

WAS JESUS A *MESITH*? : PUBLIC RESPONSE TO JESUS AND HIS MINISTRY

D. Neale

Summary

Negative public response to Jesus is examined with reference to Deuteronomy 13 and rabbinic assessments of Jesus as a mesith, a beguiler of the people. The tradition of interpretation of Deuteronomy 13 in the rabbinic corpus and New Testament passages that reflect this motif are examined for clues to the cause of conflict the historical Jesus encountered in his ministry. In particular, the issues of familial division, Jesus' reception in the cities, and the rural pattern of ministry are examined. It is argued that Jesus experienced the ostracism reserved for the mesith at both the personal and the civic level.

I. Introduction

The gospels report a generally positive public response to Jesus throughout most of his ministry. It usually falls to Jesus' fellow religionists to mount the opposition, and apart from the final hours not a single instance of crowd disapproval or mob violence can be discerned in the gospel narratives. Yet, there is indirect evidence in the gospels of a more widespread and concerted negative public response to Jesus as well. The purpose here will be to assess some of that evidence and then place it in an interpretive historical context which will help to explain that negative response. Specifically, we will address the question, 'Does the Old Testament and rabbinic material on the *mesith* (one who entices to apostasy or idolatry) offer any help in understanding response to Jesus in the time of his public ministry'?¹ The interpretive crux will be the Old Testament and rabbinic traditions regarding the so-called *mesith* and whether these texts can provide insight into this important but neglected aspect of Jesus' public ministry. In terms of the New Testament material some of the factors in Jesus' ministry that will occupy us are the enigmatic

¹While the subject has not received much attention, several writers have seen the connection of this material to Jesus, usually with respect to his trial. See J. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, (London, SCM Press Ltd. 1966) 78-9 and *New Testament Theology*, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons 1971) 78. Also Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York, MacMillan Co. 1925) 25 & 27-8, and others see n. 9 below.

rural pattern of ministry, the expulsion from certain towns and cities, and the unwillingness of some to be identified with Jesus.

II. Methodological Concerns

A word on method is in order as we begin, particularly with regard to the use of rabbinic sources here, since their relationship to the first century Palestinian milieu is always a matter of debate and often tenuous. No argument will be made that the rabbinic pronouncements cited here necessarily had currency in Jesus' day, although in some cases a tradition of similar belief probably did exist in the first century. The reason these rabbinic pronouncements on the *mesith* are of particular interest for the study of negative public response to Jesus is not based on a redactional or historical/critical assessment of their value. Rather, it is due to the fact that all these passages have a broad and direct dependence on Old Testament texts which were known to the religionists of Jesus' day and are quoted in the New Testament. This forms the cord that ties the three traditions together. If lines of evidence converge from the Old and New Testament material, and then find expression in rabbinic texts, we are justified in speaking of an authentic religious tradition whose general form spans the period during which all these texts were produced. I will attempt to show that the New Testament material is bracketed on either side by traditions which explain otherwise difficult material. The hope is that this will lead to fresh and plausible interpretations of some of the New Testament material.

III. The Old Testament and Rabbinic Evidence

The first task is to outline the rabbinic and biblical characteristics of a *mesith*. The basic charge against the *mesith* is that he entices individuals or even whole towns to idolatry. The biblical text is Deuteronomy 13 where treatment of such a one is set out (6ff.).² This is not the false prophet, who is dealt with elsewhere and is exposed by

²*MT* D. 13:7, *tysiy*, the hiphil form here is from the root *tws*, 'to incite, allure, instigate' (*BDB*, 694). The hiphil participle *tysim* becomes the rabbinic designation for one who leads others astray. M. Jastrow, on the other hand, traces *tysim* to *tsy* ('to do habitually'; *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* 1 (New York, Pardes Publishing House 1971) 583, an idea compatible with that of an instigator. The one who leads a town astray is a *meddiah*, *hydiim*. So *M. San.* 7.4.

