then discusses Paul's passionate response to rejection from within his own people and his theological response of hope before turning to consider the issues in Matthew and Luke, and briefly in the fourth gospel. Its conclusions are that responses were diverse, both in their scope and in their potential to cause harm and to heal.

Keywords: Rejection, Grief, Anger, Conflict, Predestination, Theism, Determinism, Paul and Israel, Parable of Sower, Antisemitism, Exclusivity, Continuity/Discontinuity, Torah.

Hatred has no place, but what if I am deeply hurt? Issues of conflict and hurt play a role in all human relationships. They also play a role in relations among communities, churches and nations. This paper will explore some instances within Christian beginnings of how people handled the pain of rejection. The issue of rejection was indeed a fairly constant feature in Christian beginnings as those proclaiming good news were sometimes met with rejection and even hostility. That claim matters and its rejection has the potential to call one's identity into question. People need to deal with it and find some way of explaining why such rejection is inappropriate.

The stimulus for this paper came from my study of this phenomenon in the fourth gospel where I argued that one of the author's concerns was to deal with the problem of rejection especially from Jews.¹ It was one thing to have one's message

¹ William LOADER, "Rationalising Rejection in John 8 and Elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel," a paper presented at the *Colloquium Ioanneum*, Vienna, August, 2023, to be published by Mohr Siebeck in the conference volume.

rejected by Gentiles in Cappadocia, for instance. It was quite another thing to have one's message rejected by Jews, especially if you, yourself are a Jew, but equally if you are a Gentile making the claim that you represent faithfulness to Israel's tradition.

I went on to argue that in speeches he developed for Jesus and in his narrative the author employed a range of strategies to deal with the issue. They included some scripture-based argument, but primarily took the form of disparagement of opponents as inherently bad (3:19–21), children of the devil (8:44) and as unchosen, predestined to reject (6:44–45). In addition, the author employs assertions of exclusive monopoly on truth and salvation as well as attempts to explain the apparent discontinuity of such claims as reflecting divinely intended continuity.

It provoked me to inquire to what extent such strategies were employed in other New Testament writings in dealing with rejection. This paper focuses on five instances to illustrate the diverse responses. We begin with the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation and Mark. We then consider the huge problem of how they came to terms with the execution of Jesus. Beyond that, we examine Paul's responses and those of Matthew and Luke.

The Parable of the Sower Processing Rejection

The earliest form of the Parable of the Sower is to be found in Mark 4.² There we find both the parable itself (4:3–9) and an interpretation which treats it allegorically (4:14–20). I take the interpretation in its present form to be a secondary development reflecting experience of the early church, including its experience of persecution.³ At its simplest, the parable makes a defiant statement of hope. There will be a harvest and it will be astounding: 30-, 60-, 100-fold! We may imagine that Jesus' first hearers, living and perhaps working in the granary rich lands around Galilee, knew exactly what he was talking about and appreciated the amazing claim. God's reign will come! Hope and harvest had long formed part of the discourse of hope.

Alongside the positive is also the downside. Of course, when you sow before ploughing in the seed, or even when that is not so,⁴ some will have fallen on the path where the birds would snap it up, others on shallow soil and would wilt and die, and others among thornbushes where it would be choked. Despite all this,

² See the detailed discussion in Klyne SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 145–177; Kristina DRONSCH, „Vom Fruchtbringen (Sämann mit Deutung) – Mk 4,3–9 (10–12) 13–20“ in Ruben ZIMMERMANN (ed.) *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007) 297–311.

³ DRONSCH, „Vom Fruchtbringen,“ 306. As SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent*, speculates that in an earlier form the interpretation may go back to Jesus (166).

⁴ See SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent*, 167.

some would survive and succeed, ... more than succeed! We may speculate that Jesus was in part countering the fact that not all were accepting his message. Despite this, a wonderful harvest will come. Trust! Believe!

It is not at all surprising that the parable invited further reflection on rejection, especially in the light of the experience of rejection which Jesus' followers came to face. The effect of the explanations in the interpretation of the parable in 4:14–20 is to put more focus on the experience of rejection. Why failure? Partly because Satan was at work, symbolised by the birds, but partly also because of who these people are who receive the word. Some lack depth and wilt under pressure of persecution and others surrender to the lure of wealth and greed. The latter explanations reflect a stage at which the Jesus movement is underway. It lays blame on those who reject the word, but primarily on those who do not sustain their initial commitment to discipleship because of greed and persecution. Unlike the original parable, its focus appears mainly to be on failure within the community of disciples, that is, why some have given up their faith. The interpretation thus addresses in part the grief (and probable anger) and potential self-doubt which such departures will have evoked.

Mark takes this still further with the comments he inserts in 4:10–12 before the interpretation of the parable. It goes beyond just the Parable of the Sower to speak of parables (4:10, 13) and has the twelve disciples pose the question about their purpose, and then has Jesus declare:

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables (4:11)

It finds an echo in the conclusion of the chapter of parables where Mark explains:

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples (4:33–34).

