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Vengeance Is God's: Jesus's Perpetuation of Jewish Teachings

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RUTH LANGER
ruth.langer@bc.edu
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

Introduction

I write the following as a Jew who has been engaged in dialogue increasingly deeply over the past decades, seeking avenues of Jewish self-criticism. Jewish prayers for divine vengeance came to my attention long before the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, but that and the war following made the topic urgently relevant. Jews have long prayed "May God avenge his/her/their blood," about martyrs and victims of terror; the sheer scale of the 2023 tragedy made this call seem omnipresent.[1]

This plays into a negative Christian stereotype of Jews that finds its most famous expression in William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (Act 3 Scene 1) where Shylock cries out in his famous "I am a Jew" soliloquy, arguing for the fundamental humanity of his people, including:

> And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

The word "revenge" echoes in Shylock's speech here. Fulfilling his legally legitimate demand for a pound of Antonio's flesh from near his heart, as he well knows, is a death sentence. Shakespeare suggests that this Jew's desire for revenge, for blood, goes beyond the specifics of this one unfulfilled bond. It is more systemic, evil, and fundamental; it emerges from another stereotyped trait: his Jewish money-grubbing. The Christian counterpoint, "mercy,"[2] echoes as well in this play, particularly in Portia's lectures to Shylock in this same scene, urging him to forfeit his

[1] See my forthcoming, "Jewish Prayers for Divine Vengeance," *New Studies in Jewish Liturgy in Honor of Uri Ehrlich*, ed. Haim Kreisel, Shimon Fogel, Vered Raziel Kretzmer, and Joseph Tabory, Jewish Thought 8 (Ben Gurion University Press).
[2] Cf. Luke 6:36.

bond. Yet, subtly, Shakespeare seems to recognize that this is an unsupported stereotype. In concluding his plea for the recognition of a Jew's basic humanity, Shylock accuses Christians too of desiring revenge and even of teaching Jews to seek it. Indeed, when at the end of the play, Shylock loses his property and is forced to convert, Shakespeare portrays precisely such an act of Christian vengeance, or is it justice?

Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock and this discourse around themes of vengeance and justice plays with an antisemitic trope that derives in no small part from what became a common interpretation of Jesus's teachings in his Sermon, especially in Matthew's version. Shylock's initial claim, "hath not a Jew eyes?" hints at the Matthean contrast between the Old Testament's "an eye for an eye" (Exod 21-24, Lev 24:20, Deut 19:21) and Jesus's imperative "do not resist evil" and "turn the other cheek" (Matt 5:38-39). Matthew here was read as representing Jesus as teaching a radical rejection of Old Testament vengeance and in so doing, critiquing Jews. This generates the stereotype that Shakespeare echoes and that becomes part of Christian cultural and theological anti-Judaism.

However, this stereotype cannot be documented much before Shakespeare's time. Luther's 1543 "On the Jews and their Lies" is apparently its earliest literary appearance.[3] However, this stereotyping of Jews and Judaism persists today. "An eye for an eye" is still a common Christian disparagement of Old Testament justice, contrasted with Jesus's teachings of love. Jews are thus vengeful, lacking mercy.[4] Christians, in contrast, follow Jesus' teaching to turn the other cheek, not to resist injustice or demand recompense, mercifully going beyond what justice demands of them and loving their enemies (Matt 5:38-48; cf. Luke 6:27-36). This stereotyped difference is so common and ingrained that my students routinely tune out any demonstration of its theological problematics.

This disparaging distinction derives from words that Matthew and Luke present, with some significant differences in nuance, as Jesus' own words in his Sermon. Modern scholars, though, understand that these evangelists present different reworkings of Jesus's actual words. Jesus, they remind us, spoke to a Jewish audience and within the context of the lively Jewish discourse about how to live an appropriate life according to the teachings of Torah.

For the purposes of this project's investigation of how understanding Jesus's Jewishness can impact Christian-Jewish relations today, this paper investigates this stereotyped distinction between Jews and Christians. Was it the teaching of the Jew Jesus? Or was it introduced by Matthew to meet the needs of his late first-century audiences? How does this stereotype affect Jews? I will argue that the stereotype

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[3] Jehuda Reinharz and Monika Schwartz-Friesel, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind: The Language of Jew Hatred in Contemporary Germany* (Brandeis University Press, 2017), 52, citing Luther (Berwald, 1543/1577), 377. See also Susan Jacoby, *Wild Justice: The Evolution of Revenge* (Harper and Row, 1983), 107-108. She provides no specific references.