the non-fulfilment of his prophecy.³ This is a genuine prophet or dreamer of dreams who has passed the test of authenticity (2) and whose very success is sent to test Israel's love and loyalty (3b). The question is not whether the omens or portents come true—they do—but whether Israel should receive the message based on these mighty works.⁴ If such individuals entice Israelites away to foreign gods, they are to be treated without 'pity or compassion' and stoned. Severe treatment is commanded, even with regard to apostate family members: '. . . your own hand shall be first against them to execute them' (9), which places the prohibition of mercy and compassion in especially high relief. In the case of a town which welcomes an enticer, now called a *meddiah*, all of its inhabitants and livestock shall be killed, and the town shall be burned down as a whole burnt offering to the Lord, never to be rebuilt (12ff.).⁵ The fierceness of the punishment for the *mesith* or those who tolerate his activity is remarkable. Judicially both the perpetrator and those who tolerate the crime are the subject of extreme punishment.

A tradition of interpretation in the rabbinic corpus has grown up around the Deuteronomy passage and reference to Deuteronomy 13 can be found repeatedly in the Mishnah and the gemara. The specific

³The false prophet dies by strangulation (M. San. 11.1); Dt. 18:20-22. A *mesith* can also be an ordinary citizen, "He that beguiles (*mesith*) [others to idolatry]"—such is a common man (*hedyot*) that beguiles another common man'. *Hedyot* from the Gk. ἰδιώτης, is neither a prophet nor a sage, cf. PT San. 7.12, J. Neusner's translation, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel* 31 (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1984). The Christian movement had its ἰδιώτης", cf. 1 Cor. 14:16, 23 & 24, where the ἰδιώτης is an 'outsider' and more than simply 'unlearned', cf. Acts 4:13 and 2 Cor 11:6. See further O. Gigon, 'ἰδιώτης', in *Soziale Typenbegriffe im alten Griechenland und ihr Fortleben in den sprachen der Welt*, E.C. Welskopf (ed.), (Berlin, Akademie-Verlag 1981) 385-91.

⁴This is often the case in the gospels. The authenticity of Jesus' works are not questioned, the question is whether his words and works ought to inspire a following. See below n. 20. Also, cf. the interesting story of the *min* (heretic) in PT San 7.13 who performs wonders and parts the sea, yet Rabbis Eleazar and Joshua are not taken in.

⁵See M. San. 9.1 and 10.4 for the specific conditions which must be in evidence and the method of death.

crime of the *mesith* is leading others into idolatry. But, more generally, a *mesith* is one who simply leads individuals and towns away from God. The *mesith* falls into that special category of offenders against the faith that are not accorded the law of love of Leviticus 19:18; thus ARNa 15a: ‘Love them all, and hate (only) heretics, apostates (*mesitim*), seducers and informers’. They are to be loved only if they repent and act as they ought as the people of Israel. The *mesith* is listed as one to be stoned along with those who commit incest, bestiality, the blasphemer and idolater, soothsayers, profaners of the Sabbath and others (M. San. 7.4). The *mesith* ‘allures another out of the ways of life into the ways of death’ (BT Men. 99b). The ideas of disloyalty to Israel and the seduction of the people lie at the heart of the activity of these evil-doers. The possibility that Jesus could have been viewed along the lines of one who led individuals and towns astray seems very plausible indeed.⁶

The animosity to the *mesith* is particularly evident in the material that deals with his legal status. In terms of jurisprudence none had as few leniencies accorded him as the *mesith*. For example, the charge against the *mesith* is the only capital case in rabbinic jurisprudence where witnesses may be hidden in order to entrap the offender in his crime (M. San. 7.10). What a defendant might not say in public he could perhaps be enticed to say again in private, with witnesses hidden behind a wall. Normal legal precedent was strictly protective of the defendant’s rights but for the *mesith* this contravention was tolerated on the basis of the ‘no pity’ clause of Deuteronomy 13.⁷ The essence of the act was to craftily get the

⁶Jesus is never charged in the NT with being an idolater, nor can we easily imagine his activity in the gospels as being construed in this sense. The later identification of Jesus as a *mesith* by the rabbis is probably due to an understanding of the term that functioned more broadly than ‘idolater’. Compare, e.g., the traditional Jewish identification of covetousness as idolatry, Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; see A. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas, Word Books 1990) 333. Note the translation of *mesitim* in ARN 15a as ‘apostate’ by Soncino.