This, too, serves as comfort and reassurance for the insiders. It appears, however, at first sight to reverse what will have surely been the purpose of the parables, namely, to communicate, and to suggest that their purpose was to obscure. In 4:12 this is spelled out in a citation from Isaiah 6:9–10:

in order that
 “they may indeed look, but not perceive,
 and may indeed listen, but not understand;
 so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.” (Mark 4:12)

Do the parables become a vehicle not for revealing but for obscuring the message for many and letting only some see it and is this seen as divine purpose? As such, it will have been taken as comfort by insiders who are fortunate/chosen to

receive the explanation of the parables in private. They reject us because this was their fate as determined by God and implemented in part by Jesus' telling parables. To claim that the parables' secret needs explanation which Jesus gives only to the chosen insiders goes beyond what the interpretation of the parable states, namely that responses are determined by people's depth or distractions.

At a surface level, Mark 4:11 and especially the citation of Isa 6:9–10 in 4:12 could be read as even absolving those who reject or who give up their faith of responsibility. God is to blame, not those following their God-determined responses. That is clearly not intended and would be to fail to understand the nature of religious language and how it functions.

Parables are, indeed, not straightforward. Their purpose is not to obscure but to communicate if people are open to receive what they are saying. They are not a direct form of communication but function suggestively inviting people to make connections, in much the same way as metaphors evoke meaning.⁵ In that sense they can be heard or not heard. The penny will drop, as it were, and the hearer be able to declare: "Oh, I see! I get the point!" In that sense, some will see and some will not. The harsh words about purpose cited from Isaiah 6:9–10 belong to the rhetoric of persuasion and are meant as a warning, indeed, for Mark, a warning to believers.⁶ They can be interpreted as advocating fixed predestination, and are in that sense potentially dangerous, but this fails to see the way such language works and how it functions in Mark. Such deterministic assertions, which appear closed, usually leak, that is, they occur in contexts which assume repentance is possible and where people remain accountable.

Coming to terms with rejection takes different forms in the way the Parable of the Sower has been transmitted. Originally the message was: some rejection is natural, but don't be discouraged, hope and harvest are assured. This was dealing with rejection of Jesus by his contemporaries. Then the interpretation moves to offer comfort for failure and rejection, especially the dropping off of support, explaining that some people lack depth or become distracted and by implication are to blame. To challenge hearers of his own time, Mark employs the prophetic strategy of asserting divine purpose in rendering people blind and deaf and asserts that only true insiders receive the secret. This is to be seen as serving the rhetoric of persuasion rather than as asserting determinism and exclusive revelation. At the

⁵ On this see Ruben ZIMMERMANN, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), who speaks of the "metaphoricity" of the parables (145–47).

⁶ As DRONSCH, „Vom Fruchtbringen,“ comments: „Die Verstockungsaussage ist somit eine mahnende, auf eine Innengruppe gerichtete Selbstkritik“ (300). Similarly, SNODGRASS, *Stories with Intent*, observes, speaking of such statements as Isaiah 6:9–10: "Their illocutionary effect is *to urge hearing in a context where judgement is assured* and where there are promises that a remnant will return and blessing will come from Yahweh" (160).

same time there is an assumption that such statements are also to help Mark's hearers come to terms with failure.

Mark Processing Rejection

Mark's account of the Parable of the Sower is already an indication of the way he seeks to process rejection. While such statements offer comfort and reassurance, Mark is also using them to confront and persuade disciples to remain faithful. In the rest of his gospel, despite the positive comments 4:11, 34, he reinforces that message by showing failure even among these disciples. He even later confronts them in language recalling the prophetic warning, namely, when he has Jesus declare: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (8:17–18). This doubtless serves the purpose of Mark's attempt to bring a challenge to his hearers about their need to understand.

At the same time as engaging in the rhetoric of confrontation, Mark is also offering hearers assurance of what he wants them to understand and embrace. That includes his having Jesus declared God's Son at his baptism and also as having authority, not as the scribes (1:22). That authority, linked to his identity as Son of Man, is further enhanced by showing Jesus in the controversy stories of 2:1–36 embracing rational explanation as the basis for interpreting tradition in contrast to the cultic and purity concerns of his critics, the scribes, a contrast reflected also in 7:1–23.⁷ This assures his hearers: Jesus has authority, and his teaching makes sense in contrast to that of his opponents, which does not. In this way Mark offers explanation for rejection.

A similar appeal to good sense is evident in the tensions in Mark 3 based on accusations of Jesus' being in league with Belial and of not conforming to family expectations, where it makes sense that it would hardly be the demonic that would cast out demons and that one's true allegiance must always be doing God's will. The tension over family and community expectations reappears in Mark 6. Mark is appealing to his hearers to recognise these higher priorities and that they make sense in the light of the prior loyalty to God and God's reign and at the same time to see rejection by family and critics as demonically inspired.

