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Blood, People, and Crowds in Matthew, Luther, and Bach
by Michael Marissen

In all of Christian Scripture, probably no line has been invoked to justify theological condemnation of Jews or physical violence against Jews more frequently than the outcry for Jesus’ crucifixion expressed by “all the people” in Matthew 27:25, “His blood be on us and on our children.” This verse appears too, of course, in Bach’s St. Matthew Passion (BWV 244), and it is important to ask how the passage was interpreted within Bach’s great choral work. Key to understanding this troubling verse are, in my view, the various terms used in Matthew’s Gospel to refer to groups of people mentioned in the passion narrative (including the group that utters this remark) and the particular words used in Luther’s New Testament to render these terms in German. The evidence strongly suggests that Luther’s Bible intensifies whatever anti-Jewish tendencies (that is, hatred of or unreasonable prejudice against Jews or Judaism) there may be in the Greek text of Matthew, thereby significantly affecting interpretation of the expression “his blood.” It is all the more significant, then, that the commentary offered by the other texts in Bach’s St. Matthew Passion—madrigalian poetry by Bach’s Leipzig contemporary Christian Friedrich Henrici (“Picander”) and stanzas from Lutheran hymns by various authors—appears to work in the opposite direction, mitigating the anti-Jewish sentiments amplified by Luther’s translation of the Bible.

Laos and Ochlos in Matthew, and Das Volk in Luther

In the original Greek, Matthew’s Gospel uses several different terms to refer to groups of people. The most common are laos (“people”) and ochlos (“crowd”), each of which is often somewhat vague in its New Testament usages; thus readers have to rely on context if they want to identify the groups more specifically. With his recent mono-
graph on the crowds in Matthew, Robert Cousland has done an enormous service of sorting through a myriad of historical, narrative, and theological issues. The upshot of his research is that there is a strong literary tendency in Matthew to use laos to refer to the people of Israel (even if it does not always denote the people as a whole), and to use ochlos either generally for crowds or particularly for the people of Israel as opposed to their leaders. Thus when push comes to shove, so to speak, the ochlos and the Jewish leaders emerge as distinct subsets of the laos. Seeing that Matthew finds echoes in the Hebrew Bible—through talk of the “lost sheep of the House of Israel” on the one hand and the “killers of prophets” on the other—Cousland concludes that the reason the Gospel of Matthew narratively aligns the ochlos with its author’s understanding of the history of Jewish Israel is that the evangelist seeks to win the proto-Rabbinic Jews of the first century over to his proto-Christian side, where he believes the true future for “Israel” lies.

Cousland allows that there are anomalies for his literary scheme. He notes, for example, that “the use of ochlos at Matthew 9:23, 25 [for a group of mourners—identified as a “crowd” only in Matthew—making a tumult at the house of a ruler who is identified as the synagogue leader “Jairus” only in Mark and Luke] would argue against any simple identification of the crowds with Israel...[and] at one level Matthew’s understanding...does not depart from the [varied] view...[in] Mark.” Stomping in as a biblical-studies amateur where some experts may fear to tread, I would offer the additional observation that the use of ochlos at Matthew 26:47 and 26:55, this time apparently to signify a large quasi-military group sent by the Jewish leaders (that is, an ochlos consisting not of the general populace of Israel, but of court attendants who were at the disposal of the Jewish leaders for police purposes when necessary, as in John 18:3), possibly makes for another, odd inconsistency in Cousland’s word-study scheme. Also, I would note that, significantly, for this Gospel the ordinary Jewish folk and their leaders appear in the end to be blended together for disapprobation (see 28:15, “...and this story [that Jesus was not risen from the dead but his body had been stolen from the tomb by his disciples while the guards were sleeping] has been told among the Jews up to this day”). It appears, then, that despite Cous-
land's extremely stimulating and thorough study, the identity of the crowds in Matthew is still worthy of critical discussion.

For the present study on Luther’s Gospel translation and Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, there is another, crucial issue surrounding possible distinctions between “crowds” and “people” in Matthew. While the overall tendency in Matthew does seem to be for *ochlos* and *laos* to connote ethnically Jewish groups, there are some narrative and historical indications that the crowds in this Gospel are to be understood as partly Gentile. Concerning the narrative indications, Cousland provides a formidable discussion of the geographical references in Matthew 4:23–25, coming, however, to the following meticulously formulated conclusion on the possible presence of Gentiles:

With one exception, the members of the crowds originate from regions that were popularly regarded as Jewish. Only the mention of the Decapolis [a grouping of ten Greek cities, with majority gentile populations] gives grounds to the supposition that he included Gentiles in the crowds. Even in this instance, however, it is probable that he accounts the Decapolis part of Eretz Israel, given the region’s one-time inclusion in the Davidic kingdom.

It is, of course, possible that Matthew envisages Gentiles among the crowds. Matthew’s reference to the Decapolis could allow for the possibility. If so, however, this is the only point where the Gospel explicitly affords such an impression.

But for further material that is consonant with the notion of a gentile presence in the crowds specifically at Passover, I would point to a passage from Flavius Josephus’s *The Jewish War*, written, like the Gospel of Matthew, toward the end of the first century. Josephus writes that the greater part of those who perished in the Jewish revolt of the years 66–70 were of the same ethnic stock [*homophulos*] as the Jerusalemites. He goes on to say that the size of the multitude [*plethos*] at Passover can be determined by taking the number of lamb sacrifices and multiplying by ten; this, he notes, would not equal the full number of the multitude, however, since, for example, menstruating women and people with certain diseases could not participate in the Passover meal on account of their ritual impurities, and also since it was likewise unlawful for the “large numbers” of visiting foreigners [*allophulois*, that is, non-Jews] to be partakers of this sacrifice. Since Josephus matter-of-factly relates the presence both
of the ritually impure and of Gentiles in the multitudes at Passover, presumably there is nothing controversial or apologetical about the second of his two observations.

