‘What is that to us? See to it yourself’ (Mt 27:4):
Making atonement and the Matthean portrait of the Jewish chief priests

Introduction

To read the Gospel of Matthew within its 1st century religious context is to read an intensely Jewish narrative. Central to the world of this Gospel are the Jerusalem temple, its administrators, the chief priests, and the sacrificial system which they are charged by Jewish law to officiate. This article assesses the Matthean portrait of the Jewish chief priests of Jesus’ day against the scriptural backdrop which lays out their prominent role within Jewish religious life, namely ‘making atonement’ before God for the ‘sins’ of the people. In section one I sketch out the Matthean portrait of the scripturally assigned role of the priests, connecting this portrait to its biblical antecedents. In section two I assess the overall performance of the Matthean chief priests against the backdrop of their assigned role. In section three I address the question of atonement. Crucial here is 27:3–10, the account of Judas Iscariot, who returns his 30 silver coins to the chief priests and says (27:4a; emphasis mine), ‘I have sinned, because I have handed over innocent blood’. Here I highlight Matthew’s ironic modus operandi as he portrays the chief priests’ non-priestly response to Judas. Additionally, I contrast Matthew’s portrait of the Jewish chief priests with a brief portrait of Jesus’ own ministry within the Jewish community, a ministry which fulfils the priestly role abandoned by the chief priests. I conclude my article in section four with brief reflections on the rhetorical impact of Matthew’s portrait of the Jewish chief priests within his overall narrative.
Central to the 1st century Palestinian world of Jewish religious life depicted within Matthew’s narrative are the Jerusalem temple, its primary administrators, the chief priests, and the sacrificial system which they are charged by Jewish law to officiate; a system in which gifts are ‘offered’ on the altar (5:23–24; 8:1–4; cf. 12:3–5), blood is ‘poured out’ to make atonement (26:28), and the ‘sins’ of the people are ‘forgiven’ (26:28b). The task of this article is to assess the Matthean portrait of the Jewish chief priests of Jesus’ day against the scriptural (largely Levitical) backdrop which lays out their primary role within Jewish religious life, namely ‘making atonement’ before God for the ‘sins’ of the people. In section one I will sketch out the Matthean portrayal of the scripturally assigned role of the priestly class within Jewish religious life, connecting this portrait to its biblical antecedents. In section two I will then assess the overall performance of the Matthean chief priests against the backdrop of their assigned role, highlighting their prominent characteristics as Matthew portrays them (cf. Weaver 2009). In section three I will address the question of atonement. A crucial text here will be 27:3–10, the account of Judas Iscariot, who returns his 30 silver coins to the chief priests and announces to them (27:4a; emphasis mine), ‘I have sinned, because I have handed over innocent blood’. Here I will highlight Matthew’s ironic modus operandi as he portrays the chief priests’ non-priestly response to an Israelite who comes to them confessing his sin. I will then contrast Matthew’s portrait of the Jewish chief priests with a brief portrait of Jesus’ own priestly ministry within the Jewish community, a ministry which fulfils the priestly role effectively abandoned by the chief priests, namely mediating atonement vis-à-vis the ‘sins’ of God’s people (1:21; 26:27–28). I will conclude my article in section four with brief reflections on the rhetorical impact of Matthew’s portrait of the Jewish chief priests within his overall narrative.

‘Go, show yourself to the priest’ (8:4b)
The assigned role of the Jewish priestly class within Matthew’s narrative

Whilst Matthew nowhere sets forth a detailed description of the scripturally assigned role of the priestly class within the Jewish community of 1st century Palestine, a close reading of Matthew’s narrative yields significant bits and pieces of such a description. Fundamental to the task of the chief priests is their scriptural calling to maintain the Jerusalem temple, that is, the ‘house of God’ (12:4), ‘my [ = God’s] house’ (21:13//Is 56:7), or the place where God ‘dwells’ (23:21), as a ‘house of prayer’ for the people of Israel (21:13//Is 56:7). It is the worship of God which lies at the root of the priestly calling and it is this priestly calling to give oversight to the worship life of the Jewish community which Jesus proclaims to the chief priests as he enters the temple during his Passover visit to Jerusalem and physically overturns the commercial enterprise which he finds there (21:12–13). Here Jesus draws on the words of the Prophet Isaiah to remind the chief priests of their sacred charge vis-à-vis the wider Jewish community: ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”’ (21:13a//Is 56:7).