Aside from the conflict in Mark 7, where again Mark has Jesus appeal to reason, even to set some of Torah aside in declaring all foods clean, Mark does not bring us again to the issue of Jesus' rejection by fellow Jews until chapter 11. In the interim he deals with failure and rejection of Jesus' priorities on the part of the disciples, such as Peter's rejection of Jesus' path of suffering and the disciples'

⁷ On the way Mark depicts Jesus' attitude towards Torah, see the discussion in William LOADER, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (WUNT 2.97; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 9–79, 122–36.

ambitions of grandeur, as well as their potentially failing to see that the 12 and 7 baskets symbolise the inclusion of Gentiles beside Jews (8:19–21).

In chapter 11 Jesus confronts temple leadership as failing to bear fruit, symbolised by the cursing of the barren fig tree but also by the temple intervention, foreshadowing its destruction. The fruit imagery continues in the parable of the wicked tenants, which serves to link the temple's destruction and their killing of the son (12:12), and assures the hearers of the temple's replacement with the one built on the risen Christ as the cornerstone who was rejected (12:11), the temple not made with hands, as Mark will have Jesus respond to the charge before the chief priests. These chapters from 11–14 serve in part as reassurance in the light of the temple's destruction.

Chapter 12 goes on to ward off the danger of seeing the movement as a threat to Rome (12:13–17), places the key commandment of love ahead of cult (12:28–34), having asserted Jesus' authority (11:27–33), and contrasts a widow's devotion with the scribes' self-aggrandisement and greed (12:41–44). Mark 13 returns to the temple's destruction and encourages hearers to avoid false claims and remain ready and faithful despite harassment and persecution. Jesus' fate, then, at the hands of both the Jewish authorities and the Romans, serves also as a model for what his hearers might well face, with the assurance that his resurrection is also a promise that they can hope.

Mark's gospel portrays rejection of Jesus by fellow Jews primarily as the expression of corrupt leaders and largely irrational priorities which resulted in the temple's destruction. Apart from the citation of Isaiah 6:9–10 in chapter 3, there is no indication of Mark explaining rejection in terms of those opposing Jesus as being predestined to do so, however loosely understood, and certainly not of having read that as absolving them of responsibility. Those rejecting are depicted as having false priorities and acting wickedly, but also earlier as failing to think rationally.

Mark's story serves, therefore, in part to help his hearers deal with rejection from outside and rejection and departure from inside, partly by explaining why people do so but also by underlining Jesus' status and authority. While that reassurance includes depicting Jesus and the events surrounding his ministry as fulfilling scripture or echoing it typologically, as in the case of the healing and nature miracles, Mark does not appear to reflect concern about issues of continuity and discontinuity. Jesus and the church are simply being faithful to the God of Israel. The others are not. Even Mark's rationally based interpretation of Torah to the extent of setting parts of it aside (and we may assume that this applied also to the standard areas of circumcision and food, table fellowship and food laws), does not appear for Mark to pose an issue of continuity. To be rejected by wicked people and irrational people poses no existential crisis. If anything, it serves to reinforce a sense of secure identity. Resurrection assures vindication.

Processing Rejection in Solidarity with the Rejection of Jesus

One of the roles played by the gospel account is to deal with the grief of rejection by seeing it as in solidarity with the rejection of Jesus. In this, the resurrection of Jesus plays a significant role. There is suffering and rejection, but there is also hope. Thus, to tell the story of Jesus in this light is also to help process the experience of one's own rejection. Paul, for instance, senses this solidarity when he speaks of sharing Christ's suffering and also his resurrection (Rom 8:17). Hope helps people come to terms with suffering and rejection.

Nevertheless, the suffering the rejection of Jesus will have been a problem in itself. And one of the ways of coming to terms with the rejection of Jesus was to see it as in solidarity with the rejection of the prophets and rejection and suffering of the righteous. In Mark this is implied in the Parable of the Vineyard in 12:1–12. Elsewhere, such as in the Q material preserved in Matthew and Luke, it is more explicit. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Luke 13:34; Matt 23:37). Luke has Wisdom speak of sending apostles and prophets and their rejection from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah (11:49–51; cf. Matt 23:34–35). The reference to apostles beside prophets shows that the sense of solidarity relates not just to Jesus' rejection but also to rejection of church leaders.

Solidarity with the suffering righteous is particularly apparent in the passion narrative, where motifs from Psalm 22 help shape the narrative, from the dividing of Jesus' clothes by lots (15:24; cf. Ps 22:19), and the mockery (15:29–30; cf. Ps 22:8) to the cry of forsakenness (15:34; cf. Ps 22:1).