This is not to say that the Gospel of Matthew is to be read as though it was meant to be taken as a straightforward "historical" document, one roughly akin to Josephus's *War* (which, of course, has its justifying motives too). Matthew, in comparison to its most closely related Gospel, Mark, more strongly reflects a Jewish background, and this aspect of the narrative in Matthew presumably cannot simply be attributed to a greater concern on the part of its author for historical exactitude. My question is whether the Gospel's naming of various groups, even if altogether theologically motivated, is so forceful and unambiguous that its earliest audiences would have identified the narrative's crowds not simply as mostly Jewish but rather as exclusively Jewish. In light of what Josephus reports it seems that Matthew's first readers would have taken it for granted that the Passover crowds were ethnically mixed. (The presence of gentile tourists in Jerusalem at Passover in the first century was perhaps a bit like today's large numbers of non-Catholics attending papal Easter services at the Vatican.) That is to say, while readers may concede Cousland's point that the author of Matthew has fashioned his crowds as a literary construct, it would not necessarily follow that they should reject, as Cousland does for Matthew, the notion of ethnically mixed crowds, especially at Passover.

Yet whatever the purposes might be in the Gospel of Matthew for using the words *ochlos* and *laos*, they are lost in Luther's version of the Gospel: Luther renders both terms with *das Volk* (for a full listing, see Appendix 1, below). Thus, while in Matthew the *laos* might be understood to be the Jewish people and the *ochloi* to be mixed crowds of mostly Jews and some or even many Gentiles, in Luther one encounters only Jews.

Now one might object that in the vernacular of Luther's day the word *Volk* covered a very wide semantic field that included a number of terms from the Greek New Testament. In translating both *ochlos* and *laos* as *Volk*, Luther was simply working with the limitations of the linguistic tools at hand. Appendix 1, below, would show, in this case, that Luther was consistent in assuming a broad usage. We
should not, in fact, expect him to do otherwise, and thus it would be altogether misguided to suspect that there is any interpretive significance in Luther’s linguistic conflation of Matthew’s ochloi and laos.

But it is important to note that Luther does come up with unproblematic word choices to render ochlos when the crowds in question are clearly not the general Jewish populace. Luther gives Schar for the ochlos of believers in Jesus at Acts 1:15; Haufe for the great ochlos of Jesus’ disciples at Luke 6:17; and Schar or Scharen for the ochloi of attendants with policing duties at Mark 14:43 and Matthew 26:47, 55 (cf. Luke 22:47, 52; John 18:3). Obviously the word Volk would not work in these various cases. But since laos and ochlos are not synonyms in Greek, just as populus and turba are not in Latin (that is, the language of the Vulgate Bible), why can Luther not be expected to find another word than Volk to cover all or most usages of ochlos? For example, he does use Menge for large groups of people or angels in Mark 3:8; Luke 8:37; Acts 2:6, 4:32, 5:14, 6:5, 14:1, 14:4, 17:4; and Hebrews 12:22. If Luther can render plethos or myrias with Menge, why not also ochlos? The words plethos and ochlos are in fact closer to each other in connotation than are laos and ochlos. One might here ask, however, whether it was typical for prior German Bibles to render ochlos as Volk, such that Luther was simply following this standard usage. But, as it happens, every one of the pre-Luther German Bibles does maintain a linguistic distinction between crowds and people, rendering the Vulgate’s populus as Volk, and rendering turba consistently as Schar (or in some Bibles, Gesellschaft, but in no instance ever as Volk). Thus Luther’s linguistic conflation appears in fact to be an innovation in Bible translations.

If many pre-Luther readers of Matthew had traditionally been inclined to equate his “crowds” with “the people” anyway, this does not mean Luther’s linguistically innovative Bible thus becomes reproachable: encountering only das Volk for both terms, readers of Luther are now precluded from making a distinction between Matthew’s ochloi and laos. Luther’s rendering of ochlos as Volk could be of serious import to questions of theological anti-Judaism, as the Gospel narrative’s key moment in the bringing about of Jesus’ death involves the Jewish leaders persuading the Passover ochloi that they should ask Pilate to release Barabbas but destroy Jesus (27:20). Thus whereas for readers of
Matthew's Greek text this may arguably place blame on mixed crowds of Jews with Gentiles that have been swayed by the chief priests and elders, for readers of Luther's translation the moral responsibility for the death of Jesus can only fall on *das Volk* (that is, exclusively upon "the Jews"), whom Luther's readers have heard mentioned around sixty times by this point in his linguistically innovative rendering of Matthew. Luther and his ecclesiastical followers, incidentally, had most likely read the above-cited passage from Josephus about the mixed multitudes at Passover: Luther himself and many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran pastors published countless collections of sermons for a general readership in which excerpts from Book 6 of Josephus's *Jewish War* are cited.

Various word choices in Luther's translation of Matthew 27 may subtly reinforce a reading of sole Jewish responsibility within the biblical narrative for inducing Pilate to crucify Jesus. In Luther's rendering, the chapter opens with all the chief priests and elders of the *Volk* (*laos*, in Matthew) holding a council on how they might kill Jesus. Verse 9 then speaks of the prophet's having foretold the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver: "Sie haben genommen dreißig Silberlinge, damit bezahlet ward der Verkaufte, welchen sie kauften von den Kindern Israel" ("They have taken thirty pieces of silver, with which the Sold One was paid for, whom they bought from the children of Israel"). Already in Matthew too there is necessarily a conceptual link between "the people" in 27:1 and "the sons of Israel" in 27:9. But, through verbal echoes brought about with specific German word choices, Luther's text will go on to link these two passages to verses 15, 20, 24, and 25 (that is, echoes that Matthew's Greek does not effect; see Luther's verses in tabular format with direct translations at Appendix 2, below).

For Luther's passion narrative, then, as throughout his rendering of the Gospel, the *ochlos* (singular in verses 15 and 24; plural, *ochloi*, in verse 20) and the *laos* will simply turn out to be one and the same—the Jewish populace: *das Volk*.