The modus operandi of Jewish priests for carrying out their priestly calling to the worship life of the Jewish community is, in turn, sacrificial in character. The Jewish ‘house of
prayer’ is in fact a house of sacrifice, where gifts are ‘offered’ on the altar (5:23–24; 8:1–4; cf. 12:3–5), blood is ‘poured out’ to make atonement (cf. 26:28a), and the ‘sins’ of the people are ‘forgiven’ (cf. 26:28b). It is the priests who administer this sacrificial system, officiate at these sacrifices, and serve in this way as human agents of divine forgiveness. The everyday tasks of Jewish priests, as reflected within Matthew’s narrative, point, detail by detail, to the requirements laid out in the Torah for the Jewish sacrificial system.

Day by day the priests sacrifice the ‘gifts’ (doron) brought by worshippers to the ‘altar’ (thysiaseterion) in the temple (5:23–24; 23:18–20; cf. 8:1–4). Following an elaborate ritual outlined in Leviticus 14:1–32, they examine those whose leprosy has made them ritually unclean, validate their cleansing, and sacrifice the required offering brought by those who have been cleansed: ‘[C]o, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift [doron] that Moses commanded …’ (8:4). They also deposit financial gifts in the temple treasury (eis ton korban: 27:6; cf. 15:5 doron//Mk 7:11 korban, ho estin doron).

Sabbath by Sabbath they ‘[or] the bread of the Presence’ (tous artous tes protheses: 12:4; cf. Lv 24:5–9; Ex 40:23; 2 Macc 10:3), twelve loaves baked from ‘choice flour’ (Lv 24:5), ‘set … in order before the LORD regularly as a commitment of the people of Israel’ (Lv 24:8), and designated specifically ‘for Aaron and his descendants, who shall eat them in a holy place’ (Lv 24:9). Sabbath by Sabbath they likewise carry out their regular priestly duties in spite of Sabbath work prohibitions (12:5; cf. Nm 28:9–10).

Day by day and year by year the Jewish priests ‘make atonement’ (exilaskomai) on behalf of the people, so that their ‘sins’ (hai hamartiai) might be ‘forgiven’ (aphiemi). This happens both individually, on a case by case basis, and collectively, in an elaborate, annual ritual on the Day of Atonement. This annual ritual is enacted by the high priest inside ‘the curtain of the temple (katapetasma tou tou naou: Mt 27:51; cf. Lv 16:2, 12, 15), that curtain which sets apart ‘the most holy place’ (Ex 26:31–34), that is, the place in which God ‘dwells’ (cf. Mt 23:21). This ritual, clearly the single most important of all Jewish rituals, is enjoined on the priests in due solemnity by the word of the Lord to Moses (Lv 16:34): ‘This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins.’

Finally, in addition to their sacrificial work in ‘making atonement’ for the people, the priests likewise play a crucial deliberative role in ensuring that the Jewish community is ‘absolved of bloodguilt’ (Dt 21:8; cf. Mt 27:6 with its reference to ‘blood money’) in those cases where ‘innocent blood’ has been shed by an unknown perpetrator (Dt 21:1–9; cf. Mt 27:4). In the midst of an elaborate ritual of absolution carried out by the elders of the town nearest the dead body (Dt 21:1–4, 6–8), the priests are called into action as a deliberative group (Dt 21:5; emphasis mine):

Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister to him and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD, and by their decisions all cases of dispute and assault shall be settled.

The urgency of their deliberative work in this ritual of absolution is apparent in the motive clause which concludes this piece of case law (Dt 21:9; emphasis mine): ‘So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, because you must do what is right [LXX: good and pleasing (kalos kai arestos)] in the sight of the LORD.’ The deliberative role of the Jewish priests in ‘purifying the guilt of innocent blood from the Jewish community is, accordingly, crucial to the broad covenantal commitment of the Jewish people spelt out in Deuteronomy 6:1–25, a commitment summarised in the call of Deuteronomy 6:18: ‘Do what is right and good [LXX: pleasing and good, to areston kai to kalon] in the sight of the LORD.’

‘And they conspired’ (26:4a)
The narrative portrayal of the Matthean chief priests vis-à-vis their priestly calling

As Matthew portrays it, the scripturally assigned vocation of the Jewish chief priests is both liturgical and deliberative in its focus. Their calling, broadly framed, is to maintain the Jerusalem temple (‘my [= God’s] house’), as the ‘house of prayer’ (21:13//Is 56:7) for the Jewish people. Within that broad calling their primary tasks are to administer the sacrificial system carried out at the ‘altar’ (5:23–24; 23:18–20, 35), to make atonement on behalf of those who have ‘sinned’ (26:28; cf. 1:21), and to take deliberative action to remove the guilt of ‘innocent blood’ from the midst of the community (27:4, 6).