[4] This stereotype perhaps appears in the first (1600) edition of *Merchant of Venice* too, when Shylock's deserting servant, identified as the "clowne" (later, as Lancelot Gobbo), says, "There will come a Christian by,/ Will be worth a Jewes eye" (II:v, D1 verso, https://digitalcollections.folger.edu/bib163955-157592). Current editions read "Jewess'."

itself likely arises from Matthew's reworking of Jesus's original teaching. This results in a mischaracterization of Judaism. Jewish teachings actively discourage human-initiated vengeance; God, on the other hand, when operating as a God of justice does exact vengeance.

Vengeance in the Hebrew Bible

What do we know about that Jewish discourse? For this, we need to begin with the canon of Jewish Scriptures. The Hebrew Bible knows that vengeance can be destructive or cruel, involving unjustifiable hatred, vindictiveness, and injustice. However, in biblical Hebrew, the normal words for vengeance, derived from the root *n-q-m* and its synonyms,[5] more frequently point to a legitimate, humanly or divinely implemented punishment for an illegal act. In other words, properly enacted, divinely sanctioned vengeance is most often an expression of fundamental justice and restitution, necessary to the functioning of society and creation.[6] The Bible severely limits legitimate acts of vengeance by individual humans. The Exodus covenant code requires it only to avenge or redeem the blood of an intentionally murdered family member (Exod 21:12-13, 20-21; 22:1-2).[7]

This responsibility for personally ensuring justice was apparently not considered an entirely positive task; it was over time gradually centralized into a court system. This enabled Jews to interpret Lev 19:18's "You shall not take vengeance…against members of your people"[8] as an outright prohibition on any vengeance against a fellow Israelite. Yaakov Shalom Licht reads this prohibition within its context of Lev 19's commandments to love one's neighbor and not to hate one's fellow, thus suggesting that Leviticus forbids even the desire to take vengeance within the Israelite community.[9] Ongoing Jewish tradition, in the time of Jesus and beyond, continued this reliance on local courts. Judaism does not implement Exodus' system of personal blood vengeance.[10]

Vengeance, however, remains part of Hebrew Bible discourse. There, most humans legitimately exacting *neqamah*, vengeance, are acting as God's instruments of justice on earth, sometimes in the context of war (e.g. Josh 10:13, 1 Sam 14:24). God's acts of vengeance are, by definition, praiseworthy. Many, though, never take place. Rather, God utters pre-emptive warnings, giving humanity a

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[5] Most frequently the noun *g'mul* (recompense), combined with verbs *heishiv* (return), *shilem* (pay), or *darash* (demand).

[6] According to the count of Wayne T. Pitard, "Vengeance," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (Doubleday, 1992), VI:786, the term appears seventy-four times in forty-nine biblical passages. Fourteen of these contexts are explicitly legal, and twenty-four more carry a similar meaning. In only twelve passages does the context suggest "malicious retaliation," but in most of these, the avenger is an enemy of Israel or of God.

[7] Num 35:29-34 describes this process but does not explicitly use the language of *neqamah* (vengeance).

[8] All Hebrew Bible translations are RJPS unless otherwise noted.

[9] Yaakov Shalom Licht, "*Neqamah*," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* [Heb.] (Mosad Bialik, 1968), V: 918.

[10] For an overview of Jewish court systems from the Bible to today, see Haim Hermann Cohn, Isaac Levitats, and Moshe Drori, "Bet Din and Judges," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), III: 512-524.

chance to amend its ways. While occasionally God's vengeance punishes the Israelites for their breaches of the covenant, most responds to Israel's own suffering; the Bible anticipates God's future punishment of precisely the human tools that God has used to create Israelite suffering. Israel's enemies are thus God's enemies. For example, God declares at the end of Deuteronomy 32, with its multiple explicit invocations of divine *neqamah* against the nations that God has used to punish a wayward Israel:

> See, then, that I, I am the One; There is no god beside Me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal: None can deliver from My hand. Lo, I raise My hand to heaven, and say: As I live forever, when I whet My flashing blade and My hand lays hold on judgment, **vengeance will I wreak on My foes**, will I deal to those who reject Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood—as My sword devours flesh—blood of the slain and the captive from the long-haired enemy chiefs. O nations, acclaim this people! For [God] will **avenge the blood** of these servants, **wreak vengeance** on opponents, and cleanse this people's land (Deut 32:39-43, emphases mine).

Prophetic predictions of the downfall of other nations similarly assert that disasters will beset them as retribution for their treatment of Israel (e.g., Isa 34:8, Jer 50-51, Nahum).

Thus, divine vengeance is an element of prophecies of comfort for Israel, whether speaking of the downfall of the wicked or foreseeing Israel's ultimate redemption. Similar themes appear also in Psalms (e.g., 79:10, 110:4-6 [with alternative terminology]). Ps 94 is particularly powerful in its prayerful petition that God, as the God of retributive vengeance, will appear, uphold justice, and punish the Psalmist's evil persecutors. In none of these cases, though, do humans initiate the vengeance; rather God is the sole actor. The root *n-q-m* and related biblical terms thus do not necessarily carry the negative emotional and psychological connotations associated with the word "vengeance" in western languages; rather, their field of meaning is much broader. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld suggests that "retribution" or "punishment" would be more appropriate translations than "vengeance" because its connotations today of arbitrariness and emotionality are not appropriate to the biblical understanding.[11] However, I prefer to retrieve a broader meaning of "vengeance."