⁷ Cf. BT San. 29a. Moreover, the rabbinic legal procedures in capital cases are slanted in the direction of acquittal at almost every stage of the legal proceedings. Obviously, the blood of a wrongly executed defendant was upon those who brought judgment, so precaution was in order. Testimony must begin with evidence for acquittal and contradictory testimony from witnesses in capital cases renders their testimony invalid (M. San. 4.1, 5.2). With respect to witnesses see Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd 1970) 160ff, who makes special reference to the currency of Deuteronomic law on witnesses in New Testament times (160, n. 2); also D. Daube *Witnesses in Bible and Talmud* (Oxford, Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies 1986).

offender to repeat his invitation to heresy in the hearing of others who could bear witness.⁸

When a sentence of death had been passed the condemned was led forth ‘outside the camp’ with a herald preceding him to declare the offence and invite any who knew anything in favour of acquittal to come forward (M. San. 6.1). As an added precaution an attendant at the door of the Bet din was equipped with a towel to signal a horseman stationed at a distance. If anyone appeared with evidence for acquittal the horseman was signalled and sent to stop the proceedings, even four or five times if necessary. Remarkably, all of this precaution for acquittal was suspended in the case of the *mesith* and again, Deuteronomy 13 is cited in support (BT San 33b). The gemara on M. San. 6.1 quoted above is BT San 43a and of particular interest. While later expunged from the Talmud, Soncino preserves the reading of earlier editions about the herald who supposedly preceded Jesus to his execution. The announced charge is that Jesus ‘practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy’, and it is asked, ‘Was he not a *Mesith*, concerning whom Scripture says, Neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him?’⁹ Again, the citation is from Deuteronomy 13:9. When the invitation for voices in favour of

⁸D. Daube notes in his treatment of Dt. 13 that the crime is simply one of verbalization and draws a parallel to Stephen’s death (*Witnesses*, 10). See further n. 9. The scenes from the trial come to mind with the conflicting testimonies of the witnesses: ‘I heard him say. . .’. Or could the attempt by the Herodians and Pharisees of Mk. 12:13 ‘to trap’ Jesus in what he said be explained on this basis? ‘Trap’, ἀγρέμω, ‘to catch’ as in an ‘unguarded statement’. Cf. the perjorative sense of ἐμβούλιον in Mk. 3:6. Similarly Luke’s ἐνεδρεύοντες αὐτον θηρεύσαι τι ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτου (11:54) has the same feel as what might be expected in the case of a *mesith*. Such actions by Jesus’ opponents might well have been viewed in the light they are presented in the gospels, craftiness and trickery.

⁹See further J.Z. Lauterbach, ‘Jesus in the Talmud’, in *Jewish Expressions on Jesus* (New York, KTAV 1977) 18ff.; Klausner, *op. cit.*, 25 & 27-8; R.T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* 83ff. Attribution of BT 43a is to Abaye, c. 280-338 CE, a Babylonian Amora.

acquittal is given in the gemara it is objected that his offence was one for which no such precaution was necessary.

The punishment for the *mesith* is stoning and this is suited to the severe nature of the offence, i.e. an attack on ‘the fundamental belief of Judaism’ (BT San. 49b). The enormity of the offence is seen in the gemara on Mishnah 7.1, ‘Stoning is severer than burning, since thus the blasphemer and the idol-worshipper are executed.’¹⁰ Furthermore, even though the one who seduces an individual or town is considered to be more deeply culpable than the seduced, the deceived themselves are to be slain if they tolerate the crime (Dt. 13:15; BT San. 50a).

