YES OR NO: THE DEMAND FOR HONESTY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

BY

PAUL S. MINEAR
New Haven

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"Concerning the command not to swear at all, but always to speak the truth, he commanded as follows 'Don't swear at all, but let your yes be yes and your no, no. Anything more than this comes from the Evil One.

This saying of Jesus as reported in Justin Martyr's Apology (I, 16, 5) is the core of a teaching which appears in a more highly developed form in three New Testament passages: Matthew v 33-37; xxiii 16-22; James v 12. In all but the last-named passage it is attributed to Jesus. We will examine these three primary texts to detect various signs of development, along with lines of interpretation and modes of application. We will begin with the version as found in the Sermon on the Mount. The three features of Justin’s teaching appear here in virtually the same wording. In v 34a is the negative command “Don’t swear at all” and in v 37 is the positive complement “Let what you say be simply yes or no” and the rationalization “Anything more than this comes from the Evil One.”

At the moment we need not decide whether Justin was in this case dependent on Matthean tradition or was in touch with an independent oral source. The most recent work on this problem adopts the former option. E. P. SANDERS believes that Justin used Matthew but intentionally omitted his illustrations of forbidden oaths (Mt. v 34b-35) because he “was interested only in the principle” (The Tendency of the Synoptic Tradition. Cambridge, 1969, pp. 57, 67). This explanation is quite unconvincing. It is as credible that these illustrations should have been added during the development of oral tradition as that they should have been intentionally deleted during one of the redactional stages. Certainly, if one starts with the Justin version as the nucleus he can readily explain the accretions. It is also significant that these examples of forbidden oaths illustrate only the negative prohibition. They obscure and
blunt the thrust of the positive command, which Justin clearly understood to be central: “always to speak the truth.”

We should examine, then, these illustrations:

“Do not swear at all,
either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,
or by the earth, for it is his footstool,
or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King”
(Mt. v 34b, 35).

These three oaths are entirely typical of Palestinian Jewish practice. The banning of these three appears to spring from a prudential motive. Because of the divine power to enforce penalties, such oaths are too dangerous to be used. In swearing by the earth, the oath-taker might be attempting to evade divine sanctions, but such evasion was entirely impossible. A still different rationale appears in the fourth example of oaths which should be avoided (v. 36). It is the futility of swearing which becomes the point here. To swear by one’s own head carries no force, inasmuch as a person has no power to change one hair from black to white. One may also discern an implicit warning to the creditor that he should not trust another’s oath. Both notions are alien to the thought of v. 37, although one can understand how, once the saying of 34a, 37 was current in oral tradition, it would attract examples of oaths like these, some dangerous to the debtor (v. 34b, 35) and some to the creditor (v. 36). One may conclude that these additions (34b-36) were probably made before the teaching was drawn to this Matthean context, because there were subsequent changes which are more probably Matthean.

The context in Matthew makes intelligible the addition of v. 33. There is nothing in the saying itself to suggest a necessary reference to the Leviticus law. Why should the command for transparently honest speech be contrasted with the law against perjury? It was presumably the combination of six antitheses in Matthew which dictated not only the introductory formula but also the citation of a specific law (Lev. xix 12) to serve as a foil against which Jesus’ command could be set. But the contrast between the command “to perform to the Lord what you have sworn” and the command to avoid oaths altogether is awkward and imperfect. Three of Matthew’s antitheses repudiate or abrogate an earlier law (v 31f., 38f., 43f.). Not so the saying on oaths. Like the commands on murder and adultery (v 21f., 27f.) this command affirms the earlier law