28. Whilst Jesus and the leper are in Galilee, close to Capernaum (cf. 8:3) and far from the Jerusalem temple, Jesus’ command is nevertheless conceivable within Matthew’s literary context. Keener (2009:263) notes that ‘priests lived throughout Palestine and came to Jerusalem only during their course …; some Jewish traditions thus expect a leper to submit to local priests’ inspection … before offering the sacrifice in the temple (Lv 14:2–3).’

29. See footnote 24.

30. Thus Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 16:16, 30, 34; 19:22; Numbers 15:25, 28. Whilst Matthew’s narrative makes no mention of ‘atonement’ (hilaskomai/exilaskomai), there is strategic reference to ‘forgiveness of sins’ (apheinai + hai hamartiai) within a covenantal and sacrificial context: ‘This is my [Jesus’] blood of the covenant which has been poured out for many for the sake of the forgiveness of sins’ (26:28; cf. 1:21).

31. Thus the Levitical case laws governing the sacrifices to be brought and the atonement to be made for a wide range of sins and/or trespasses: Leviticus 4:13–21; 22–26, 27–31, 32–35; 5:1–6, 7–10, 11–13, 14–16, 17–19, 6:1–7, 24–30; 7:4–10. See by contrast Matthew 27:4, where such a ritual of atonement should clearly take place but does not.

32. Thus Leviticus 16:2–34. Cf. Matthew 26:28, which alludes to just such an annual atonement ritual.

33. There is sturdy scholarly discussion concerning which of two temple curtains, the ‘outer’ curtain (cf. Ex 26:36) or the ‘inner’ curtain (cf. Ex 26:33–35), is in focus within Matthew 27:51 (thus Carter 2000:536; Keener 2009:686–687; Luz 2005:565–566; Witherington 2006:521). There is broad consensus, however, that Matthew’s concept certainly includes the ‘inner’ curtain, which separates the ‘holy place’ from the ‘most holy place’ (Ex 26:33), even if it might not exclude the ‘outer’ curtain. As Luz puts it (2005:565), ‘[t]he narrator speaks of “the curtain.” It does not appear to bother him that there is more than one.’ But see Carter’s minority viewpoint (2000:536) which excludes the ‘inner’ curtain from Matthew’s consideration.
But the chief priests who appear ‘on stage’ within Matthew’s narrative do not for the most part visibly carry out the activities which Matthew has outlined for them. Whilst the narrative clearly implies that the chief priests are regularly engaged in a full range of liturgical tasks,34 it does not for the most part portray them in the act of carrying out these tasks. Matthew offers his readers no real-time images of the chief priests serving at the altar in the temple,35 offering the gifts brought by the worshippers, or mediating the forgiveness of God to those who have sinned. Nor do Matthew’s readers witness the chief priests eating the bread of the presence or otherwise fulfilling their Sabbath duties. Where Matthew does portray the chief priests engaged in liturgical tasks, he does so only in ironic fashion.36 Accordingly, Matthew’s narrative portrayal of the chief priests within their real-world context bears little overt resemblance to the Matthean portrait of their scriptural calling.

The chief priests, as Matthew portrays them, belong to the highest echelon of Jewish society in 1st century Palestine; and they have, accordingly, the greatest religious and political power within the Jewish community. One of their prime assets is their wealth in physical resources of all kinds. The Matthean chief priests appear to have significant money at their collective disposal (cf. 26:15b; 27:3; 28:12), evidently associated with the commercial enterprise which they have established at the Jerusalem temple, an enterprise based on the essential and thus legitimate sale of sacrificial animals (21:12: ‘those who sold doves’/τάς περιστέριας; cf. Lv 5:7; 12:8), the accompanying and necessary exchange of money for the requisite temple currency (21:12: ‘the moneychangers’/τόν κολλύβιστον; cf. Ex 30:13),37 and the collection of the temple tax (to didrachma: έν τῆς δίδραχμης; 17:24–27).

In addition to their disposable wealth, the chief priests likewise oversee the maintenance of a massive and magnificent piece of real estate, the Jerusalem temple. This facility is unimaginably ‘great’ in popular conception (megas/mega; cf. 12:6; 23:17), a complex of ‘buildings’ (τας οἰκοδομὰς του θισυστηρίου: 24:1) that calls for special notice by travellers to Jerusalem.

The temple is constructed ‘stone upon stone’ (lihos epi lithon: 24:2) with huge Herodian ashlars, adorned with ‘gold’ (chrysoi: 23:16–17), and topped with an impressive landmark, ‘the pinnacle of the temple’ (το πέτρυγιον του ήρωου: 4:5), dangerously high above the ground far below (cf. 4:5–6).