So much serves the sense of solidarity with believers' suffering. Coming to terms with the shame of Jesus' death goes, however, beyond solidarity. We can trace evidence of seeing it as within God's will and plan and as fulfilment of scripture in a way that goes beyond what believers suffer (1 Cor 15:3). In particular, as it comes to be interpreted as vicarious suffering like that of the Maccabean martyrs and the figure of Isaiah 53, it transcends notions of solidarity. In a world of sacrifices and in the light of Jewish tradition Jesus' death, far from being a low point and moment of shame, becomes a high point of achievement, which can be depicted as salvific, a ransom, like a Passover lamb celebrating deliverance, an expiatory sacrifice for sins, an atoning shedding of blood, an array of images declaring Jesus' death as the means of salvation.

The notion of crucifixion as shame is turned on its head in the process, so that in Paul, for instance, there is minimal focus on the rejection and on those rejecting and all the attention is given to what this death achieves in positive terms. He celebrates the paradox that what the world saw as shameful is now for him the good news (1 Cor 1:18). Any sense of shame or discomfort believers might feel at such a wretched end is left well behind in the process.

While the synoptic gospels, by comparison, contain some salvific motifs in relation to Jesus' death, they are very few (Mark 10:45; 14:20–25; supplemented in

Matt 26:28 with specific reference to the forgiveness of sins) and Luke has little. They preserve them alongside an understanding of John the Baptist and of Jesus during his ministry as already offering forgiveness of sins.

Thus, at one level people could see their own suffering and rejection in solidarity with Christ's suffering and rejection, but coming to terms with Christ's suffering went far beyond what believers could understand of their own suffering. It was much more, indeed a source and for Paul (as for Hebrews) *the* act of atonement.

Paul Processing Rejection

Paul's letters provide insight into a range of experiences in which he experienced rejection. In most instances the rejection is from fellow members of the Jesus movement. Just occasionally he mentions rejection by fellow Jews (e.g. 1 Thess 2:14–16; 2 Cor 11:24–25). His major treatment of their rejection of the gospel comes in his letter to the Romans, where, it appears, he is at the same time answering a criticism that he has betrayed his own people.

Somewhat in contrast to the explanations of rejection in Mark, Paul's discussion is deeply emotional. Countering any suggestion that he did not care, he begins by underlining his own sense of grief at Israel's response to the gospel. He even declares: "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (9:3) and goes on to acclaim their special status (9:4–5).

That concern then reaches out for explanations. They include the notion that "not all Israelites truly belong to Israel", and that God had in the past chosen some and not others (9:6–13). Thus, like Mark, he comes to terms with rejection in part by seeing it as divinely determined, citing the favoured choice of Isaac and then Jacob, and defending God's right to make such determinations, as a potter has rights to mould clay (9:21). He cites the notion of a remnant (9:27) and intimates that God's purpose was behind Israel's rejection so that a remnant along with gentiles might be saved (9:22–29).

The rejection, itself, is not excused (as it would be if we were to take divine determination literally) but blamed. It was the outcome of Israel seeking righteousness, right standing with God, on the basis of fulfilling the Law instead of as a gift to be received by faith, something Gentiles had grasped (9:30–33). Juxtaposed to these statements about responsibility is the claim, paradoxically, of divine intent in causing them to fall by setting up a stumbling stone (9:33).

Having offered these explanations of his fellow Jews' rejection of this message, including of himself as its bearer, Paul is not happy to abandon caring about them. In that sense, he has not written them off. He insists: "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (10:1) and repeats his diagnosis: they have misplaced zeal in seeking a right

relationship with God on the basis of keeping the Law, citing Moses in support (10:2–5).

He then affirms the offer of a right relationship with God as now accessible to all (10:6–13) and his own role in making it so (10:14–17), by implication, therefore, as valid. Blame returns in 10:18–21 where he cites precedent for Israel's not giving heed to what they have been told.

It might have been enough to stop there and conclude with regret that they are now lost and that is the end of it. He might just accept that they have rejected and come to terms with why they have done so, their blameworthy approach and their refusal to hear, and behind it, paradoxically, divine purpose. However, Paul is not willing to deal with their rejection in this way. Instead, he insists on not doing so. In part that is because these are his people, and he cannot imagine that God who had chosen them would now abandon them (11:1–2a). Initially, he cites Elijah's distress at Israel's rejection of God, only to be told by God that a sizeable remnant had remained faithful (11:2b–4), in order to highlight the fact that a remnant of Israel, including himself, had responded (11:5–6).

Paul calls them the chosen or elect, reflecting an assumption of divine determining, and reinforces this with the notion of divine hardening, recalling what we saw Mark had done in using Isaiah 6:9–10, but nevertheless similarly not using the notion in a way that removed responsibility for rejecting. In 11:12 he repeats the imagery of stumbling, used already in 9:33 as he offers yet another way of coming to terms with the grief of their rejection: “through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles” (11:11). He goes, however, further, to add: “so as to make Israel jealous” (11:11). It opened the way for Gentiles.