More subtly, and probably unintentionally, Luther's text also makes a stronger connection between verses 9 and 25 than is found in the Greek text of Matthew 27. At verse 25 Matthew's word is *tekna*, a term that Luther provides with a literal translation, "children." At verse 9,
however, the Greek text in Matthew speaks of “[the] sons of Israel” (roughly following the Greek Septuagint text of Zechariah 11:12–13), and here, as with virtually all other biblical instances of “the huios Israel,” Luther does not provide a literal rendering. The term employed in Matthew, the plural of huios, can altogether rightly also be rendered “children,” as it denotes either a group of boys or a group of boys with girls. Tekna, however, can be used for a group made up only of females (for example, at 1 Peter 3:6). Thus where Matthew’s chapter 27 has two terms for the Jewish offspring, Luther’s has only one: Kinder. Again, it is of course in no way semantically or otherwise wrong to translate both terms as “children.”

My point is simply that only in the translation can one hear the cry in verse 25 (“sein Blut komme … über unsere Kinder”) as verbally echoing verse 9 (“von den Kindern Israel”).

I should mention here that while in his rendering of the biblical narrative Luther appears to place sole moral responsibility for the crucifixion with Jews, he can theologically interpret and apply his biblical narrative variously. On the one hand, for example, he can warn Christians in Holy Week to meditate on Jesus’ suffering, not on the evil of “the Jews.” The opening paragraph of Luther’s well-known sermon, “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion” of 1519 reads (my emphasis):

Some people meditate on Christ’s passion by venting their anger on the Jews…. That might well be a meditation on the wickedness [Bösheyt] of… the Jews, but not on the sufferings of Christ. You [churchgoers] should be terrified… by the meditation on Christ’s passion. For the evildoers, the Jews, whom God has judged and driven out, were only the servants of your sin; you are actually the one who, as we said, by his sin killed and crucified God’s Son.

In other writings, however, he is just as likely to vilify Jews and apparently take it for granted that it was they who indeed crucified Christ. For example, in his lecture on the famous story of Jacob at Pe-niel in Genesis 32, Luther states, commenting on 32:31 (my emphases):

Without any controversy we shall say that this man [with whom Jacob wrestled] was not an angel but our Lord Jesus Christ, eternal God and future Man, to be crucified by the Jews.

Commenting then on the “sciatic nerve” in the next verse, Luther writes:
...what the Hebrew word [nasheh] properly signifies, I do not really know. The proper name Manasseh has been derived from this word, that is, "forgetting." ...Certain people interpret [this word] as the "sinew of forgetfulness," as though you were able to say that [Jacob] forgot his place on account of the dislocation. But these are Jewish ideas, that is, inept and foul.  

Translation Issues elsewhere in Luther's New Testament

Luther's apparent tendency to render ambiguous expressions in the Greek biblical text more clearly in the direction of theological anti-Judaism in his German translation is not limited to his reading of the crucifixion scene in Matthew.

To cite a key example, the Greek text of Matthew 21:43 reads, "For this reason I say to you that the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and it will be given to a people/nation [ethnei] producing its fruit." Because the noun employed to refer to the recipient of the kingdom is not plural (ethnei is dative singular), there are several interpretive possibilities: the kingdom will be given to a renewed (portion of the) historical people of Israel, or to the Church, or to a different nation, or to a new leadership that believes in Jesus, and so on. Luther, however, renders the recipient with a plural dative noun: "Das Reich Gottes wird von euch genommen und den Heiden gegeben werden, die seine Früchte bringen" ("The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to the gentiles, who [will] bring its fruits"). Since in all other New Testament instances of the inflected form ethnei—Acts 10:35; 24:2, 10; 26:4; Romans 10:19—Luther translates with the singular noun Volk, his rendering with the plural Heiden in Matthew 21 may be considered overinterpretive and, frankly, tendentious. (Both the Vulgate and Erasmus 1519, unlike Luther, follow Matthew in rendering the passage with dative singular.)

In light of such a significant example it is perhaps not surprising that Luther would (unwittingly?) conflate Matthew's ochloi and laos in a way that could augur unfavorably for the Jewish people.

"His Blood" in Bach's St. Matthew Passion

What, then, do Bach and Picander do with Matthew 27:25 and the matter of responsibility for the death of Jesus? I suggest that their
work projects not a violent but a redemptive understanding of the verse, and I conclude that fostering hostility to Jews is not the subject or purpose of the commentary on the Gospel’s passion narrative in Bach’s St. Matthew Passion.

It is interpretively helpful to know that an ultra-literal translation of the Gospel’s Greek would read “His blood on us and our children,” as there is no verb in Matthew’s formula. The biblical scholar Raymond Brown notes: “It is not wrong to supply a verb (‘come’ or ‘be’), as many translations do; but that creates the danger of misreading the phrase as a self-curse, a prophecy, or a blood-thirsty wish” (which have been in fact the most common ways of reading the verse). The way Luther’s Bible, and therefore Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, gives the passage is: “his blood come over us and our children.” Bach would have been familiar with interpretations that took the phrase to be a self-curse, and the verse is certainly taken this way, for example, in his colleague Georg Philipp Telemann’s 1722 passion oratorio Das selige Erwägen (no. 31, my emphases: “So you cry out, damned [vermaleideite] sinners, ‘His blood come over us and over our children?’ You have taken it [that is, “his blood”] upon yourselves as a curse; but for me it will come to blessing”). But Bach’s St. Matthew Passion reads 27:25 differently, waiting until after verse 26 (the scourging of Jesus by the Roman soldiers) to break the biblical narrative with commentary. The St. Matthew Passion in fact meditates not on the responsibility of “the [Jewish] people” for Jesus’ crucifixion, but on the “generously” redemptive power of “his blood.” The text of the alto aria “Können Tränen meiner Wangen” reads:

Können Tränen meiner Wangen
Nichts erlangen,
O, so nehmt mein Herz hinein!
Aber laßt es bei den Fluten,
Wenn die Wunden milde bluten,
Auch die Opferschale sein!