Vengeance in the New Testament

This was the biblical heritage of Jesus, Paul, and their Jewish contemporaries. While Paul's discussion of vengeance, and that found in Revelation is largely in continuity with this heritage, Matthew, especially, records Jesus as taking a radically new direction. Although Jesus does not address vengeance directly, he teaches

[11] "Psalm 94," in *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer et al., Hermeneia (1517 Media; Fortress Press, 2005), 453.

abundantly about love, patient suffering, and forgiveness of enemies, i.e., the obverse of vengeance. This shapes subsequent discourse, including in the *Merchant of Venice* with which we began.

The key locus for this discourse appears in the collection of Jesus's sayings, presented somewhat differently by Matthew and Luke as part of his Sermon (Matt 5:39-48; Luke. 6:27-38). These evangelists differently order and nuance Jesus's remembered message, recasting it in the process. What Jesus actually said is lost, but a careful comparison highlights the evangelists' reshaping of it.[12]

	LUKE 6:27-38	**MATTHEW 5:39-48**
A		**38** "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
B	**27** "But I say to you who are listening:	**39** But I say to you:
C	Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; **28** bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.	
D	**29** If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.	Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, **40** and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well,
E		**41** and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.
F	**30** Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again.	**42** Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.
G	**31** Do to others as you would have them do to you.	(= Matt 7:12: In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.)
H		**43** "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' **44** But I say to you:
I		Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and

[12] New Testament translations follow the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

		sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.
J	**32** "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **33** If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.	**46** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? **47** And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?
K	**34** If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.	
L	**35** Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.	
M	**36** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.	**48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
N	**37** "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; **38** give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."	

As commentators point out, most of the differences here reflect the evangelists' need to communicate effectively in their own contexts.[13] The commonalities suggest that Jesus himself teaches radical love, even for those who, rather than reciprocating that love, act as tormentors of various sorts. Such a love stands in opposition, by implication, not only to personal vengeance, but also to any desire that God avenge the wrongs done. Luke presents a single coherent set of teachings

[13] François Bovon, *Luke I: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 232-233, points to Luke's language of "sinners" instead of the more culturally specific "tax collectors" in J.

structured by the repeated exhortation to love one's enemies (C and L). All else elaborates upon this. Matthew, however, presents this same material as his fifth and sixth contrasts[14] (5:39-48), plus the Golden Rule (7:12), separating Jesus's teaching about a nonviolent, non-retaliatory response to evildoing from its intensification in the loving response one should have, even to one's persecutors.[15]

Both of these contrasts (A and H) begin, "You have heard that it was said," followed by a purportedly well-known Jewish biblical teaching – though H's commandment to hate enemies appears only in Qumran literature (1QS 9.21). Matthew then prefaces Jesus' preferred teaching with "But I say…" With this, Matthew contrasts Jesus's own teaching with that of unnamed others. These, because they live by the Bible, must be Jews. The stereotyped association of Jews with vengeance with which we began emerges from this New Testament source. However, Matthew's reworking suggests that he added this framing as part of the anti-Jewish polemic characteristic of his Gospel; therefore, they are not Jesus's own words. But is it not also possible that Luke excised this contrast as not communicating meaningfully to his own audience, interfering instead with his discourse on radical love?[16] For further insight into Jesus's actual teaching, we need to examine its impact elsewhere in the New Testament. What did other early Jesus-followers understand Jesus himself to have taught?

In Romans 12:14, Paul writes, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." In this, he echoes Jesus's words that frame the teaching in Luke (C and L) and that appear in Matthew (L) as "But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43-44). Paul then goes beyond Jesus's sermon, addressing directly how this fits with desires for vengeance, continuing:

> **17** Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. **18** If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God,[17] for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." (Rom 12: 17-19, citing Deut 32:35).

In including (or adding?) an explicit discussion of vengeance, Paul acknowledges the human emotional response to being wronged more explicitly than does Jesus' Sermon tradition. He does not condone acting on this emotion, though. In explicit continuity with Jewish Scripture, Paul here teaches that legitimate vengeance

[14] Often labelled "antitheses." Jesper Svartvik, *Jewish Foundations of the New Testament: Addressing the Roots of Antisemitism* (Paulist Press), 9-11, citing a number of leading scholars, argues that these are better called "*hypertheses,*" as "the Matthean protagonist does not go against the commandments but wants to go further and higher." See also *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd edition, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Brettler (Oxford, 2017), 18, 20 n. 5.21-48 (henceforth: JANT).