IV. Negative Public Reponse in the New Testament Material

The hypothesis that Jesus may have been perceived by some as a seducer and one who enticed others from certain foundational beliefs of Judaism can be tested by examining some New Testament texts. If the hypothesis helps to elucidate otherwise difficult events then so much the better. The purpose again is to examine the underlying negative public response to Jesus which dogged his ministry and eventually culminated in his death.¹¹

1. Familial Division

We begin with the gospel tradition of division within the family over the gospel message. Luke says,

...in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (Lk. 12:52,53)

¹⁰BT San. 49b; also BT San. 53a.

¹¹It is not being argued here that the charge of being a *mesith* was responsible for Jesus’ death, only that it may have been a factor in his negative treatment throughout the course of public ministry. S. Zeitlin has argued that Stephen’s death was as a ‘beguiler’ whose crime was to promote a change in the law (*Who Crucified Jesus* (New York, Harper & Brothers 1947) 190). D. Hare dismisses the possibility because there is no reference to idolatry *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge, CUP 1967) 22, n. 2). But clearly, what Stephen **said** got him killed (Acts 6:13 & 14), and so also with Jesus. If a broader understanding of the crimes of the *mesith* is granted, Zeitlin’s and my own suggestions are possible.

Why would Jesus have announced that ‘henceforth’ his ministry activities would divide families against themselves? It would be tempting to divorce this saying from the historical Jesus and find here the experience of the later church in its troubled relationship to the synagogue. But it can be explained in terms of the experience of Jesus and his disciples themselves. This text in Luke is clearly derived from Micah 7:6, a text which is also quoted in Matthew 10:35-36 (Q material). However, the same theme is found in a somewhat different form earlier in Matthew 10:21, and there it seems to be reflective of Deuteronomy 13:6. The Matthew passage describes what the Twelve can expect in their missionary journey and the Deuteronomy passage describes the fate of the *mesith*.

Matthew 10:19a, 21

When they hand you over...
 Brother will betray brother
 and a father his child
 children will rise against
 parents

Deuteronomy 13:6,9

if anyone secretly entices you..
 ...even if it is your brother
 your father’s son or mother’s son
 your own son or daughter
 or your wife or your most
 intimate friend

and have them put to death ...you shall surely kill them

In terms of literary structure Deuteronomy 13 seems to provide a more probable source for Matthew 10:21 than does Micah 7:6. Matthew’s treatment of this passage is also interesting in that he takes it from its apocalyptic setting (*cf.* Mk. 13:9-13; Lk. 21:12-19) and places it in the context of the disciples’ immediate experience.¹² Being clearly eschatological in tone and usage, the whole idea of Micah 7:6 does not fit the context of the instructions to the Twelve. Micah explains such animosity among family members in terms of the chaos of the end-times.¹³ But if Matthew 10:21 is derived from Deuteronomy 13:6ff.,

¹²Matthew alone envisages persecution particularly for missionaries, see Hare, *op. cit.* 96-113, esp. 110-12. See further V. Hampel, ‘Ihr werdet mit den Städten Israels nicht zu Ende kommen’, *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 45 (1989) 3. But P. Grelot, (‘Michée 7,6 dans les évangiles’, *Bib*, 67 (1968) 366) traces Mt. 10:21, as well as 10:35ff. to Mi. 7:6.

¹³Grelot, *ibid*, shows the connection of Micah 7:6ff. to eschatological passages across the spectrum of the literature of Early Judaism.

as I suggest, it gives a concrete historical reason for the animosity and makes the charge understandable in terms of Jesus' actual ministry. It then fits Matthew's context remarkably well. A family whose kin was charged with being a *mesith* could be called upon to reveal where their loyalties lay. The biblical mandate actually calls for a family to divide itself against the offender, indeed to be the first to raise their hands in execution. Furthermore, in this light the special Matthean material at Matthew 11:1 becomes significant. Jesus goes on to proclaim the gospel **in the home-towns of the disciples** (ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν αὐτῶν), exactly where they could expect to encounter familial problems of this nature.