If the tears of my cheeks cannot achieve anything, o, then take in my heart! But let it, at the streams — when the wounds [of Jesus] generously bleed— also be the offering basin

Bach’s musical setting, too, gives powerful expression to the idea that Jesus’ blood-streaming chastisement is only in appearance a curse but in essence a blessing: the incessant rhythm of violent marcato pairs of dotted sixteenth and thirty-second notes from the recitative “Erbarm
es Gott!” (which comments on the flogging Jesus received at the hands of the Roman soldiers) palpably softens by morphing into soothing legato pairs of dotted eighth and sixteenth notes in the aria “Können Tränen meiner Wangen.”

The classic biblical commentary of the seventeenth-century orthodox Lutheran theologian Johann Olearius, a copy of which Bach owned, was probably a source for Bach and Picander in producing this redemptive interpretation for the St. Matthew Passion.

Olearius suggests that Matthew 27:25 connotes both judgment and redemption. He writes concerning the verse:

*His blood; NB. Genesis 4. Matthew 23:35. [About] this blood-guilt NB. Psalm 51:16; together with every curse, threat, and punishment—about this NB. Genesis 27:13; about this Lamentations 5:7 . . . come over us; about this NB. Genesis 27:13. [As if to say:] “Do this upon our own responsibility; we want to indemnify you. Let it come on our children and descendants. Should it happen to him unjustly, then we want to carry the guilt.” At which [it is] worth remembering . . . 2. The horrible fulfillment after 40 years [that is, the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in the year 70] . . . 3. The comforting conversion of this curse into blessing. For the power of the blood of Jesus Christ comes over us, and purifies us; 1 John 1, that is to say: “Your goodness be over us,” Psalm 33:22, which is redemption for the many. NB. Psalm 130:7.*

Notice that Genesis 27:13 figures in Olearius’s comments both on judgment and on redemption. Concerning this verse (where Rebekah replied “the curse be on me” to her son Jacob's worry that if he goes to his blind father Isaac pretending to be his older brother Esau, he will bring on himself a curse instead of the hoped-for fatherly blessing. So says also David, Psalm 33:22. Your goodness, Lord, be over us, as a steadfast protection, NB. Psalm 91:1-2, and remain over us unchangingly.

*At its commentary on Genesis 27:13, Bach’s Calov Bible Commentary writes something similar about curses and blessings:*

[Rebekah] said [“the curse be on me”] out of assured trust that it would turn out such that Jacob would receive not a curse but a beautiful fatherly blessing, at which she also could be delighted—which ascertainment originated from

Now at his commentary on Psalm 33:22 ("Your goodness, Lord, be over us, as a steadfast protection"), Olearius writes:


That is, "goodness" in Psalm 33 and "his blood" in Matthew 27 are both said in the Luther Bible to be "over us," prompting Olearius to draw an interpretive parallel between the Psalm and Gospel. Christians take the redemptive power (that is, the goodness) of "his blood" to have been instituted by the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:27–28, words that Bach powerfully set in the St. Matthew Passion ("Drink from it, all [of you]; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins"). At his commentary on Matthew 26:28, Olearius writes:

*Blood; haima;* about this 1 John 1:7. This is ratification of the new covenant through my own blood... thus corresponding to the sacrificial blood [of] Exodus 24:8.  

At his commentary on Exodus 24:8 ("Then Moses took the [sacrificial] blood and sprinkled the people with it, and exclaimed, 'Behold, this is the blood of the covenant that the Lord [has] made with you ...'"), Olearius writes:


That is to say, sprinkling blood over "the people" is understood by Olearius to be an act of blessing both in Exodus and in the Gospel; and thus implicitly the blood passages in Matthew 26 and 27 are to be linked.

To return to Bach: Taking a blessing to appear behind a curse happens again toward the end of the St. Matthew Passion, at the aria "Ach Golgatha," whose third and fourth lines read, "the blessing and salvation of the world appears on the cross as a curse." The idea of the cross as seeming curse but actual blessing is developed also in the next aria, "Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand, uns zu fassen, ausgepannt."
Lutheran passion sermon writers in Bach's personal library refer to Jesus as "the proper high priest" [der rechte Hohepriester]: "his hands he has outstretched [ausgespannt] on the cross to embrace you; . . . his hands he has outstretched to bless you" (that is, by forming the posture of the priest in a prayer of blessing—see also the Epistle to the Hebrews, especially 7:25).

**Conclusion**

It might be useful to provide in brief my readings of Matthew, Luther, and Bach:

For Matthew's Gospel, in the narrative itself Jews and Gentiles ("the crowds") are together held morally responsible for the death of Jesus (27:20, 24); the Kingdom of God passes to some new or renewed entity (21:43); and "the (Jewish) people" are depicted as crying out "his blood [be] on us and our children" (27:25, one verse after Pilate has declared himself innocent before the festival "crowd"), presumably because Matthew wishes to point to the violence heaped upon Jews in the year 70, the generation of "the people's" children or grandchildren, when the Jewish Temple was destroyed.

For Luther's linguistically innovative translation of the Gospel, however, only Jews will and can be held morally responsible for the death of Jesus. Against Matthew's distinction between "the crowds" and "the people," for Luther it is the same Volk of 27:20 that cries out a blood curse upon itself in 27:25; the Kingdom of God passes from Jews to the Gentiles; and "the (Jewish) people" do indeed curse themselves for all time post Christi adventum (because, Luther believes, they have become a God-forsaken group who should naturally expect continual persecution).