Central to this temple and crucial to the worship which takes place there are its ‘altar’ of acacia wood (θισυστηρίον: 5:23, 24; 23:18, 19, 20), ‘gift’ (doron: 5:23; 24; 8:4; 15:5; 23:18, 19), and ‘Passover’ (πασχάς: 26:2, 17, 18, 19), a celebration for which the priests must slaughter the lambs brought to the temple by the celebrants (cf. Jn 1:29, 36; 19:31). See also the reference in 21:12–13 to the market operated on the temple grounds for exchanging money into temple currency (cf. Ex 30:13) and for buying and selling sacrificial animals, in this case doves (cf. Lv 5:7; 12:8).

34. Thus, for example, the references to ‘altar’ (θισυστηρίον: 5:23, 24; 23:18, 19, 20), ‘gift’ (doron: 5:23; 24; 8:4; 15:5; 23:18, 19) and ‘Passover’ (πασχάς: 26:2, 17, 18, 19), a celebration for which the priests must slaughter the lambs brought to the temple by the celebrants (cf. Jn 1:29, 36; 19:31). See also the reference in 21:12–13 to the market operated on the temple grounds for exchanging money into temple currency (cf. Ex 30:13) and for buying and selling sacrificial animals, in this case doves (cf. Lv 5:7; 12:8).

35. But see Jesus’ reference (23:35) to ‘Zechariah, son of Barachiah,’ a figure from Jewish history who was apparently on duty in the temple when he was ‘murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.’ For a discussion of the historical (2005:154–155) difficulties surrounding the interpretation of this Matthean reference, see Luz.

36. One such liturgical task which the chief priests perform ‘on stage’ within Matthew’s narrative, albeit in markedly ironic fashion, is to deal with the disposal of money brought to the temple (27:9–5), ostensibly for deposit in the temple treasury (27:6). Elsewhere Matthew portrays the chief priests frequently involved in the deliberative task of ‘taking counsel’ (συμβουλεύειν: συμβουλίου λαμβάνω: 26:4; 27:1, 7, 28, 12). But these deliberations, in similar fashion, provide a bitterly ironic counterpart to the chief priests’ calling to ensure that ‘innocent blood’ be removed from the Jewish community.

37. As Long (1997:236) notes: ‘The popular notion that the temple had become commercialized and Jesus was “cleanse” it, restoring it to its previous sacred purpose, is false. The sacred role of the temple was the offering of sacrifices and the making of offerings under the direction of the priests. If these functions were to be fulfilled, then someone had to provide the animals to be sacrificed, and someone had to change the Greek and Roman coins the pilgrims brought with them into Jewish coins suitable for offerings.’ Instead, as Long concludes (1997:24), Jesus’ temple action is not ‘reform’ of the temple cultus but rather ‘revolution’: ‘Jesus is not improving the temple; he is attacking the temple, and it is doomed...’

38. As Matthew depicts it, the Jerusalem temple is the gathering place for the entire Jewish community, from the greatest to the least; chief priests (21:15, 23, 45), scribes (21:15), elders of the people (21:23), Pharisees (21:45; 27:62), scribes/scribes of the people (2:4; 16:21; 20:18; 21:15; 26:57; 27:41), and elders/elders of the people (16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1, 312, 20, 41). They and their religious associates constitute, collectively, the literati of the Jewish community, those who...
may be a riot [thorybos] among the people' (26:5).42 When they are faced with tainted 'blood money' resulting from their police action against Jesus (time haimatos: 27:6; cf. 27:3–4a), they weigh their options and take the religiously expedient decision (27:6–7).

If the Matthean chief priests are strategic in their words and actions, they are likewise conspiratorial in their efforts against Jesus. Within Matthew’s rhetoric the confluence of references to ‘gathering together’ (synago: 2:4; 26:3, 57; 27:17, 62; 28:12) and ‘taking counsel’ (symboulion: 26:4; symboulion lambano: 27:1, 7; 28:12) serve collectively to depict the Matthean chief priests as persistent conspirators.43 They are introduced to the world of conspiracy when Herod the king ‘call[s] together [synago: 2:4] all the chief priests and scribes of the people’ and inveigles them into his own paranoid scheme against ‘the child who has been born king of the Jews’ (2:2; cf. 2:3–8). Years later they themselves ‘gather’ (synago: 26:3) and ‘conspire’ (symboulion: 26:4) against Jesus. They then ‘gather’ (synago: 27:57) in the house of Caiaphas the high priest to conduct a kangaroo court, seeking from the outset to condemn Jesus on the ‘false testimony’ (pseudomartyrion: 26:59) of ‘false witnesses’ (pseudomartyrion: 26:60). They ‘confer together’ (symboulion lambano: 27:1) against Jesus before turning him over to Pilate. They ‘gather’ (synago: 27:62) before Pilate to demand measures to secure the tomb of Jesus and prevent a resurrection fraud by Jesus’ disciples. In their final appearance within Matthew’s narrative (28:11–15) they ‘assemble’ (synago: 28:12) with the elders and ‘devise a plan’ (symboulion lambano: 28:12), their own resurrection fraud, to account for the empty tomb.