This idea of religious divisions and categories finding expression in social ways should not be surprising. Christians themselves soon developed their own categories of 'outsiders', even extending to intimate associations (1 Cor. 5:11-13, see further, n. 3). Even Jesus seemingly separated himself from his family for a period (Mk. 3:21, 31-35 & par.) and enjoined others to do so if necessary for the Kingdom of God (Mk. 10:29-30; Lk. 14:26). In time, the Christian community developed its own equivalent of the *mesith*. Gundry sees a dependence on Deuteronomy 13 for Mark 13:22.¹⁴ By an ironic twist, Jesus himself now warns against the new *mesitim* who will 'lead astray' the faithful. Now 'false messiahs and false prophets' (ψευδόξριστοι καὶ ψευδοπροφήται) will attempt what he himself was accused of doing.

2. Jesus' Reception in the Cities

The nature of Jesus' reception in various cities is another interesting area to test our hypothesis. Many communities apparently received Jesus enthusiastically. Certainly Capernaum initially welcomed Jesus (Mk. 2:1-2; 3:19b-20), and perhaps Nain (Lk. 7:11), but beyond this

¹⁴R. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden, E.J. Brill 1967) 50. As does M. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London, SPCK 1974) 126; cf. 468. See also Rev. 13:14; and 1 Cor. 15:11-13 where the *mesith* idea is adopted by the Christian community with a similar punishment adopted, note the apparent allusion to Dt. 17:2-7. Note also the correlation of Christian heretics to the OT *mesith* in that the important issue was whether one should show hospitality, i.e. receive, the offenders or turn them out (cf. 1 Jn. 2:19; 2 Jn. 7,10-11; 3 Jn. 5-8, 10).

specific cities that were receptive to Jesus are surprisingly hard to identify.¹⁵ Matthew indicates that the cities where Jesus did most of his works of power did not repent (Mt. 11:20) and Jesus' advice to the Twelve indicates that trouble was to be expected at the civic level. They are advised to shake off the dust of the house or town that will not receive them: 'it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town' (Mt. 10:14-15). A distinct acceptance or rejection of the emissaries is contemplated, an experience apparently viewed as common to travelling prophets. The injunction from Deuteronomy 13 to defend the cities and villages of Israel from deceivers may have been the basis upon which cities took such actions. Scrutiny, rejection and the resulting appearances before local councils and synagogues are anticipated (Mt. 10:17).¹⁶ This prediction of persecution before councils and synagogues is not a prophetic warning of future trouble, or a reflection of, say, the experience of the Matthean community. Rather, it reflects the actual, immediate experience of Jesus and his disciples. Because this tradition derives from the middle of Mark's apocalypse (13:9-11), it has been assumed that this persecution was a future event. But Matthew does not view it this way and to him it was actually to occur in the life of the disciples, and even Jesus

¹⁵Particular notice of the positive reception Jesus had among the 'Galileans' is made in Jn. 4:45. So also Mk. 6:56. Cana knew him and seems to have received him (Jn. 4:46) but many references give no indication of the nature of Jesus' civic reception: Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi, Jericho, Bethphage and Bethany, (Mk. 8:22,27; 10:46; 11:1). Unlike Capernaum, however, there was no long stay in these places. Negatively, Jesus is begged to leave the country of the Gerasenes, Mk. 5:17; he does not want to be observed in Tyre, Mk. 7:24; in Nazareth they take offense, Mk. 6:3, and drive him out, Lk. 4:29; Jesus anticipates civic problems for the twelve, Mk. 6:11; a clandestine trip through Galilee, Mk. 9:30; the disciples are afraid to enter Jerusalem, Mk. 10:32; Jesus ends public travel altogether and retreats to remote Ephraim, Jn. 11:54.