[15] A number of commentators on these texts struggle to identify Matthew and Luke's hypothesized common source, Q. As my discussion is not dependent on Q's specific content or even existence, I avoid the inevitable pitfalls of this hypothesizing.

[16] See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, Hermeneia (Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 270-71, 275.

[17] Greek reads simply "wrath" (NRSVUE note ad loc.).

comes only from God's hands. Because of this, humans should willingly endure evil inflicted on them by others. The proper human response to evil, he teaches, coherent with Jesus's sermon, is acts of mercy. He continues, "Instead, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'[18] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:20-21, citing Prov 25:21-22).

In practice, though, Paul does not fully remove legitimate vengeance from the human level, writing, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." Therefore, he says, these rulers have the right and responsibility to punish wrongdoers. In this, "They are God's servants, agents of (or avengers bringing[19]) wrath, to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:1-4).[20] Thus, Paul does not condemn vengeance on a theoretical level; he merely confines the right to act on it to God and God's agents, the government. This is still coherent with Jesus's call for radical love in the face of one's persecutors, but it confines it to a motivator of personal action and does not hamper effective communal governance. This is more coherent with Luke's version than with Matthew's antitheses, which Paul apparently does not know.

Discussions of divine vengeance without opprobrium also appear elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul explicitly mentions it in 1 Thess 4:6 and 2 Thess 1:8 and implicitly threatens it in 2 Cor 10:6. Luke 18:3-8 records a parable of Jesus about a widow seeking vengeance against her opponent from a corrupt judge who eventually grants it to her. Jesus teaches that God too will grant such vengeance to his chosen ones who petition for it constantly.[21] Revelation foresees martyrs calling

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[18] Romans omits the last phrase of the Proverbs verses, "and the Lord will reward you." Robert Jewett and Roy D. Kotansky, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon J. Epp, Hermeneia (1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2006), 778, suggest that this changes the motivation for following the verse from receiving a reward to instead a love ethic that imitates God's love for the undeserving, as appears earlier in the book. However, this suggestion ignores the echo between the conclusion of the Proverbs verse and Deut 32:35 both in Hebrew and in Greek. The same Hebrew word (in different tenses) is translated in Proverbs as "reward" (*yeshalem*), and in Deuteronomy as "repay" (*shilem*). In Deuteronomy, applied to enemies, this verb is a synonym for "avenge," abbreviated from the fuller phrase *leshalem g'mul*. The meaning in Proverbs is not different. It seems plausible that Paul consciously generated this pun in his juxtaposition of these verses. However, to do this, he would have relied on the Hebrew texts. The LXX does translate both words as *antapodoso/ei*, but it adds a modifier in Proverbs, specifying that this reward is "with good things," thus precluding the parallel and Deuteronomy's punitive sense.

[19] The King James Version and its followers employ this language of vengeance, "for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." This draws on language already present in the fourteenth-century Wycliffe Bible. Jewett and Kotansky, 780-81 n. l, indicate that there is not strong support justifying a preference for any one of the variants on this part of 13:4. Their translation reads, "For she (the authority) is God's servant, an avenger [bringing] wrath upon the one practicing the bad." This positive view of the government in Rome, they say, must reflect a period of benign rule under Nero and not his later brutal persecutions of Christians (796).

[20] Chapter divisions are a medieval addition to the text. As there are no rhetorical markers of a change in subject here, it is legitimate to read these passages together. See Jewett and Kotansky, 781.

[21] NRSVUE translates the relevant verbs as "grant justice." See Amy-Jill Levine's discussion of this passage in her *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, 2014), 209. See also her note on this in the JANT, 152, v. 3, "lit. 'avenge me'." Compare also the appearance of this same verb in 2 Cor 10:6.

out "with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?'" (6:10) and later tells of the heavenly jubilation over the fall of Babylon because God "has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her prostitution, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants" (19:2). Even within Matthew, much more so than the other Gospels, parables foretell violent divinely inflicted punishments, i.e., divine vengeance, for those who fail to prepare themselves appropriately for the coming Kingdom.[22] These are not coherent with the message of Jesus in Matthew's version of the sermon.[23]

Consequently, the temptation to compare Old Testament and New Testament about this entire discourse derives from Matthew the evangelist's reworking of the earlier discourse. The Hebrew Bible's teachings about vengeance evolved over centuries and empires, all concluded well before the time of the New Testament. Jesus and Paul were Jews, living within the complex Jewish world of the eastern Mediterranean (and within that, mostly in Judea and the Galilee) in the early first century CE. Their teachings about human and divine vengeance were consistent with the model set in Jewish Scriptures, even as they also negotiated as Jews with this model in ways appropriate to their own time.