The Matthean chief priests are as corrupt in their dealings as they are conspiratorial in their actions. Thus, even as they carry out what are in principle legitimate priestly tasks, they fail to act with integrity. Whilst they have legitimate funds to use for the purposes of temple worship (cf. 17:24–27; 21:12–13 45), they use this wealth instead as capital for bribes paid to hit men (26:14–16), real-estate transactions that have the character of money-laundering (27:7–10), and hush-money paid to co-conspirators for passing on a false story (28:11–15). For his part Jesus accuses them of transforming the house of God (21:13a) into a ‘den of robbers’ (21:13b//Jr 8:11a), to which they retreat for security after carrying out lives of injustice.46

When they engage their deliberative responsibilities as a council (26:3–5; 27:57–59), a task which should focus on

41. Matthew strategically associates each of these elite Jewish groups with the ability to ‘read’: Pharisees (12:3, 5; 19:4), scribes (21:16, cf. 2:5–6), elders (21:42), and chief priests (21:16, 42; cf. 2:5–6), as well as Sadducees (22:31; see footnote 40).

42. Thus, for example, questions concerning Sabbath observance (12:2; 10), divorce (19:3), payment of taxes (22:17), levirate marriage (22:23–27), the greatest commandment (22:34–36), oaths (23:16, 18), and tithing (23:23–24).

43. Cf. 21:45, where the chief priests do not take action to arrest Jesus as a result of their fear of the crowds.

44. Cf. 12:14 and 22:15, where the Pharisees also engage in conspiracy (symboulion lambano) against Jesus.

45. See footnote 38.

46. Cf. Jeremiah 7:8–11a: ‘Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!” only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?’
removing the guilt of ‘innocent blood’ from the midst of the Jewish community ([haima anaition; Dt 21:8; cf. 21:5]), they first conspire to kill their rival (26:4) and then intentionally corrupt their own judicial processes by engaging the services of ‘false witnesses’ ([pseudomartyron; 26:60]) to provide ‘false testimony’ ([pseudomartyrian; 26:59]). When they ultimately pronounce the death sentence on the defendant in their trial (26:65–66), they ironically make themselves guilty of blood which they will shortly and implicitly acknowledge to be ‘innocent’ (athlon: 27:4; cf. 27:6). Thus, rather than fulfilling their covenantal commitment ([Dt 21:9//6:18] to ‘do what is right in the sight of the LORD’), they instead incur the very blood guilt that they are charged to remove from the Jewish community ([cf. Dt 21:5, 8]).

Whilst the chief priests have access to the highest levels of Roman power in Palestine, access which could be used for the purposes of ‘righteousness’ ([dikaiosyne; 3:15; cf. 14:3–4]),47 they use this access instead for nefarious and self-serving purposes. When Herod the Jewish client king needs strategic information to assist him in destroying a political rival, the chief priests and scribes provide him with the intelligence he seeks (2:1–6). When the chief priests wish to destroy their own political rival ([cf. 21:38]), they hand him over to ‘the Gentiles’ (20:18), namely, to ‘Pilate the Roman governor’ ([cf. 27:2]). When the chief priests later fear resurrection fraud, they see and gain an immediate audience with Pilate to express their concerns and to appeal for a remedy (27:62–66). When the chief priests and elders face the terrifying conundrum of an empty tomb, they plot their own resurrection fraud and promise to ‘secure’ the Roman governor, if the truth ever reaches his ears (28:11–15).48

If the Matthean chief priests are conspiratorial in their actions and corrupt in their dealings, they are likewise cruel and abusive on levels both physical and emotional. In predicting his upcoming passion, Jesus warns his disciples (16:21) that he will ‘undergo great suffering’ ([polla pathein]) at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes ([20:19]) that these same people will ultimately ‘hand him over’ ([paradidomi]) to the Gentiles to be mocked ([empaizo], flogged [mastigoo] and crucified [stauroo]).49 Jesus’ words are borne out vividly by the events that transpire in Jerusalem. After the high priest and the Jewish Sanhedrin have condemned Jesus to death (26:65–66), they themselves attack Jesus physically (26:67), ‘spitting’ in his face ([empypa], ‘striking’ him (kolaphizo), and ‘slapping’ him (ripapizo). Their physical abuse is matched, in turn, by their verbal abuse. As they spit and strike and slap, they taunt Jesus verbally (26:68): ‘Prophesy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?’ Then, just as Jesus has predicted, they ‘hand him over’ ([paradidomi; 27:2; cf. 26:2]) to the Romans, to be ‘flogged’ ([phragellio; 27:26], ‘mocked’ ([empaizo; 27:29, 31]) and ‘crucified’ ([stauroo; 26:2; 27:22, 23, 26, 31, 35; cf. 27:38]). As Jesus hangs dying on a Roman cross, the chief priests, scribes, and elders ‘mock’ him ([empaizo; 27:41]) still further with a vicious onslaught of charges (27:42–43): ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son”’.50 Such is the portrait of cruelty and abuse by the Matthean chief priests.