¹⁶The *sunevdria* here are 'local Jewish councils' says V. Taylor, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House 1966) 506; see also E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 2* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, revised 1979) 185ff. *Cf.* the treatment Paul received in 2 Cor. 11:24. A village need have only 120 men to compose a lesser Sanhedrin (Schürer, *ibid* 188-9). Mishnah Sanhedrin is concerned with how such councils viewed their responsibilities, at least in the second century if not earlier, and this is where we find material relating directly to the *mesith* (M. San. 7.10, *cf.* 11.6).

himself.¹⁷ Our line of investigation would suggest that Matthew preserves the actual historical reality.

3. Jesus' Rural Pattern of Ministry

All this may help to explain the rural pattern of Jesus' movements. There is a clear pattern of civil rejection of Jesus and his disciples: 'When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. . . .' (Mt. 10:23; cf. Lk. 10:10). In Matthew 23:34 we find this interesting description of the treatment of charismatic visitors to towns in Palestine:

Therefore I send you prophets, sages and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. . .

This is a pattern known to us from Paul's ministry, but seen here in relation to Jesus in a Palestinian context. In Q there is the specific condemnation of Chorazin and Bethsaida for their refusal to 'repent', which we should perhaps understand as their refusal to 'accept' Jesus civically in those places (Mt. 11:20ff.; Lk. 10:13ff.). Evidently these cities simply would not tolerate his work there. Even Capernaum, his headquarters, eventually drove him out (Mt. 11:23; Lk. 10:15). It is not difficult to consider an event such as that described in John 6:52-71 as the cause of a break in Jesus' relationship with Capernaum. At his teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood many turned back from following him (66) and this backlash could well have had a civic aspect. This civil judgment and rejection is precisely the action called for by Deuteronomy 13:12ff. with respect to a *meddiah*.

The notion that 'town after town' will exercise this ban was probably due to the judicial interconnection of Jewish towns and villages. Smaller villages (κώμῳ) were often subordinate to 'mother' towns (πόλεις) and it would be surprising if an action to ban Jesus in

¹⁷So Hurtado, *Mark* (Peabody, Hendrickson 1983) 214-5. Grelot analyses the differing contexts of this triple tradition material, 'Michée 7,6', 363-6, esp. 365. On Mt. 10:21 see further D.J. Weaver, *Matthew's Missionary Discourse* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press 1990) 97ff. On expulsion from a community, compare Eliezer's expulsion from Yavneh for doctrinal insubordination at the end of the first century (see J. Neusner, *A Life of Yohanan Ben Zakkai* (Leiden, E.J. Brill 1970) 113-14).

one town had not reverberated through the system.¹⁸ Could the silence of the gospels on Sepphoris, a town of 30,000 barely four miles from Nazareth and the major Roman administrative centre of Galilee, be due to the fact that Jesus was not welcome there? And if this were true it would place the rejection at Nazareth in a new light (Lk. 4). The rejection may have found added impetus from pressure within the interrelated councils and would have been especially poignant in view of Jesus' intimate connections with the populace.¹⁹ Nazareth's civic subordination to Sepphoris may have shaped its response to its native son.

The incident in Nazareth actually fits the pattern of Deuteronomy 13 remarkably well. Following Jesus' inflammatory words in 4:24-27 we find those in the synagogue filled with rage.

They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. (29, *cf.* Dt. 13:10)

Their intent was evidently to stone Jesus, for which throwing the offender from a cliff 'twice the height of a man' (M. San. 6.4) was the first step. The attempted stoning is in complete accord with rabbinic prescriptions for the treatment of the *mesith*. To the inhabitants of Nazareth the rejection of Jesus was probably viewed as an act of

¹⁸For Schürer's description of the interdependence of cities and towns in Judea see *Jewish People*, 2, 188-90.