For Bach's St. Matthew Passion (whose biblical portions come verbatim from Luther), the biblical narrative itself depicts Jews as morally responsible for the death of Jesus, while in the commentary portions Christians alone are chastised for their guilt in having caused Jesus' death; there is no mention of the passing of God's Kingdom; and it emerges from the commentary that "the (Jewish) people" are understood ironically to have called upon themselves and their children a blessing effected by the redemptive blood of Jesus.
Given the historical evidence, it does not appear that the kind of interpretation of the Gospel projected by the words and music of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion can be said to have any reasonable connection with the physically violent or determined eternal-damnation strains of anti-Jewish sentiment often associated (whether rightly or wrongly) with Matthew’s passion narrative. What remains unclear, however, is just how “generous” listeners may believe the redeeming blood of Jesus proclaimed in Bach’s aria “Können Tränen meiner Wangen” to be. While the Pauline idea of justification only by grace through faith surely applies for Gentiles, does the same necessarily hold true, according to Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, for the salvation of so-called Old Israel? Are listeners rightly to understand the St. Matthew Passion as construing salvation altogether inclusively when, for example, in Bach’s recitative no. 22 the text states (my emphases):

Der Heiland fällt vor seinem Vater nieder; 
Dadurch erhebt er mich und alle Von unserm Falle Hinauf zu Gottes Gnade wieder.

The Savior falls down before his Father; 
thereby he lifts me and everyone from our Fall up to God’s grace again.

But if the hope behind a redemptive understanding of Matthew 27:25 is that all the children of Israel will accept the saving power of Jesus’ blood, this could still give the passage a “violent” effect: would not such a confession mark the death of “Judaism”?  

Appendix 1

Usage of ochlos and laos in Matthew

BIBLES:

E = Elberfelder
Er = Erasmus 1519
K = King James Version
L = Luther
M = passage in Matthew
N = New Revised Standard Version
NT = Greek New Testament
V = Vulgate

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**TERMS:**

C = crowd  
P = people  
L = laos  
Pl = plebs  
M = Menge  
Po = populus  
Mo = multitude  
S = Schar  
T = turba  
V = Volk  
Vm = Volksmenge

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<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>great crowds follow Jesus, from</td>
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<td>Decapolis, etc.</td>
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<td>5:1</td>
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<td>Vm</td>
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<td>crowds [follow Jesus, from Decapo-</td>
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<td>lis, etc.]</td>
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<td>7:28</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>P</td>
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<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>crowds astounded at Jesus, who has</td>
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<td>authority, not as “their scribes”</td>
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<td>8:1</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
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<td>great crowds follow Jesus from the</td>
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<td>mountain</td>
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<td>8:18</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>great crowds around Jesus</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:8</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>crowds in Jesus’ own town see him</td>
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<td>healing</td>
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<td>9:23</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>crowd in a leader’s house making a</td>
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<td>commotion, thinking young girl had</td>
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<td>died, but Jesus says she’s only</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:25</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>crowd is put outside the house</td>
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<td>9:33</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>crowds at Jesus’ healing mute de-</td>
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<td>moniac: “Never has anything like</td>
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<td>this been seen in Israel”</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:36</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Jesus has compassion for crowds,</td>
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<td>who are like sheep without a</td>
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<td>shepherd</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:7</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Jesus speaks to crowds about John</td>
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<td>the Baptist</td>
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<td>12:15</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Vm</td>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Jesus cures many crowds following</td>
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<td>him, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s</td>
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<td>prophecy of justice to and hope for</td>
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<td>the gentiles</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
all the crowds amazed at Jesus' healing a mute and blind demoniac
Jesus speaks to crowds of his true kindred (not his mother and brothers)
crowds gather around Jesus by the sea
whole crowd stands on the beach
this people's heart has grown dull [people here seem equated with the crowd of 13:2]
Jesus speaks to crowds in parables
Jesus leaves the crowds
Herod fears the crowd because they regard John as a prophet
crowds follow Jesus to a deserted place
Jesus has compassion for this crowd and heals their sick
disciples ask Jesus to send crowds away
Jesus gives food to the crowds
Jesus gives food to the crowds
Jesus dismisses crowds
Jesus dismissed crowds
this people [the Pharisees and scribes] honors me with their lips, but... in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines
speaks to crowds of things that truly defile
great crowds seeking Jesus' healing
crowd amazed at Jesus' healing, "and they praised the God of Israel"
Jesus has compassion for the crowd
disciples worry about food for so great a crowd
Jesus orders crowd to sit
disciples feed the crowds
Jesus sends the crowds away
Jesus and disciples come to the crowd
large crowds follow Jesus in Judea, and he cures them
large crowd follows Jesus from Jericho
crowd orders blind men seeking healing to be quiet

crowd spreads cloaks on the road for Jesus

crowds call to Jesus, “Hosannah”
crowds say Jesus is the prophet from Galilee

leaders of the people

leaders are afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as a prophet

leaders are afraid of the crowd, for they regard Jesus as a prophet

the crowd astonished at Jesus’ teaching

Jesus warns crowds and his disciples about the Pharisees

leaders of the people

leaders fear a riot among the people if Jesus is seized during the festival

large crowd with weapons seek to seize Jesus

leaders of the people

the crowds [with weapons, seeking to seize Jesus]

leaders of the people

Pilate accustomed to releasing a prisoner to the festival crowd

leaders persuade the festival crowds to ask for Barabbas but to have Jesus destroyed

Pilate washes his hands before the festival crowd

the entire people respond, “his blood [be] on us and our children”

chief priests and Pharisees ask Pilate for guard at Jesus’ tomb, so that his disciples will not be able to steal the body and say to the people, “he has been raised from the dead”
Appendix 2