‘What is that to us? See to it yourself’ (27:4b)

The Matthean chief priests and atonement for God’s people

Matthew’s portrait is vivid; and his message is unmistakable. The consistent modus operandi of the Jewish chief priests reflects conspiracy, corruption, and callous cruelty. Their ongoing activities, as Matthew portrays them, stand in sharp and ironic contrast to their priestly vocation. In fact, Matthew never depicts the Jewish chief priests carrying out their central scriptural calling and their covenantal commitment to ‘make atonement’ before God for the ‘sins’ of the people ([cf. Lv 16:34]). Remarkably absent from Matthew’s Jewish narrative, a narrative in which matters of ‘sin’ and ‘forgiveness’ ([aphesis]) figure significantly ([1:21; 26:28]), are any real-time images of the Jewish chief priests dealing in person with the ‘sins’ of the Jewish people. Despite their massive and amazing ‘temple’ complex ([cf. 4:5; 12:31, 32; 24:1–2], with its ‘altar’ for sacrifice ([5:23, 24; 23:18, 19, 20, 35]) and its ‘curtain’ that closes off the place where God ‘dwells’ ([27:51]; cf. 23:21), the chief priests are never visibly engaged in the act of ‘making atonement’.

Instead, when they are called to this very act, the central and primary task of their priestly vocation, in a moment of crucial importance, the chief priests completely and callously abandon their priestly calling ([27:4b] vis-à-vis an Israelite who confesses his ‘sin’ to them in an act of suicidal desperation ([27:3–4a, 5]). Judas Iscariot has recently conspired with these same chief priests ([26:14–16]) and accepted a bribe of 30 silver coins in exchange for ‘handing [Jesus] over’ to them ([paradidomi; 26:15, 16; translation mine]).51 But when he learns of Jesus’ ‘condemnation’ and realises the deadly implications of his own actions ([27:3a]), Judas now ‘repents’ ([metamelomai]: 10:4; 17:22; 20:18; 26:2, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 25, 46, 48, 72:3, 4) is fundamentally no different in kind than that of the chief priests, scribes, and elders of the people who ‘hand [Jesus] over’ ([paradidomi; cf. 20:19; 27:2, 18] to ‘the Gentiles’ ([20:19], namely, to ‘Pilate the governor’ ([27:2, 18]). Nor does Judas’s act differ essentially from that of Pilate himself, who ‘hands [Jesus] over’ ([paradidomi; 27:26]) to his crucifixion.

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47 John the Baptist, for example, who has been called by Jesus to join him in the task of ‘fulfilling all righteousness’ ([3:15]), uses his access to Herod the tetrarch in order to speak truth to power ([14:3–4]), an act which costs him his life ([14:5–12]).
48 Matthew does not clarify whether this action to ‘secure’ the Roman governor will be one of friendly persuasion, bribe, or deceit. But regardless of their intended methods, the goal of the chief priests is self-serving and nefarious.
49 Here the chief priests are depicted as not only inflicting their own suffering on Jesus but also handing him over to others precisely so that these others can inflict even greater suffering on him.
50 The biting irony of Matthew’s narrative, however, is that the chief priests, scribes, and elders both acknowledge and proclaim the deep truth about Jesus’ identity, even as they mock him and ridicule his claim to be ‘God’s Son’.
52 Thus aphesis 26:28; apophonia: 6:12, 14, 15; 9:2, 5, 6; 12:31, 32; 18:21, 27, 32, 35.
53 Judas’s act of ‘handing Jesus over’ ([paradidomi; 10:4; 17:22; 20:18; 26:2, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 25, 46, 48, 72:3, 4]) is fundamentally no different in kind than that of the chief priests, scribes, and elders of the people who ‘hand [Jesus] over’ ([paradidomi; cf. 20:19; 27:2, 18] to ‘the Gentiles’ ([20:19], namely, to ‘Pilate the governor’ ([27:2, 18]). Nor does Judas’s act differ essentially from that of Pilate himself, who ‘hands [Jesus] over’ ([paradidomi; 27:26]) to his crucifixion.
27:3b) of his participation in this conspiracy against Jesus. In urgent distress he comes to the chief priests in the posture of a penitent seeking atonement, bearing both the 30 silver coins (27:3c) and a damning self-confession (27:4a): ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ Judas clearly knows the Jewish scriptures and he is clearly aware that a ‘curse’ hangs over him for his actions (Dt 27:25): ‘Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.’ The issue that Judas brings to the chief priests is, therefore, not merely a matter of ‘sin’ to be atoned, but even more crucially, a matter of life and death (cf. Dt 19:11–13).

