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The Religious Leaders of Israel in Matthew's Narrative

The religious leaders of Israel are presented as “flat characters” in Matthew's story—that is, predictable figures who serve to embody the root trait of being evil.¹

The World of Matthew's Story

The parable of the wheat and weeds in 13:24–30 offers a dualistic picture of the world that contrasts with the biblical image of Genesis.

The parable is explained in 13:36–43:

The Son of Man put people in this world (the wheat).

The devil also put people in this world (the weeds).

God's servants (the field hands) should not try to get rid of the devil's children, for they might mistakenly eliminate some who were put here by the Son of Man.

The children of the Son of Man and the children of the devil must coexist.

The angels (the harvesters) will take care of the devil's children at the end of time, throwing them into the fires of hell and separating out the righteous for salvation.

This is bleak imagery. There is no hope for children of the devil. They cannot be reached by preaching, and they cannot repent. Weeds do not become wheat. The gospel is for children of the Son of Man, and those who accept it will be saved; people put here by the devil are destined for damnation. They will torment believers until the end and then get what is coming to them.

Identifying the Weeds

Later in Matthew's story, Jesus identifies the religious leaders of Israel with the weeds of this parable:

“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (15:13–14).

This is consistent with the rest of Matthew's story:

Jesus (and the narrator of Matthew's Gospel) repeatedly characterizes the religious leaders of Israel as “evil” (9:4; 12:34, 39; 16:4; 22:18), as a “brood of vipers” (12:34; 23:33), and as children “of hell” (23:15).

In this Gospel (unlike the others), there are no exceptions to the portrayal of the religious leaders as evil. There is not a single instance in which any religious leader of Israel says, does, thinks, or believes anything that is right.

Jesus never preaches to the religious leaders or calls them to repent (any more than he would the demons that he exorcizes). He simply tells them that they are evil and assures them of the eternal condemnation that awaits: “You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?” (23:33).

The Religious Leaders’ Role as “Flat Characters”

Did the historical author of this Gospel really believe that the scribes and Pharisees who interacted with Jesus were put on earth by the devil, that they were irredeemably evil and thus not candidates for conversion (didn’t he know about Paul)? This seems unlikely.

Literary critics maintain that “flat characters” in a narrative function primarily to personify values. In Matthew’s narrative, the scribes and Pharisees personify the primal value “evil”; what the scribes and Pharisees do in this story is what evil does: it condemns the guiltless (12:7), blasphemes the Holy Spirit (12:31), neglects the weightier matters of the law (23:23), and so on. Matthew’s readers probably are not expected to draw historical conclusions about scribes and Pharisees from this story, but rather are expected to come to an understanding of the nature of evil. They are expected to recognize that evil tends to be hypocritical, masquerading as good (23:27–28); involves unwitting self-deception, failing to recognize its own duplicity (15:14; 23:16–22); and perverts what otherwise would be good, ignoring motives or outcomes (6:2, 5, 16).

1. See Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Biblical Adventures in Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).