Verses from Luther's rendering of the passion narrative in Matthew

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Luther</th>
<th>direct translation</th>
<th>key term in Matthew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 1 Des Morgens aber hielten alle Hohepriester und die altesten des Volks einen Rat über Jesus, da sie ihn toteten.</td>
<td>When morning arrived, however, all the chief priests and the elders of the people held a council about Jesus, so that they might kill him.</td>
<td>laos</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 9–10 Da ist erfüllet das gesagt ist durch den Propheten Jeremias, da er spricht: Sie haben genommen dreißig Silberlinge, damit bezahlet ward der Verkaufte, welchen sie kaufen von den Kindern Israels, und haben sie gegeben um einen Topfersack, als mir der Herr befohlen hat.</td>
<td>And so is fulfilled what is told by the prophet Jeremiah, when he says: They have taken thirty pieces of silver, with which the Sold One was paid for, whom they bought from the children of Israel, and have given them for a potters field, as the Lord has commanded me.</td>
<td>huios</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 15 Auf das Fest aber hatte der Landpfleger Gewohnheit, dem Volk einen Rat über Jesus, da sie um Barabbas bitten sollten und Jesus umbrachten.</td>
<td>But during the Festival the governor was accustomed to releasing a prisoner to the people, whomever they wished.</td>
<td>ochlos</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 20 Aber die Hohenpriester und die altesten überredeten das Volk, da sie um Barabbas bitten sollten und Jesus umbrachten.</td>
<td>But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.</td>
<td>ochlos</td>
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<td>27 22–23 Pilatus sprach zu [dem Volk] Was soll ich denn machen mit Jesu, von dem gesagt ward, er sei Christus? Sie sprachen alle Laß ihn kreuzigen! Der Landpfleger sagte: Was hat er denn ubels getan? Sie schrien aber noch mehr und sprachen: Laß ihn kreuzigen!</td>
<td>Pilate said to [the people]: What, then, should I do with Jesus, of whom it is said, he is the Christ? They all said: Have him crucified! The governor said: What evil thing has he done, then? But they shouted out still more, saying: Have him crucified!</td>
<td>[ochlos]</td>
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<td>27 24 Da aber Pilatus sahe, daß er nichts schaffete, sondern daß ein viel großer Getüm mel ward, nahm er Wasser und wusch die Hande vor dem Volk und sprach: Ich bin unschuldig an dem Blut dieses Gerechten, sehet ihr zu!</td>
<td>But when Pilate saw that he could do nothing—rather, that a much greater commotion was developing—he took water and washed his hands before the people and said: I am innocent of the blood of this righteous one—you see to it!</td>
<td>ochlos</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 25 Da antwortete das ganze Volk und sprach: Sein Blut komme über uns und über unsere Kinder.</td>
<td>Then the entire people answered, saying: His blood come over us and over our children.</td>
<td>laos teknon</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
NOTES

1 This essay was first read at the conference Passion, Affekt und Leidenschaft in der frühen Neuzeit. Kongreß in der Herzog August Bibliothek, 11. Jahrestreffen des Wolfenbuttelers Arbeitskreis für Barockforschung. April 2–5, 2003. Wolfenbuttel, Germany Lothar Steiger, professor emeritus of practical theology and dogmastics at the University of Heidelberg, delivered a formal response that will be published in the conference proceedings, edited by Johann Anselm Steiger (Wolfenbuttel. Wolfenbuttel Arbeitskreis für Barockforschung, 2005). My thanks to Tassilo Erhardt, Daniel Melamed, and Paula Fredriksen for criticism and encouragement


3. Cousland, Crowds, 93.

4. This notwithstanding the comments at 26.55b about Jesus’ teaching of the ochlos in the Temple. Presumably 26.47 should not be construed to mean that a large group of the commoners of Israel came with weapons they had borrowed from the chief priests and elders! Alternatively, however, it might be argued that we are supposed to read the phrase apo ton archon ton presbyteron tou laou as saying that a large group “of the people [of Israel]” was “sent from” or “authorized by” their leaders. (It is worth noting that the ochlos is here in any event not depicted as a vigilante mob. whoever the ochlos is, acts on legal authority.) But would chief priests and elders wish or need to authorize, and arm, a crowd of commoners to seize Jesus of Nazareth?

5. Yet another observation: Are not the leaders schematically “above” the laos in Matthew 27.64?


Incidentally, the classic Whiston translation of Josephus—owing to his particular Christian bias—erroneously assigns the “large numbers” to the entire multitude rather than to “the foreigners” (my thanks to Jonathan Price, Tel Aviv University, for helping me with this passage). Josephus cannot be referring to Gentile converts to Judaism, as proselytes would lawfully partake of the Passover sacrifice. Drawing on these passages in Josephus in connection with a notion of mixed crowds in the Gospels has, to my knowledge, not been explored in New Testament studies.

9. This issue has, to my knowledge, not been explored in Luther studies.

10. It is possible, of course, that Luther is simply realizing a latent tendency in the language of Matthew, as its author certainly does not project a positive view of Jews who elect not to follow Jesus. My question, however, is whether Luther might be bringing a false clarity to the text.

11. Almost without exception, these do read turba (“crowd”) in the Vulgate. the Bible Luther knew from his youth. It is important to know, incidentally, that the readings in today’s “Luther Bibles” often differ substantially from Luther’s own version, which was still in use in Bach’s day.

12. Gesellschaft in the Mentel Bible and the various translations derived from it. Schar in the Zaminer Bible and its derivatives. The variant readings of these many pre-Luther German Bibles are meticu­lously provided in the marvelous reference work, Die erste Deutsche Bibel, 10 vols., ed. William Kurr­elmeyer (Tubingen: Litterarischer Verein in Stuttgart, 1904–15).

13. Luther subscribed to a theory of biblical translation in which the idea was, when deemed necessary, to provide readers not with a literal rendition but with what the translator believed to be the theologically true sense of the text; see, for example, Luther, “On Translating: An Open Letter,” trans. Charles M. Jacobs and E. Theodore Bachmann, in Luther’s Works, vol 35, Word and Sacrament I, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia. Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 181–202. The aim of the present dis-
cussion of the crowds in Matthew is—however presumptuous this may sound—less to question Luther’s methods than his results.