At this point Paul directs comments to Gentiles, cautioning them against feeling superior and arrogant. Using the imagery of an olive tree, he again asserts Israel's special place – it is the tree – and Gentiles are ingrafts, but then urges them to see that those branches which have been cut off (blamed for their disbelief) might be grafted in again (11:13–24). He then makes explicit what he had previously only hinted at: Israel's hardening was not just to open the way for Gentiles and thereby to make Israel jealous; the final step which he describes as a mystery is that all Israel will be saved. It is an extraordinary claim but based on some key assumptions: “as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:28b–29). Summing it up he declares: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11:32).

The word “mystery” in 11:25 is apt. It is a word used in relation to future hope and it also conveys awareness that no explanation can be given about how what it depicts is to be achieved. Paul cannot let go of his love for his people and believes that the same applies to God. He cannot write them off. At one level, Paul is displaying ethnic loyalty. It is also more than that, for Paul asserts his genuine love and concern. He also argues from divine loyalty to the covenant with Israel, but it is also more than that. Paul assumes divine love. Within the framework of his

theology, which includes belief in Israel's chosenness and belief in God's compassion, he cannot be satisfied with writing off those of his fellow Jews who have rejected the gospel. Instead, he deals with that rejection by acknowledging present pain and convincing himself that this rejection would ultimately be reversed.⁸

There are, therefore, a number of strands to Paul's way of dealing with rejection. One strand is theistic determinism: God planned it, caused the fall and the hardening. It was, in that sense, meant to be, a notion which provides some comfort for people facing pain of rejection. Paul never suggests, however, that this exonerates his fellow Jews from responsibility. He spells out blame. He does not, however, write them off, but instead comforts himself (and others) with a defiant hope bereft of detail about how. Paul's way of dealing with rejection is thus a mixture of theistic determinism and blame, but ultimately an assertion, against any evidence, of love and therefore hope.

Love meant he could not give up on those who had given up on him. That love was however confined within a theology of divine election of Israel. To apply the same assertion of love to non-Jews, to all people universally, would not I suspect be within Paul's horizon, but at least he shows how love can push boundaries often used to exclude in the context of dealing with rejection and securing one's sense of identity and value.

Matthew Processing Rejection

Matthew incorporates Mark's account of the Parable of the Sower into his gospel with minor modification, reversing the climax to read 100-, 60-, 30-fold (13:3–9). He also adds to the explanation which Mark brings between the parable and its interpretation (13:10–11), a saying which Mark brought in 4:24, that those who have will be given more and those who do not have will be treated oppositely, a very negative claim (13:12). Matthew introduces it to explain the determinism of the allusion to Isaiah 6:9–10, which he then proceeds to cite in full and to declare those who do hear as blessed (13:13–17). In the process, Matthew softens the harshness of Mark's introductory conjunction, ἵνα, expressing purpose, instead introducing an allusion to the citation using ὅτι "because" and so depicting the citation of Isaiah 6:9–10 as an explanation for why people reject.

Rejection is an element of his gospel, as it is for the other gospels, not least the rejection of Jesus, foreshadowed in Herod's failed attempt and Pilate's success. Overall, as reflected in the climax of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's first

⁸ I read Paul as asserting that all Israel would turn to the Messiah, not that Israel has a separate path to salvation. On the meaning of "mystery" and Paul's interpretation of it, see the discussion in Robert JEWETT, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 701–702, who sees all Israel's conversion as a third element of the "mystery" after the hardening of Israel and Gentile conversion.

major discourse attributed to Jesus, and his last in chapters 24–25, the focus is especially on challenging believers within Matthew’s churches to remain faithful. Unlike in Mark, they are not dull; they do understand, but they need to remain faithful. Otherwise, Matthew argues, they will share the fate of Jews outside the movement who had rejected the message. In that sense, attention to their rejection by fellow Jews is presupposed but subordinate.

Inasmuch as the author is concerned to inform his hearers of the appropriateness of their following Jesus, he seeks to show that by doing so they are remaining faithful to Torah.⁹ Probably to counter some within the movement whose stance called that into question and to answer Jewish allegations that Jesus advocated departure from the Law, the author has Jesus’ first major discourse underline his commitment to upholding Torah to the letter (5:17–19). Conflict then focuses on interpretation and on what faithful observance means. Matthew’s redaction of the controversy stories no longer puts focus on the rationality of Jesus’ responses beside his authority, as in Mark, but primarily on his authority and his consistency with scripture. Matthew’s Jesus argues as interpreter of Torah, in that sense as the true and faithful scribe.¹⁰ Unlike in Mark, continuity with Israel’s faith and its Law is of fundamental significance in offering assurance to his hearers in the face of conflict and rejection which calls their faith into question.

Within the Sermon on the Mount there is direct reference to enemies, who include presumably fellow Jews who persecute followers of Jesus (5:10; “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” 5:44). This has the potential to counter any attempt to gain comfort in seeing those enemies meeting a terrible fate.