The chief priests know the scriptures well (cf. 2:4–6). Likewise, they know what is at stake for Judas. But rather than carrying out their covenantal commitment and initiating a life-giving process to ‘make atonement’ on behalf of Judas’s sin, the chief priests cynically abdicate all priestly responsibility as they throw Judas’s sin back into his face with the words, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself’ (27:4b). The irony of Matthew’s narrative rhetoric here is profound on not one but two levels. To begin with, the Jewish chief priests, who are bitter rivals of Jesus Messiah (1:1, 16, 17, 18) and who have conspired constantly and strategically to kill him and gain his messianic ‘inheritance’ (21:38), have themselves instead, in one unguarded moment, given away any possible claim to their own religious and political leadership of the Jewish people. By abdicating their most fundamental task, namely ‘making atonement’ on behalf of the ‘sins’ of the Jewish people, the Matthean chief priests have proven by their own words that they have no claim to be called the ‘shepherds’ of Israel (9:36; cf. 2:6) and no claim on the ‘inheritance’ of the Jewish ‘vineyard’ (cf. 21:33–46). In the words of David Garland (1993:255), ‘[Judas] is turned away by the callous shepherds who have no regard for the sheep’.

But if the Matthean chief priests have abdicated their own calling and thereby given up any claim to the leadership of the Jewish people, theirs is an act of ironic necessity. As they acknowledge openly in confessing on the use of the 30 silver coins (27:6b), there is a clear reason why they cannot make atonement on behalf of Judas’s sins. Given that they themselves are the prime movers in the conspiracy against Jesus, the bribe they have paid to Judas is indeed ‘blood money’ (27:6b, Garland 1993:255). Accordingly, they share both Judas’s sin (27:4a) and Judas’s ‘curse’ (cf. Dt 27:25). They are in fact even more in need of atonement than Judas, seeing as they have not ‘repented’ of their actions (21:28; cf. 27:20, 41–43; 28:11–15). Ultimately, in the words of Garland (1993):

Judas . . . [has made] a fatal mistake by returning to the temple to seek absolution through his co-conspirators when the temple is no longer the place of God’s presence or the seat of forgiveness (p. 255)

Nor will ultimate outcomes be positive for the Matthean chief priests and their scripturally assigned role as ‘Atoners in Chief’ of the Jewish people. When Jesus dies, the ‘curtain of the temple’ will be ‘torn in two, from top to bottom’ (27:51a) in a massive and symbolic display of divine power which will open the place where God ‘dwells’ to the public view of Jews and Gentiles alike and will, by the same token, fundamentally reshape the geography of atonement. Ultimately Jerusalem, the ‘holy city’ (4:5) of the Jewish people will itself be ‘burned’ (22:7) and the entire temple complex, the central locus of the chief priests’ current activities, will be ‘destroyed’ so totally that ‘not one stone will be left .. upon another,’ but ‘all will be thrown down’ (24:2; cf. 26:61; 27:40).

In an act of profound and unintended irony the chief priests, even before the death of Jesus, have already pronounced the judgement of God on themselves and their leadership role within the Jewish community. In response to a story told by Jesus about conspiratorial and vicious vineyard tenants who kill the son of the vineyard owner and do not return the fruits of the vineyard, the chief priests (21:41) give voice to their own demise: ‘He [i.e. God, the divine vineyard owner] will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’ Within Matthew’s narrative rhetoric there is thus no salvific future for the Jerusalem temple with its elaborate sacrificial system for ‘making atonement’. Nor is there a salvific future for the Jewish chief priests, who serve as the officiants of this sacrificial system.

Instead, Matthew’s narrative rhetoric pointedly replaces the priestly role of the Jewish chief priests with the priestly role of Jesus himself. Jesus is the one whose name and whose life vocation, given to him before birth by divine agency, spell out the act of atonement for the ‘sins’ of ‘his people’ (1:21; emphasis mine): ‘... [A]nd you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ Jesus is the one who throughout his earthly ministry pronounces God’s ‘forgiveness’ to humans (apheimi: 9:2, 5) with divinely-given ‘authority on earth to forgive sins’ (apheinai hamartias: 9:6).