14. By “theological anti-Judaism” I mean not simply disagreement with or critique of Judaism but rather the teaching of marked contempt for or categorical dismissal of the religion of Judaism and its practitioners. The question for me is whether or to what extent a rendering of the passion narrative in Matthew justifiably proves useful to those who wish to foster contempt for Judaism or Jews.

15. See “die Juden” at Matthew 28:19; see also Luther’s rendering of Acts 10:22, “bei dem ganzen Volk der Juden” (“by the whole nation [ethnos] of the Jews”), and of John 18:35, “Bin ich ein Jude? Dein Volk und die Hohenpriester haben dich mir uberantworter” (“Am I a Jew? Your [own] nation [ethnos] and the chief priests have handed you over to me”); considering the Gospel of John’s overall intensified anti-Jewish sentiment, might it be significant that there is no mention of “crowds” in its passion narrative? True, the Vulgate renders Matthew’s ochlos at 27:20 this time with populus, but it is important to know that the textual source Luther used in translating the Gospel, Erasmus’s Novum Testamentum Omne of 1519 (a Greek New Testament with Erasmus’s own recension of the Latin on facing pages), specifically corrects the Vulgate’s reading to turba; Erasmus also notes for 27:20, “And here, again, it is ‘crowd,’ not ‘people’—ochlos.” Since Luther consulted heavily with Philip Melanchthon, to whom Erasmus’s separately bound annotations were very well-known, and, moreover, since Luther also cannot have failed to notice that Erasmus’s side-by-side biblical text reads turba with ochlos, it seems clear enough that he was wont to override good information he had readily at his disposal Heinrich Bornkamm, “Luther’s Translation of the New Testament,” in Luther. A Profile, ed. H. G. Koengsberger (New York: Hill & Wang, 1973), 210–17, notes that Luther as a rule does correct the Vulgate readings in conformity with Erasmus’s suggestions. On Melanchthon and Erasmus, see Timothy J. Wengert, Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melanchthon’s Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).


17. Note again, however, that there is not necessarily such a (strong) link between the “crowds” and “the people.”

18. In this Luther is not simply following the Vulgate, as one can see from the chart provided in Appendix 1, below. Moreover, Luther’s textual source, Erasmus 1519, had corrected to turba or multitudo all but one of the (few) instances where the Vulgate had wrongly rendered ochlos as populus. And it is worth noting that in going about his task, Luther believed he could do better than the Vulgate: his avowed intention in translating the Bible from the original languages was that he thought “that it may result in a translation worthy of being read by Christians—I hope we shall present our Germany with a better one than that of the Latins [that is, better than the Vulgate].” See his letter of 13 January 1522 to Nikolaus von Amsdorf in D Martin Luther Werke Knittsche Gesamtausgabe, ser. 4, vol. 2 (Weimar: Bohlau, 1931), 423; quoted in Bornkamm, “Luther’s Translation of the New Testament,” 211.

19. In this case there is a somewhat similar linguistic echo between filius and filios in the Vulgate, one that is retained in Erasmus 1519. But to be altogether clear here, and even to risk being tiresome: I would not claim that a translation featuring the same noun for offspring at 27:9 and 27:25 should in and of itself be considered anti-Judaic; what I am suggesting is that an otherwise already somewhat anti-Judaic translation of the Gospel might reasonably be seen as subtly reinforcing its polemical tendencies through such a verbal echo in this particular context.


23. Luther, Lectures on Genesis, 145.
27. Commenting on this verse, Davies and Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, 3:189, write: “If the Gentiles were in view, would we not expect the plural?” Incidentally, not one of the pre-Luther German Bibles reads “gentiles” here. Luther frequently refers to Matthew 21:43 in his exegetical writings. See, for example, his comments on the book of Jonah in Luther’s Works, vol. 19, Lectures on the Minor Prophets II, ed. Hulton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974), 97–98: “That Jonah is sent from the land of the Jews into a foreign country symbolizes that the Spirit and God’s Word were to be taken from the Jewish people and bestowed on the Gentiles. Thus Christ says in Matthew 21:43…”
28. This section expands upon material from Appendix 1 in Michael Marissen, Lutheranism, anti-Judaism, and Bach’s St John Passion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 72–75.
30. Brown, Death of the Messiah, 837.
31. See, for example, Abrahám Calóv, Die heilige Bibel nach S. Herrn D. Martini Luthen Deutscher Dolmetschung und Erklärung (Wittenberg, 1681–82), 5:284 (Bach’s own copy, with his numerous high-lightings and marginal comments, is housed at Concordia Seminary Library, St. Louis), emphasizes runes, “This was a horrible curse, through which [the Jews] have precipitately incurred and drawn upon themselves and their entire lineage not only temporal but also eternal vengeance, expulsion, and damnation. Of the like example, as also of such a true vengeance, among no people from the outset of the world is [there] to [be] read.”
33. It should be noted here that, unfortunately, some translations of the St. Matthew Passion libretto render the closing lines from the chorus “Sind Blitze, sind Donner,” as asking “hell [to] break to pieces with sudden fury the false betrayers, that murderous race.” Picander’s text reads, “den falschen Verräter, das mordrische Blut” (“the false [or, ‘depraved’] betrayer, that murderous blood”)—that is, “the betrayer” is masculine accusative singular, referring to Jesus’ disciple Judas Iscariot, and the next phrase applies to him as well. Blut, then, here refers not to a “race” (that is, “the Jews”) but simply to the character in the biblical narrative, Judas. (Compare such expressions in English as “young blood.”) It should also be noted that in the aria “Ach, nun ist mein Jesus hin” the talk of Jesus’ being caught in “tiger-claws” refers to the bands of chief priests and elders, not to the Jewish people as a whole.
34. The word mild is here regularly translated as “gently.” For the word’s less well-known sense, which is much more likely the operative one in the present context, consider for example the wording of Psalm 37:21, “The Godless one borrows and repays not; the righteous one, however, is mer-
Theologische und musikalische Akzente in J. S. Bach's Passionen, in "Wie freudig ist mein Herz, da Gott versöhnet ist"—Die Lehre von der Versohnung m Kantsaten und Orgelchoralen von Johann Sebastian Bach, ed Renate Steger (Heidelberg [n.p.], 1993), 37–104, at p 78–79