The issue of handling rejection by Jews, primarily fellow Jews, receives attention in the sending out discourse, into which Matthew has incorporated material which Mark had placed in Jesus’ final discourse in Mark 13, and which Matthew has supplemented. Synagogues and councils will persecute Jesus’ followers and families will face divisions (10:16–25, 34–39). The focus is realistic expectation: you are likely to face persecution; you go out as sheep among wolves. In other words, rejection is to be expected.

The following chapter cites examples of rejection by Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, threatening them with worse consequences on the day of judgement than for Tyre, Sidon and Sodom (11:20–24). Threatening judgement is a major strategy in Matthew, who has John the Baptist already do so and profile Jesus as judge to come, and who makes it a constant theme in the closing words of the five main discourses, directed to all who refuse the message, including members of the church. In that regard, any sense of comfort which Matthew’s hearers might have

⁹ On Matthew’s depiction of Jesus’ attitude towards Torah, see further LOADER, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law*, 136–272.

¹⁰ See LOADER, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law*, 187–95.

in hearing of God's judgement against unbelievers is a two-edged sword because it applies equally to them.

Matthew gives more attention to rejection as he has Jesus' ministry reach its climax. Matthew supplements Mark's account of the parable of the wicked vineyard workers who kill the son of the owner who now employs new workers (leaders of the church) (Mark 12:1–12; Matt 21:33–46), with the parables of the two sons, about responses to John the Baptist (21:28–32) and the wedding feast, about responses to Jesus' disciples (22:1–14). Failure to bear fruit is part of the charge and refers to faithful keeping of Torah; rejecting Jesus and his message is the other. Matthew's hearers would take reassurance from the image of their leaders now replacing the unfaithful leaders and their being invited and given a place in the kingdom after those first invited forfeited it by not responding. There is here a sense of a change of leadership, but not of abandonment of Israel as a whole.

In his expansion of the Parable of the Great Feast (cf. Luke 13:15–24) to become a wedding feast, Matthew interprets the disaster of the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple as God's judgement against its inhabitants for rejecting Jesus and his messengers. It finds its echo in words put on the lips of the Jerusalem crowd, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25). It follows the image of Pilate as protesting his innocence in surrender to their will and so placing the blame for Jesus' death on the Jerusalem crowd and its leaders. It is not clear if Matthew is looking back at 70 CE with a sense of pain or a sense of joy and that ambiguity allowed antisemitism to feed on such texts.

Matthew 23 provides an account of what the author sees as Jesus' charge against the leaders and, given its introduction as instruction to the disciples, very likely reflects conflicts of Matthew's own time, not least because those addressed in leadership reflect those who would have been in leadership in his time, especially the Pharisees. The initial statement is very revealing in acknowledging the legitimacy of the scribes and Pharisees as teachers of Torah. One should follow what they teach (if they are teaching Torah), but not what they do (23:2–3). Matthew then spells out the latter as imposing unrealistic demands, as engaged in self-serving concern for recognition, and as promoting interpretations which create barriers and fail to focus on core values of Torah. In words originally cited as Wisdom's, as Luke preserves (11:49), Matthew has Jesus point to the succession of sometimes violent rejections of God's emissaries, including now of Jesus himself (23:32–35). It concludes with an address to Jerusalem, bemoaning successive attempts to gather her children together as a hen, its chicks (23:37–39). This is surely more a lament than a gloat.

Reviewing Matthew from the perspective of dealing with rejection, we see that the primary strategy is to depict such rejection as a manifestation of failure to observe Torah and so of just punishment in recent times (70 CE) and in the judgement to come. Conversely, Matthew assures his hearers that Jesus and those who follow him uphold Torah and so face no such judgement. Apart from Matthew's

citation of Isaiah 6:9–10 in expanding Mark, there is no attempt to explain rejection in theistic terms as determined, nor to depict those who reject as inherently bad. He even accepts their teaching role as legitimate.

The depiction of rejection as blameworthy, both as disobedience in relation to Torah and refusal to acknowledge Jesus as its authoritative interpreter, comes in the context of a gospel which has Jesus teach: “Love your enemies” (5:44). Love can entail confrontation. It can easily reverse into hate when rejected. This is not clearly evident, despite the assurances that those who reject will face judgement. For some hearers, such judgement may serve to satisfy hate and revenge, such as we find among the martyrs beneath the altar in Revelation who cry out for vengeance (6:9–10).

Matthew does not go beyond declaring that judgement awaits those who reject but counters any sense of superiority and self-satisfaction among believers by holding them to the same criteria. Love does show in Matthew’s instructions about a church member who goes astray, by prefacing it with what originally represented Jesus’ approach to his fellow Jews, namely, that God’s love reaches out to the lost and wayward as a shepherd does for sheep (18:10–20). There is, thus, a strong sense of continuity in Matthew who portrays Jesus and the church as faithfully observant of Torah and representative of Israel. That ultimately gives comfort and reassurance in the face of rejection.