Jesus is the one who ‘saves’ those who reach out or call to him (sozo: 8:25; 9:21, 22; 14:30). Jesus is the one who bears both the 30 silver coins (27:3c) and a damning self-confession (27:4a): ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ Judas . . . [has made] a fatal mistake by returning to the temple to seek absolution through his co-conspirators when the temple is no longer the place of God’s presence or the seat of forgiveness (p. 255)

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whose ministry persistently reflects God’s ‘desire’ for “mercy and not sacrifice” (eleos ... kai ou thysian: 9:13; 12:7; Hs 6:6). In his ultimate act of faithfulness to the will of God (26:39, 42; cf. 26:44), Jesus himself becomes the sacrificial blood offering which transforms God’s covenant with God’s people for all time to come (26:28; cf. 20:28): “[T]his is my blood of the covenant [to haíma mou tes diáthesikes] which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins [eis apherein hamartion].” The salvific and durable impact of Jesus’ blood offering becomes visible for all to see at the very moment of his death, when God reaches down from heaven and ‘tears’ the curtain of the temple ‘in two, from top to bottom’ (27:51a), thus destroying, definitively and beyond reversal, both the hidden locus of the Jewish chief priests’ activity in making atonement and, by the same token, the entire sacrificial system over which they officiate in order to make such atonement.

Thus, in the penultimate irony of Matthew’s narrative rhetoric, aside from the Resurrection, God’s last laugh (cf. Ps 2:4–6), it is the Jewish chief priests themselves, those who seek to gain the Jewish messianic ‘inheritance’ through killing Jesus (cf. 21:38), who achieve instead the devastation of their temple curtain (27:51), the destruction of their temple (24:1–2), and ultimately, by the same token, the loss of their own priestly function as temple officiators. Accordingly, it is the Jewish chief priests themselves who, in Matthew’s unrelenting narrative irony, forfeit their own role as ‘Atoners in Chief’ for the Jewish people. Instead atonement is enacted for all time (cf. 28:20b) through the death of Jesus, who fills the role that the Jewish chief priests have abdicated and ‘saves his people from their sins’ (1:21) through his ‘blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (26:28).

‘See, your house Is left to you, desolate’ (23:38)
Matthew’s narrative rhetoric and the ironies of God
Within the late 1st century real world behind Matthew’s narrative, a mere 15 years or so following the epoch-changing destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by the forces of the Roman empire, the narrative rhetoric of Matthew’s Gospel is unrelenting in its condemnation of the Jewish chief priests of Jesus’ day. In a real world where Jerusalem lies ‘burned’ (22:7), its people ‘destroyed’ (22:7), its leadership ‘put ... to a miserable death’ (21:41), and ‘not one stone’ of the temple is ‘left ... upon another’ (24:2), Matthew’s narrative rhetoric sees the unmistakable judgement of God in the downfall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the dissolution of the sacrificial system officiated by the Jewish chief priests. In Matthew’s view this divine judgement is charged above all to the account of the chief priests themselves, as a result of their cynical abdication of their scripturally assigned role, not only in making atonement for the sins of their people (cf. 27-4), but also in ensuring that the guilt of ‘innocent blood’ is removed from their midst (cf. 27-6). In this post-70 CE world of massive devastation and disorientation, where the wider Jewish community of Palestine and the emerging Jewish messianic community reflected by Matthew and his church are struggling to rediscover their respective self-identities beyond the Jerusalem temple and the Jewish holy city, Matthew’s narrative rhetoric speaks a bold and unmistakable word.

For the wider Jewish community Matthew’s word is a mirror which reflects their present catastrophic reality (23:38): ‘See, your house is left to you desolate.’ The geography of atonement has shifted tectonically and for all time. The Jerusalem temple is no longer and will never again be the locus of atonement for the people of God. But in this very word of desolation lie the seeds of the ultimate ‘good news’ of Matthew’s Gospel. God will not be thwarted. God’s passion for the atonement of human sin will never be abated. In the stunning and salvific irony of Matthew’s narrative rhetoric it is precisely those who abdicate their own role in the atonement of God’s people who are the unwitting agents through whom God initiates that tectonic shift in the geography of atonement. Those who recognise the guilt of ‘blood money’ in their hands (27:6) have no way of knowing in that moment that the very blood which occasions their guilt will shortly be ‘poured out for many,’ people such as them included, ‘for the remission of sins including such as theirs’ (26:28). Atonement is God’s last word.

Such is the irony of Matthew’s narrative rhetoric and such is the ultimate ‘good news’ of Matthew’s Jewish Gospel. Let the reader understand.

Acknowledgements
Competing interests
The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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