In ancient mythology the Opferschale is a basin in which the blood of the sacrificial animal is collected. Johann Christoph Adelung, Grammatisch-kritisches Worterbuch der Hochdeutschen Mundart, rev ed (Leipzig, 1793), 3 607 Consider, too, the offerings for the altar in the Dedication of the Tabernacle in Numbers 7, where twelve times a silver basin (Luther Schale) is presented for use in grain offering (Luther Speisopfer) 36 Johann Olearius, Biblische Erklärung Darünnern, neuest dem allgemeinen Haupt-Schlussel der gantzen heiligen Schrift (Leipzig, 1678–81) This reference Bible is especially useful, as it frequently also provides page references to commentaries in other books, including standard editions of Luther's complete works, several of which Bach also owned For detailed information on the religious books in Bach's library, see Robin A. Leaver, Bach's Theologische Bibliothek (Neuhausen-Stuttgart Hanssler, 1985) 37 Bach and Picander possibly collaborated on the theological content of Picander's poetry in the St Matthew Passion, for the libretto draws on specific wordings from the passion sermons of Heinrich Muller that Bach had in his personal library See Elke Axmacher, "Ein Quellenfund zum Text der Matthaus-Passion," Bach-Jahrbuch 64 (1978) 181–91 38 Olearius, Biblische Erklärung, 5 252 39 Olearius, Biblische Erklärung, 1 2 208 40 Calov, Die heilige Bibel, 1 202 The first "X" in "XXV.23" has been corrected by hand (by Bach?) in Bach's own copy 41 Olearius, Biblische Erklärung, 3 208 42 Many recent translations of Matthew read "this is my blood of the covenant" The word "new" was added to 26 28 in some early manuscripts of the Gospel (the same is true for Mark 14 24) and is carried over into Luther's translation 43 Olearius, Biblische Erklärung, 5 230 44 Olearius, Biblische Erklärung, 1 2 496 45 See Galatians 3 13 For similar linking of curse with blessing, see Bach's church cantatas Herr, we du wilt, so schucks mir nur (BWV 73) and Jesus, der du meine Seele (BWV 78) 46 Heinrich Muller passion sermons, quoted in Axmacher, Aus Liebe will mein Heyland Sterben, 179, n 28 47 Here perhaps a contextual reference ought to be made to the Great Commission of Matthew 28 16–20, where Jesus says, "go and make disciples of all nations" New Testament interpreters are divided on whether Matthew's world mission excludes or includes Jews (for bibliography, see Davies and Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, 3 684, n 1 39) Luther certainly did not give up on an idea of converting "ethnic Israel," but in both his earlier and later writings he was extremely contemptuous of the religion of Judaism He (and many of his followers) had no doubt that God via the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple not only to punish Jews for rejecting Jesus, but also to abrogate their covenant with God and to bring definitively to an end the validity of their religion (See the discussion and documentation of these issues, for example, in Marissen, "The Character and Sources of the Anti-Judaism in Bach's Cantata 46," 68–84) 48 Perhaps it should be mentioned here that Luther and the New Testament authors apparently see no inconsistency between concomitant claims about human responsibility and about God's will for example, people can be held responsible for Jesus' death even if the crucifixion was in truth the will of God 49 A theme in many of Luther's writings but most prominently of course in his "On the Jews and their Lies, 1543," in Luther's Works, vol 47, The Christian in Society IV, trans Martin H Bertram, ed Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia Fortress, 1971), 123–306
For recent biblical criticism suggesting that according to historically informed reading of Paul the same actually does not hold true for Jews, see John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Krister Stendahl, *Final Account Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), esp. 33–44. Stendahl argues that the issue at hand in the book of Romans was the justification of Paul's gentile converts, not of sinners in general. (Stendahl, now retired, was the Lutheran bishop of Stockholm; that is to say, one does not have to agree with Brother Martin to be a good Lutheran!) Luther himself (following Augustine), however, took Paul's key phrase "all Israel will be saved" in Romans 11:26 to mean that all among Israel who are to be saved will be saved; see Luther's *Works*, vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 101, that is, Luther appears to be saying that in fact "not all Israel will be saved" (Luther's *Lectures on Romans* were not published until the 20th century.)

See Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Good News or Bad?" in *Jesus, Judaism & Christian Anti-Judaism Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*, ed. Paula Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 77–98. at 92. So far as I can see, the validity of Levine's point here about possible "anti-Jewish" effects even in a redemptive reading of Matthew 27:25 is in no way weakened by acknowledging that Jewish identity was rather more fluid in the first century than it is today (that is, many early "Christians" would not have identified themselves as "not Jewish")

Luther Bibles of Bach's day quote Matthew 4:23b almost verbatim at 9.35b. where laos is rendered as *Volk*, most modern Bibles do not contain this latter half verse. It may be interesting to note that the plural form of *ochlos* appears without any qualifiers in the Greek of Matthew 5:1:7:28; 9:8,33,36. 11:7; 12:46; 13 34,36; 14:13,15,19,22,23; 15 36,39; 21:9,11,46; 22:33; 23:1; 26:55, and 27:20: "many crowds" appears at 4:25, 8:1, 12:15, 13:2, 15:30, and 19:2, and "all the crowds" at 12:23 (see Cousland, *Crowds in Matthew*, 35, n 19). It is unclear what the significance of the plural usages is. But it might bolster the assumption of a mixed-crowd awareness on the part of the author of Matthew.

My results in this chart and the conclusions drawn from it will be unaffected by dealing with the only slightly different pre19th-century editions of the Luther Bible.