Luke-Acts Processing Rejection

A more cursory glance at Luke and Acts reveals that here we have an author now apparently in a context where Gentile churches dominate but where the issue of Jews’ rejection of Jesus and the church remains a matter of concern. His history deals with this by portraying Jesus’ beginnings among the faithful and devout of the temple. Similarly, at the beginning of Acts we see faithful Jews connected to the temple. Luke also shares the saying of Jesus which declares Torah inviolate and its observance mandatory.¹¹ In this way Jesus and the church’s beginnings arise from among faithful Torah observant Jews. Luke even portrays future hope as Jerusalem centred, reflecting a strong sense of continuity with Israel (21:28). The expansion of the mission reflects in part a version of the fulfilment of the hope of Gentiles coming in the last days to Zion.

Luke’s portrait of the failure of the mission to Israel and the subsequent turning to the Gentiles, is not a rejection of Israel, but a claim that the Christ believing Jews together with the Gentiles preserve the divine plan for Israel and the nations and that the many Jews who have rejected the message no longer belong. One may imagine a Jew in the time of Jewish resurgence in the 80s encountering a

¹¹ On Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ attitude towards Torah, see LOADER, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law*, 273–389.

Gentile Christ believer with question why he is using Israel's scripture as his own, to which the Christ believer informed by Luke would explain that they are now the legitimate bearers of Israel's tradition. Luke achieves this also by creative use of typology in depicting the church's beginnings as reflecting the stories of Israel and through numerology, the 12 and the 40 days.

Luke deals with what he clearly senses as elements of discontinuity, namely circumcision of gentiles and table fellowship with them, by evoking divine intervention in a revelation to Peter (Acts 10). That was an exception which proved the rule that otherwise the Torah's demands for Jews and more defined for Gentiles remain (Luke 16:17; Acts 15). Thus, Luke's story goes beyond Matthew's in addressing rejection, to explain how his church can claim continuity. In this way, it consoles those having to process rejection by demonstrating a link of continuity through devout observers and through divine intervention. Luke, too, uses the Parable of the Sower and Mark's loose citation of Isaiah 6:9–10, but now in the final verses of Acts does so descriptively rather than prescriptively:

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,
²⁶ "Go to this people and say,

You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

²⁷ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them."

²⁸ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the
Gentiles; they will listen. (Acts 28:25–28)

John Processing Rejection

In the fourth gospel, the issue of rejection receives greater attention, both in the words of its protagonist, Jesus, and in the narrative itself. Its creative elaboration of traditions such as we find in the synoptic gospels and probably in dependence on them, or at least Mark, focuses particularly on rejection of Jesus' claims to be God's Son. There are some occasions where conflict focuses on interpretation of Torah, but these are rare and trumped by such claims to authority which in turn exempt adherence to Torah, as in the healing of the man at the poolside on the Sabbath in John 5 and of the blind man in John 9.

Unlike in Matthew and Luke, the author does not focus on Jesus' opponents' alleged transgression and misinterpretation of Torah. Torah has itself been redefined as now having the role of being a witness to Jesus, so that obedience to Torah is accordingly redefined as accepting its witness and so accepting Jesus (5:39).

Attributes traditionally attributed to Torah, such as word/wisdom, water, bread, light, life, way, truth, now belong exclusively to Jesus. He alone is hailed as the source of salvation. To reject him is to reject God. Already in the prologue this is evident where, as the Word/Logos, drawing on the tradition of Wisdom, Jesus comes to his own, and is rejected, much as Wisdom in 1 Enoch 42 was rejected.

The author helps his hearers come to terms with that rejection, which includes rejection of themselves as bearers of the message about Jesus, not simply by attributing blame, now for rejecting God's Son, but also theistically by seeing such rejection as divinely determined, depicting those rejecting as not chosen, elect, drawn, given (6:44–45, 64–65; 17:6, 11, 12, 24), but also as in any case bad people (3:19–21). They are not just bad because they reject. It is because they are bad that they reject. They are children of the devil, not children of Abraham (8:44). These are stark claims. In some ways they could be read as absolving such people of responsibility for their rejection, but, as noted above, that is not the way the language works. In contexts of attempted persuasion, the language of predestination serves to challenge people to turn and become elect. In that sense, it leaks possibilities of reversal. In the context of helping people come to terms with rejection, it offers comfort along the lines that it was "meant to be", but not in a way that absolves those who reject of responsibility.

The extraordinary claims made for Jesus, now repositioning Torah as a witness (which the author does similarly with John the Baptist), go far beyond what we find in the other gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, and raise more acutely the issue of continuity with the faith of Israel. John shows no signs of abandoning the faith of Israel or replacing it. Clearly it matters for him, and we may assume for his hearers, among whom will have been both Jews and Gentiles, for both of whom affirming continuity with Israel's faith tradition mattered, reflected already in use of biblical imagery.

