CHAPTER THREE

THE INTENTION OF THE WOES OF MATTHEW 23

The nucleus of Matthew 23 is the seven woes which begin with v. 13 (excluding v. 14), yet the intention of oōai is subject to debate. What exactly does oōai connote? Or even more to the point, what do the seven woes in the context of Matthew 23 connote? Are they anguished cries of grief which lament over the scribes and Pharisees, or are they maledictions officially pronounced upon them? Commentators disagree. Some claim that oōai expresses sorrowful pity with no hint of imprecation, while others argue that the woes are more akin to curses, and still others maintain that oōai may indicate either lamentation or malediction depending upon its context. This chapter attempts to determine the significance of the woe cry as it relates to Matthew’s intention in chapter 23.

THE VIEWS OF SCHOLARS CONCERNING THE INTENTION OF Oōai

The unmistakable tone of stridor in chap. 23 seems accentuated by the sevenfold cry of woe. Montefiore detected an air of finality in the woes which—in light of the statement of Jesus in Matthew 9:13 (“For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”)—caused him to question whether Jesus desired that only one sort of sinner be healed or whether the woes of chap. 23 simply represented poor tactics in evangelism. Out of sensitivity to this kind of issue many Christian interpreters, it seems, have attempted to ameliorate the severity of the woes which indeed appears to be strangely out of character for Jesus. It is difficult to imagine Jesus pronouncing a curse on his enemies in light of such passages as Luke 23:34 (although textually spurious). However, this study is not focused on the intention of Jesus, but the intention of Matthew; and the two

1 See above, p. 15, n. 17.
3 H. Benedict Green, The Gospel According to Matthew, p. 187, for example, remarked; “the extreme bitterness of this chapter is out of character with what we can recover of the historical Jesus (though very much in line with the Johannine Christ; cf. Jn. 8:39ff.)"
should not be confused. Chap. 23 is a Matthean composition whereby Matthew has taken up traditions and interpreted them through alterations and rearrangements to express his own theology. Therefore, Matthew’s intention may express something quite opposite to Jesus’ intention in the original setting. This chapter will attempt to uncover Matthew’s understanding of the series of woes.

Oúaí as an Expression of Sorrowful Pity

The repeated refrain, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” sounds imprecatory, but McNeile, for one, sought to make clear that oúaí could express “sorrowful pity no less than anger”. Therefore, many believe that the woes of chap. 23 should definitely be distinguished from the malevolence of the curse. Plummer asserted that “Indeed, ‘Alas for you’ may represent the meaning of each utterance rather than ‘Woe unto you’”.

Oúaí as an Expression of Pity and Anger

Condemnation permeates the context of Matthew 23, and it cannot be muffled simply by translating oúaí as “Alas!”. Other commentators have consequently made further refinements in the understanding of the intention of oúaí. Although oúaí does not damn the scribes and Pharisees and may best be translated “Alas!” it does pass judgment on condemnable conduct. Many commentators have maintained, therefore, that while the woe is not a curse nor simply a denunciation, in Matthew 23 it expresses both pity and anger. It is a condemnation, yet it is also, and perhaps even more so, a cry of lamentation.

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6 Frank Stagg, “Matthew”, *BBC*, VIII:213. Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus*, p. 672, suggested that in “woe” both wrath and grief come to expression because the wrath directs itself against the sin which causes the lament. He is followed by Paul Gaechter, *Das Matthäus Evangelium*, p. 733. A. R. C. Leaney, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 136, stated that “woe” was not the pronunciation of a curse; “it is rather witnessing to a fact plain for all to see and understand, which the speaker does not claim to bring about but of which he has clear insight”. John Hoad, “On Matthew xxiii.15: A Rejoinder”, *ET*, LXXIII:212, 1961-1962, claimed that the woe was an “awesome lament” whose sting should not be drawn. The element of a stern warning has also been noted by J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of Saint Matthew*, p. 368: “Woe to you expresses a double idea: first, grief or indignation at the sin which is defined in the following clause; secondly, a warning of punishment from God for those who have committed this sin”.

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