Implications of Matthew's Reworking in Post-Biblical Worlds

Jesus's and Paul's followers, most not Jews, continued to negotiate with this model in seeking to understand Jesus's death and resurrection, and particularly, the role within this of God the Father.[24] The very different experiences of Jews and Christians in subsequent centuries, especially the Jewish loss of sovereignty and the experiences of life as a tiny minority in exile while Christians emerged as the rulers of empires, also led to some substantial differences in their understandings of the role of vengeance and especially divine vengeance in their own times. However, they preserved for most of subsequent history the understanding that God's justice includes retribution for sinful human behavior, and that human rulers' mandates include acting as instruments of divine justice and hence of divine vengeance.[25]

Jesus lived in a Jewish society that was losing its political autonomy. The Judean state, encompassing also the Galilee, had become a vassal state of Rome in 63 BCE; the tensions of this relationship shaped his life and led to his death at Roman hands. Search for relief from Roman oppression, for a restoration of the God-promised Jewish sovereignty over their land, were significant elements in the upsurge in messianic expectations in the community into which Jesus was born.

[22] This polemic appears particularly sharply with frequent and uniquely vehement language in Matthew. The threat of "wailing and grinding of teeth" appears only in Matthean parables, 13:47–50, 22:2–14, 25:14–30, 24:45-51, with other threats of awful deaths in 13:24–30, 18:23–35, 25:31–46.

[23] My thanks to Amy-Jill Levine for her guidance through the New Testament discussion.

[24] Ralf Miggelbrink traces these developments in detail as they apply to God's wrath, in his *Der Zorn Gottes: Geschichte und Aktualität einer ungeliebten biblischen Tradition* (Herder, 2000), Part A.

[25] As summarized by Jacoby, *Wild Justice,* 90-108.

God's intervention to counteract the injustices of Roman rule, an act of divine vengeance against Rome, was fervently anticipated, as is hinted in the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the period, including among the Dead Sea Scrolls, in whose vocabulary the root *naqam* has a not insignificant presence.[26]

As the Jewish and Christian ways parted, their experiences of suffering and their need for and understanding of divine vengeance diverged as well. Medieval Christians, and especially their ruling classes, still condemned private revenge. However, civil and religious rulers came to understand themselves corporately as the legitimate tools of divine vengeance, whether in the local punishment of sinful behaviors, in politically driven wars, or in religious battles against fellow Christians, rival Islamic caliphates, or more locally against Jews. Some of this was generated, if not necessitated, by the responsibilities of governing and defending an empire and its constituent parts, including Christian holy sites – perhaps epitomized by the Crusaders seeking to avenge tenth-century Muslim desecrations of Christian shrines in the Holy Land.[27]

As Susan Jacoby summarizes, "The long history of Christian vindictiveness toward Jews of Europe is the paradigmatic western example of vengeance committed in the name of divine justice…The Christianity preached by Jesus makes abandonment of vengeance a condition of personal salvation; the Christianity expounded by ecclesiastical authority has, at many points in history, made vindictiveness a condition of institutional survival."[28] She reads Christian accusations that Jews are perpetually and collectively guilty of deicide against this lens. It is paradoxical that a Christian culture that regularly took vengeance on a Jewish community (that it accused of collectively inheriting the responsibility for deicide) was animated by a theology that insisted on individual responsibility for actual sin and that understood God to be primarily characterized by mercy and love. In a

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[26] Martin G. Abegg, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance Volume I.2: The Non-Biblical Texts from Qumran* (Brill, 2003), 520-21, lists fifty-six instances of this root. Not all are apocalyptic. For instances, the Damascus Document, CD IX:2-8 discusses the implementation of Lev 19:18. It specifies that to bring a charge in anger and without evidence against one's neighbor is to violate both Leviticus's prohibition of vengeance and bearing a grudge, as well as its commandment to reprove one's neighbor constructively. Contrast this with the use of the term in the "Rule of the Community" (1QS I:10-11) which speaks of the obligation to hate the sons of darkness at the time of God's vengeance against them. On these texts, see *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (The Jewish Publication Society, 2013), III: 2929, 3015.

[27] Jacoby, *Wild* Justice, 103-104.

[28] Jacoby, *Wild Justice*, 82-99, here 99. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (University of California Press, 2006), 131-32, points to concrete examples of twelfth-century Christian texts that present Jews as enemies of the human race and as murderers. In n. 108, he observes that these views are documented as early as the late eleventh century among the masses, becoming accepted among theologians only in the thirteenth. While Yuval in this discussion is primarily interested in Jewish curses of Christians, his general points about Christian awareness of Jewish anti-Christian discourse are relevant to calls for vengeance as well, as he states explicitly in his conclusion to this chapter, 134.

world where governmental vengeance was normalized, anti-Jewish violence could be rationalized as "just retribution" for Jews' collective first-century crime.[29]