¹⁹S. Freyne, on the other hand, suggests that Jesus avoided the Herodian cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias because of the danger of Herod Antipas. Thus he locates the avoidance of these urban centres in the Roman side of the equation, whereas, I suggest here that the avoidance is due to the Jewish religious communities there (*Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian* (Wilmington, Michael Glazier, Inc. 1989) 222). A middle road which accounts for both would recognize that establishment-leaning Jewish leaders could well be predisposed to bring pressure to bear on trouble-makers through the Sanhedrin, suppressing the notorious Galilean tendency for activism, so supporting Roman interests as well as their own. Freyne cautiously admits that the 'political phase' of Jesus' ministry cannot be confined to Jerusalem (226; *cf.* also Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1973, 50). If crowds were responding politically to Jesus the civic and religious leaders would have to respond. The ban would serve as a defensive measure. As Vermes notes, better to throw one out lest the entire community should suffer on his account (Gen. R. 94. Jn. 11:47-50, *op. cit.*, 51, 237).

religious and civic responsibility, an act of obedience to Torah and community. When the religious and political realities of Nazareth and her powerful neighbour Sepphoris are added to the scenario, the incident has all the spirit of Deuteronomy's command to not shield or conceal even those intimately related to the community. Following this episode Jesus could not return home and the saying in Luke 9:58 that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head may have been quite literally true.²⁰

Other fragments of the gospel record require reinterpretation if this suggestion is correct. In the parable of the narrow door (Lk. 13:22ff) the boast of those who try to justify themselves before the Lord in the hour of judgment was 'you taught in our streets', in other words, 'we did not drive you from our town'. Or consider the report at Mark 1:45 that following the healing of a leper Jesus could 'no longer enter a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter'. The rural nature of Jesus' ministry may not have been because he did not want to visit urban centres such as Sepphoris and Tiberias, but that when he did he found no civic welcome there. As a result much of Jesus' time was spent in the countryside. He simply was not tolerated by some of the Jewish communities who viewed him as false prophet enticing the population with wonders and attractive teachings, undeniably real though they may be. The only place to gather without risk in many cases was beyond the city gate.

4. Fear and Loyalty, the Litmus Test of Faith

This would also explain the fear of the disciples in Mark 10:32 and related texts as Jesus turns to Jerusalem. They all faced a clear legal and biblical danger in the company of a *meddiah* (Mt. 10:32). Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the High Priest (Mt. 26:69) had a concrete basis: his association with a *meddiah* held a severe penalty. It is probably a reflection of the modern embarrassment of religion to think that Peter was simply 'ashamed' of Jesus. In fact, to have responded in the affirmative to his questioners about his acquaintance with Jesus would have invited the next decisive question, 'what is

²⁰And, as I have already noted above, this may have been the case of the disciples as well.

your opinion on his activities’?²¹ At this particular juncture that could have been a life and death question. In essence, Peter took the ‘fifth amendment’, he refused to implicate himself in a punishable offence. In a similar way the anguish around the table at the Last Supper (. . . is it I, Lord?) is invested with deeper meaning when we realize that denial or affirmation of Jesus as a prophet or christ was quickly becoming a potentially life or death question of loyalty.

In conclusion, the examination of some of the New Testament texts that reflect a negative public response to Jesus in the light of literary traditions about the *mesith* and *meddiah* shows a reasonable possibility that the hatred reserved for the biblical *mesith* could have been directed toward Jesus. Furthermore, some enigmatic aspects of the public response to Jesus’ ministry are made comprehensible in the light of this interpretation. Deuteronomy 13 and the subsequent *mesith* tradition provide a valuable addition to our basis for understanding the familial turmoil, civic unrest and personal struggle with loyalty at which the gospels hint.

²¹In comparison consider the narrative at Jn. 9:13ff. To the Pharisees a Sabbath-breaker cannot be from God but the healed man persists in his opinion of Jesus as a ‘prophet’ (17). The blind man’s parents are afraid to express an opinion for fear of expulsion from the synagogue and ultimately the man himself will not renege. The result was that the man was ‘driven out’ by the Pharisees. The decisive factor was the man’s opinion of Jesus’ ministry. The parents of the blind man and Peter take similar positions when pressed about their opinion of Jesus, i.e. non-decision. The blind man shows a courageous loyalty and suffers the consequences.