The author's solutions to assuage such concerns has two elements: temporal and spatial. He depicts Torah with its temple and cult as existing at an earthly level (spatial) and pointing forward (temporal) to what would in effect replace them. Such a claim to continuity might be comfort to John's hearers to help them sense that they are after all at one with the faith of Israel as they claim. It would, of course, do little to convince others. The author of Hebrews employs a similar framework of interpretation, in addition using the language of popular platonism to supplement the claims.

Alongside this claim to continuity is a claim to exclusivity. The "I am" statements serve not only to assert but also to deny. Thus, only Jesus is the way (14:6). This exclusivity is reflected already in the prologue according to which those who accept Jesus become God's children, thus denying claims to be God's children by descent (1:12–13). The author is seeking to help people to come to terms with rejection by asserting that they have exclusive access to salvation, which is only through the person of Jesus. To achieve this the author had to redefine also John the Baptist's role, removing from him the message of universal

forgiveness for those who repent and submit themselves to baptism and instead have him point to Jesus (1:29).

Conclusion

This paper began with the question to what extent the strategies for dealing with rejection found in John's gospel are reflected elsewhere in the writings of the New Testament and to that end considered the synoptic gospels and Paul. Mark is very likely citing a parable used originally by Jesus to assert hope in the face of rejection. It then became a vehicle for reflection on the grounds for failure, which addressed what lay behind it. Subsequently, such rejection was portrayed in theistic terms as divinely determined and Mark even appears to turn the purpose of parables upside down by arguing that they served that end.

We found the notion of theistic determinism played a role in Paul's discussion of rejection. In taking up Markan material related to the sower parable, Matthew and Luke continue it, but in their gospels it does not feature significantly. In Matthew rejection arises from not observing Torah as it should be observed, namely as taught by Jesus its interpreter. Opponents reject Jesus because they do not uphold Torah. The primary focus is their sinful attitudes and actions. Matthew's hearers can be reassured their rejection has no validity, while also being cautioned that a similar fate will await them if they turn from the Law. His hearers may have heard of their fate, especially the inhabitants of Jerusalem with sadness, but possibly with satisfaction, though Matthew has reported Jesus' command to love enemies.

Luke shares that saying, but, while also affirming Torah's continuing validity with some divinely mandated exceptions, focuses on rejection not primarily as Torah disobedience but as stubborn unwillingness to accept the gospel. His reassurance to readers is continuity through his history showing the context of Jesus and the movement as devout and faithful Jews, in contrast to whom others chose effectively no longer to belong, and as reflected in typological matches which with divine interventions assure hearers of divine purpose.

Paul's response, while using theistic determinism, goes beyond depicting opponents as wicked and disobedient to depict them as misguided in their devotion, as a result of which they do not respond to the gospel. In this sense he focuses more on cause and not just on behavioural symptoms. He is furthest from coming to terms with rejection by seeing opponents as written off and deserving their fate. At least in relation to fellow Jews who reject, he asserts love in the form of hope and belief that they will one day respond positively and grounds this in his belief in God's love, at least for Israel.

In the writings considered we do find elements of what is starkly present in John but not to the same degree. Claims are not as rigidly exclusive and at least John the Baptist remains as a source of forgiveness. There is not really an equivalent

to John's stark claims that opponents are inherently bad and therefore do not come to the light and are children of the devil, despite their depiction as wicked and disobedient. We do find some references to divine determinism, as reflected in the use of Isaiah 6:9-10, but not nearly to the same extent as in John. Clearly, however, dealing with what rejection means was an issue for all of them.

Rejection in the context of conflict is never easy, especially when one has a personal investment in the relationship. This is obvious in interpersonal relations, but it also has relevance for relationships between groups. It will have especially difficult when Christ believing Jews experienced rejection from fellow Jews, and similarly for Gentile believers who had come to believe that they were embracing Israel's faith. Rejection can evoke not just hurt but also anger and can call one's identity into question. One might see Jewish rejection as murderous or blatant disobedience or simply as indifference and attribute blame. Going beyond that raises ethical questions.

Coming to terms with such rejection by seeing it as determined by God might offer some comfort. Anger might go further and denigrate opponents as inherently evil. *Schadenfreude* then feels satisfaction at the prospect of their future fate. Anger always has the potential to turn into hate and some of the options taken by New Testament writers like Matthew and John became an inspiration for antisemitic stances. Against them stands the challenge to love one's enemies. Matthew and Luke cite it. Paul embraces love, at least, for his own who reject him and allows love a mystery of hopefulness centred on God's faithfulness. In Romans he reflects such love towards enemies when he writes: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Rom 12:14). Models of healthy and unhealthy processing of the grief of rejection are present in our texts. The challenge in our own time is to seek peace and love. I offer these reflections in honour of Professor Stelian Tofană, who has modelled ecumenical dialogue in the field of New Testament studies.

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