However, there is more to this story. In the thirteenth century, theologians and church leaders, aided significantly by baptized Jews, became increasingly aware that their contemporary Jews lived not directly by the Bible but according to rabbinic Jewish teachings and practices.[30] Although Jewish liturgical calls for God to avenge the wrongs inflicted on them[31] were not yet explicitly part of the Christian critiques of Jewish anti-Christian practices in this period, this did not remain the case. As Christians increasingly sought to eliminate all anti-Christian language from their realms, they increasingly censored Jewish texts, a process that became widespread, more standardized, and internationally mandated after the advent of printing.[32] The targets included Jewish prayers for divine vengeance, especially when they responded to persecutions perpetrated by Christians. Christian awareness of Jewish use of such anti-Christian language almost certainly contributed to the growing Christian stereotype of the vengeful Jew.

Since hopes for God to avenge the wrongs inflicted on God's people appears in biblical texts, it should not be surprising that the rabbis embedded such language in their prayers, [33] sometimes with explicit reference to Rome or to Christians. Evidence appears as early as a prayer text attributed to Rabbi Yoḥanan (d. 279 CE) in the Land of Israel, i.e., in the period of rising Christian ascendancy there but before Christianity became politically powerful. He taught that the blessing following the ritual reading of Esther on Purim should cite God's words from Jer 51:36, "I will take your side in your quarrel and will exact vengeance for you," praising God for such actions and expanding the verse with "who redeems you and saves you from the hand of your oppressors" (TJ Meg 4:1, 74d). The Babylonian Talmud's version became standard, including five different terms describing God's vengeance on Israel's enemies. This text revises Jeremiah's language so that the objects of God's actions are "us" instead of "you," transforming it into an eschatological promise.

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[29] Jacoby, 66-67, 99-100. Embedded in her discussion are some English language word games which do not hold theological weight. Some differentiate between *private vengeance*, which, like Shylock's, can be vicious and driven by hatred, greed, or other negative (even sinful) emotions, and *public retribution, justice, or vindication*. The English "vengeance" is a borrowing via medieval French, ultimately from the Latin *vindicare*, whose more direct cognate is "vindicate." More obviously fallacious are tendencies in English to differentiate between "revenge" for malicious retaliation and "avenge" for just retribution. See the Oxford English Dictionary's note on the etymology of "to avenge": *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "avenge (*v.*), Etymology," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6389901011 .

[30] On this, see Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Cornell University Press, 1982). Cohen does not discuss themes of Jewish vengeance specifically, but the larger category of Jewish hostility to Christians appears throughout. See his index. Evidence for Christian concerns about the *birkat haminim* verifies this shift. See my *Cursing the Christians?: A History of the Birkat HaMinim* (Oxford University Press, 2012), especially Chapter 3.

[31] Discussed by Yuval, *Two Nations*…, 115-134.

[32] On censorship of Jewish liturgical texts, see my *Cursing the Christians?...*, 102-116. See also my "The Censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and Its Aftermath," in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, ed. Debra Reed Blank (Brill, 2011), 147-166.

[33] See my "Biblical Texts in Jewish Prayers: Their History and Function," in *Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship: New Insights into Its History and Interaction*, ed. Albert Gerhards and Clemens Leonhard (Brill, 2007), 63-90.

Thus, Purim not only celebrates a historical salvation of Jews, but anticipates future ones as well. This prayer was not a regular site of Christian censorship,[34] but there seems to have been some sensitivity to its contents. In the early sixteenth century, Joseph Karo, himself among the Jews forced to flee the Iberian peninsula rather than be baptized, writes insistently in his encyclopedic code, the *Beit Yosef*, that this vengeance is not to be a human endeavor, but rather God's alone (OH 692).[35] This is striking given that his generation had every reason to feel vengeful.

Other Jewish liturgical calls for divine vengeance were censored, and because early Jewish printing took place almost exclusively in Christian lands, this censorship was effective. I document this at length elsewhere,[36] so let me just name here a few loci. The second blessing following the *haftarah,* the prophetic reading on Sabbaths and holidays, originally read, "Have compassion on Zion Your city, because she is the source of our life, **and surely avenge the oppressed in spirit**, speedily, in our day. Blessed are You, Eternal, who (re)builds Jerusalem." The bold-faced words were replaced universally after censorship with the more neutral "and save the oppressed in spirit." A more abstract variant of the concluding blessing became common in European rites at the same time, praising God "who gladdens Zion through her children."

Later, Jewish prayers responding the devastation of their Rhineland communities during the Crusades routinely embedded calls for divine vengeance, i.e., for justice, for the spilled blood of the Jewish martyrs. These include a cluster of lines added to the penitential "*Avinu Malkeinu*" (Our Father, Our King) prayer, an Ashkenazi memorial prayer, *Av HaRaḥamim* (Father of Mercies), recited by some communities almost weekly, and the conclusions of *qinot* (dirges) memorializing the Crusades massacres, recited on the Ninth of Av. All of these prayers were regularly censored in part or in whole, sometimes completely blacked out. The presence of such language, especially in written form, was not tolerated in Christendom.

By the early modern period, the informal catalog of derogatory adjectives that Christians used to characterize and caricature Jews often included their vengefulness. The term ceased to be understood as a call for justice; instead, it was understood as an angry, emotion-driven call for retribution. In the raging public debates in the 1510s between the Christian Hebraist, Johannes Reuchlin and the baptized Jew, Johannes Pfefferkorn, over whether Jewish books should be preserved or burned, Reuchlin repeatedly accused Pfefferkorn of being vengeful "according to the traditional manner of his ancestors."[37] Later in the century, the accusation appeared in Martin Luther's diatribe, "On the Jews and Their Lies," where he accused Jews of being vengeful and vindictive, in the midst of long lists

[34] In my review of medieval liturgical manuscripts, I have not come across exemplars.
[35] This comment was itself censored in printings under Russian rule.
[36] See my forthcoming "Jewish Prayers for Divine Vengeance."
[37] Jacoby, *Wild Justice*…, 107. See also Abraham Geiger, *Johann Reuchlin: Sein Leben und seine Werke* (1871; rpt. Outlook Verlag, 2022), 162-63 n. 3, citing Reuchlin's *Augenspiegel* folio 32b as an example.

of other accusations.[38] Whether or not this accusation was original to Luther (and chances are it was not),[39] Luther's work significantly influenced the subsequent language of antisemitism. Jehuda Reinharz and Monika Schwartz-Friesel draw a straight line from Luther to modern aspersions on Jewish character, with vengefulness appearing in the discussions of Jews by the likes of Wilhelm Marr, the coiner of the term "antisemitism," of Nazis like Himmler, and as they were preparing their book (published 2017), against Israelis.[40]

Contemporary Implications/Issues

The Christian stereotype of Jews as personally vengeful and vindictive, of responding dangerously, harshly, inappropriately, and even violently to (perceived) injustice, is still very much present in our world. The living presence of vengeance language among sectors of Jewish society today, particularly in response to terrorism, feeds this stereotype. Even before the mass murders of October 7, 2023, but especially thereafter, religious sectors of Jewish society, particularly in Israel, inscribed after the name of a victim of terror, "May God avenge his/her blood" instead of the otherwise standard "may his/her memory be for a blessing." But what does this mean? Is it purely a call on God for justice, or is it taken as a mandate for humans to be God's agents? Some Jews, especially ultra-nationalist religious Zionist settlers, do take the initiative themselves; some of their violence against Palestinians includes spray-painting the word "vengeance."[41] The language enters Israeli politics as well. Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, publicly called for Israeli vengeance after Hamas initially returned an unrelated woman's body with the murdered remains of her two small red-headed boys instead of that of their mother, the hostage Shiri Bibas. This family had become icons of the October 7 hostages, magnifying the outrage. Netanyahu invoked Ps 94 and called for God's help in avenging this further insult, but also announced that Israel itself "will settle

[38] "On the Jews and Their Lies," trans. Martin H. Bertram, in *The Works of Martin Luther* Vol. 47, *Christians in Society*, Vol. 4, 157, 277, accessed at Intelex Past Masters, Full Text Humanities.

[39] Reinharz and Schwartz-Friesel, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind*, 52 (epub page number), cite Dietz Bering, „Gibt es bei Luther einen antisemitischen Wortschaft? Zur Widerlegung einer politischen Legende," *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik* 17 (1989), 155, whose study suggests that Luther's vocabulary drew on existing patterns and was not created by him. Bering does not specifically discuss Luther's use of language of vengeance, but the term does appear in his catalogue of Luther's invectives against the Jews (154, n. 46). See also Jacoby, 108-109.

[40] Reinharz and Schwartz-Friesel, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind...*, 57, 63, 71, 75, 86, 119, 135 (epub page numbers). The focus of this volume is an analysis of language about Jews found in letters of contemporary Germans. Some of those cited connect vengeance with "an eye for an eye," one claiming that today's Israelis seek even higher proportions today (110). See also Jacoby's discussion of discourse around Jewish vengeance during the Eichmann trial and accusations that Jews were pursuing "Old Testament vengeance" (109-110).

[41] A much-discussed example occurred on July 31, 2015 when Israeli settlers firebombed the Dawabsheh home in the West Bank Palestinian town of Duma and spray painting the Hebrew word *neqamah*, revenge, on the house's exterior. A toddler and his parents perished from the fire. See the *Wikipedia* article "Duma arson attack," accessed August 14, 2024 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duma_arson_attack#:~:text=On%2031%20July%202015%2C%20Israeli,from%20their%20injuries%20within%20weeks).

the score with the vile murderers."[42] Other Jews object strongly to such thinking. During the mourning period for his murdered family, Yarden Bibas, himself recently released from Gaza, explicitly rejected this call for vengeance, calling instead for a process governed by justice.[43]

Thus, we enter a complex and emotional web of moral and psychological questions. The human need for justice is real, but whose justice? And when does such justice shade over into vengeance? Who has the power and the legitimacy to implement this justice? These questions are apparent within the Hebrew Bible itself and remain alive in the New Testament. The tensions between Jews and Jesus-followers that enter the New Testament turn, by the late medieval world, into a Christian stereotype of the evil Jew who is by very nature bent on seeking personal vengeance. This stereotype is only enhanced by the language embedded in Jewish liturgy that, using language of vengeance, calls on God to arouse the divine quality of justice to right the wrongs inflicted on Jews by their neighbors. In Europe, these persecutors were Christians, and as these Christians became more aware of Jewish thinking, they increasingly associated Jews with being personally vengeful and hence dangerous. This fed a feedback loop where Christians became increasingly uncomfortable even with Divine vengeance, forgetting its role in justice and punishment of sin.

Christians caught in this loop overlook that Paul, who clearly knows Jesus's teaching about loving one's enemies and resisting vengeful acts by individuals, understands that God's vengeance is an expression of divine justice, and that God expects human governing powers to act in support of this. There is good reason to claim that this was coherent with Jesus's own teaching in his sermon, and that it was Matthew's reworking of this teaching into a version that embedded a contrast with Jewish teachings that encouraged a blanket condemnation of even divine vengeance. This nuance of the teachings of Jesus the Jew was lost to Christian consciousness.

Instead of learning from Jesus's (and Paul's) Jewish reflexes on this matter, modern Christians have interpreted them away. One example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's chapter on "The Enemies" in his *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. There he asks how Christians can pray the Psalms calling for divine wrath, those which

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[42] Lazar Berman, "Netanyahu says Israel united in grief over slain hostages, vows vengeance against Hamas," *Times of Israel* (20 February 2025), https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-says-israel-united-in-grief-over-slain-hostages-vows-vengeance-against-hamas/.

[43] "Yarden Bibas's letter to Netanyahu calling for state inquiry, asking PM to join him at kibbutz," *Times of Israel* (5 March 2025), https://www.timesofisrael.com/yarden-bibass-letter-to-netanyahu-calling-for-state-inquiry-asking-pm-to-join-him-at-kibbutz/. Note, though, that the Bibas family, here, and at the funeral, speak critically of revenge as motivating Israeli government decisions to pursue Hamas over freeing the hostages. This is not a unique voice. See also "Hostage families, opposition decry reported plan to occupy Gaza as risk to captives," *Times of Israel* (6 August 2025), https://www.timesofisrael.com/hostage-families-opposition-decry-reported-plan-to-occupy-gaza-as-risk-to-captives/#:~:text=Vicky%20Cohen%2C%20mother%20of%20hostage,she%20misses%20her%20son%20immensely.

seem to contradict Christ's own model on the cross of praying for his enemies. His answer reads divine vengeance christologically, as a solution to human sin. The actual suffering of the persecutor that vengeance would impose is instead assumed by Jesus on the cross; vengeance becomes not punishment but an act of forgiveness and prayer. "Thus," he writes, "the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies." Humans are incapable of forgiving their enemies except through the crucified Christ, he says. Ultimately, then, "the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all people in Jesus Christ."[44] Thus, Bonhoeffer transforms not only human vengeance but even God's in a way that first-century Jews and most Christians until modernity would find unrecognizable.

Erich Zenger (d. 2010), a leading German Catholic Bible scholar, recognized this problem, arguing that this tendency of modern Christians (especially Lutherans) to disavow not only human vengeance, but even God's vengeance, is fundamentally anti-Jewish. It is grounded in the stereotyped and ahistorical contrast between the Old Testament God of Wrath and the New Testament God of Love.[45] The recovery of the Jewish Jesus has consequences, then, not only for our historical understanding, but also for opening doors to dialogue and interreligious understanding today. Shylock was a projection of Christian imagination characteristic of Shakespeare's age. Today, when we recognize that Jesus and Paul's actual teachings about vengeance were in continuity with Jewish understandings, we may be able to banish this stereotype.

[44] Trans. James H. Burness (Augsburg Fortress, 1970; rpt. 1517 Media, Broadleaf Books, 2022), Ch. 15, quotes p. 70.

[45] *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); trans. from 1994 *Ein Gott der Rache: Feindpsalmen Verstehen*), 13-23. For a study of this dynamic, see Ralf Miggelbrink, *Der zornige Gott: Die Bedeutung einer anstößigen biblischen Tradition* (Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 9; see also his comprehensive *Der Zorn Gottes.*