

Assignment:

In the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche develops his argument about the role, practice, and social consequence of the Ascetic Priest. How does Jesus, in *The Gospel According to Matthew*, seem to conform yet not conform to Nietzsche's description? What are the important differences, in your reading of Matthew, that complicate a view of Jesus as the Ascetic Priest? (Pay attention not only to what Jesus does and says, but to the figures of speech he uses.)

Essay:

Jerusalem's Priestly Class as Defined by Friedrich Nietzsche in his Work *On the Genealogy of Morals*

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The Gospel According to Matthew and Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* present their separate views on religious leaders and their perception of the essential problem of man. Nietzsche develops his concept of the ascetic priest, a type he strongly denounces and to which Jesus Christ seemingly conforms. Nietzsche also believes humans encounter their essential problem when they repress their basic nature and instead try to achieve a "moral" ideal created by the ascetic priesthood. In contrast, Matthew shows Jesus as the King of the Jews, Messiah, and Savior of the world, who stands as the only answer to humankind's essential problem of separation from God. Through Jesus, one removes the only obstacle between oneself and God: the sinful heart. Jesus figures prominently in Matthew's presentation of the Gospel and exhibits similar characteristics to Nietzsche's ascetic priest. However, even more comparisons can be drawn between the ascetic priest and the Pharisees and Sadducees of old Jerusalem. According to Nietzsche, the Pharisees and Sadducees more completely fulfill the role, practice, and social consequence of the ascetic priest than does Jesus, in that the Pharisees and Sadducees simply enforce the letter of the law and guard its sanctity, whereas Jesus uses the law as a basis, but focuses more on the spirit of the law and separates himself from Nietzsche's ascetic priest with his final act of love.

Nietzsche calls his priest a shepherd of the sick (125), who leads the "slave revolt on morality" as he persuades the morally good people (the sick, in Nietzschean terms) to redirect their *ressentiment* away from the true cause of their unhappiness and towards themselves (Nietzsche 36). The slaves are protesting the nobility's egoistic actions and rising above them, to become better – defined as unegoistic by the priestly class. His priests, these men of *ressentiment*, epitomize the desire to be different as they attempt to represent their version of justice, love, and wisdom to their followers (Nietzsche 120, 122-123). Their representation of these "values," however, causes people to question themselves, life, and those around them. A person loses faith in his or her innate abilities and basic instincts and begins to believe these abilities and instincts are inherently wrong or "sinful" (Nietzsche 122). But, Nietzsche does admit that the added characteristic of evil gives man depth; he says that upon "the soil of . . . the priestly form . . . man first became an interesting animal" (33). He deplores the ways in which the priests herd their flock in order to perpetuate their sickness, and concludes that the priests simply console their flocks and do not actually offer a concrete answer. For, if the flock discovered the answer – that

they did not need to repress their instincts – they would no longer congregate and instead would become aloof from the herd (Nietzsche 129-130). Nietzsche insists that “[man] is *the sick animal*” when compared to other beasts of the earth (121), and he also notes that, interesting as he is, man has been visibly tamed and weakened by “morals” (Nietzsche 33). Once again, his ascetic priest seems to have an answer for this taming of man by redirecting man’s *ressentiment*; his priest gives the flock a “will to power,” wherein the flock becomes useful to others and thus its guilt is appeased. With this “will to power,” the flock gives of itself to the poor and needy, loves everyone, donates to charity, etc (Nietzsche 135). In the end, this helps eliminate some of the flock’s guilty feelings, but does not, completely absolve the flock of its sins or the need to repress its basic nature (Nietzsche 135).

In these ways, the ascetic priest fulfills his role, much like the Pharisees and Sadducees do in their confrontations with Jesus and the descriptions of their actions by Jesus. Jesus instructs his disciples not to pray in public for recognition as the Pharisees and Sadducees do, not to “sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men” (Matthew 6:2). He applies the same doctrine to fasting and donating to charity, because Jesus’s focus continually remains on his heavenly father and apart from earthly matters. It is important only for God to know the reasoning behind a follower’s actions and not the whole public. Later in chapter 9, disciples of John, schooled in the Pharisee method of thought, ask Jesus, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?” (9:14). They obviously believe that fasting as the law demands is a necessary way of worshipping God and showing obedience. With their power, the Pharisees and Sadducees so completely ingrain this way of life into the Jewish people that any deviation is seen as blasphemy or sin. Of the ascetic priest, Nietzsche says, “They walk among us as embodied reproaches . . . how they crave to be hangmen . . . there is among them an abundance of the vengeful disguised as judges, who constantly bear the word ‘justice’ in their mouths like poisonous spittle . . .” (123). And indeed the Pharisees do walk as judges, ready to dispel their “justice,” causing the Jewish people to look at themselves for the reason of their sinful ways. They tame and weaken the Jews in these manners, keeping a flock of followers, ready and willing to do their bidding. Jesus himself reproaches them for these methods, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” and questions, as Nietzsche does, their way of representing morals to the public (Matthew 23:13-36).

In bringing light to the hypocrisy and injustices of the resident Jewish priestly class, Jesus calls attention to the very values that Nietzsche scorns. Also, since his role extends beyond that of simply leading a flock of morally good people, he again does not completely fulfill the role of Nietzsche’s ascetic priest. “For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost” (Matthew 18:11), a phrase whose meaning the Jews do not fully grasp. His definition of lost does fit into one of Nietzsche’s conclusions because Jesus succeeds in redirecting the eye of man so that it peers inward and becomes disgusted at what it views. But, instead of giving the flock a “will to power,” Jesus looks beyond the superficial answer of mechanical activity to one of spiritual relief. Instead of formulaic answers dealing with fasting, donating money, etc., Jesus offers one simple solution – himself. Despite the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) and Jesus’s many commands to his followers to be perfect as God in heaven is perfect, Jesus’s most imploring command is for his followers to enter the kingdom of heaven as a child, believing in him (18:3-6). In *Matthew*, Jesus does represent justice, love, and wisdom, but he does not walk around craving to hang someone simply because he or she does not follow the exact letter of the

law. Words of love and rejoicing pass his lips more often than do those of justice and judgment.

As with the role of his religious leader, Nietzsche also delineates the practice of the priest who espouses the essence of the Christian faith. The practice of the priests is to deal with the very mechanical activity Jesus despises, but that which the Pharisees and Sadducees love. This mechanical activity, Nietzsche states, helps to alleviate the guilty feelings of the followers of the ascetic priest. This type of activity, as defined by Nietzsche, involves giving to charity, helping others, loving your neighbors, etc. (134) – all “good, Christian values.” Not only does Nietzsche's ascetic priest promote these morals, but he also looks towards guilt and punishment to let him know if he's still on the right track. For the ascetic priest views the indulgence of his basic nature as sinful, something to be avoided at all costs (141). According to Nietzsche, “guilt,” “fear,” and “punishment” are simply labels for suffering. Repressing his own needs, the ascetic priest refuses to acknowledge the deliberate punishment to which he's subjecting himself and labels his suffering as one of the other three. The ascetic priest only sees error when basic human nature promotes Nietzsche's truth, and so seeks to feel good by refusing those instincts. “Pleasure is felt and sought in ill-constituted decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice” (Nietzsche 118). Ironically enough, Nietzsche points out that by denying himself life, the ascetic priest juxtaposes life with a mode of existence that wills life to turn against itself and actually creates a situation that enhances life and makes it more worthwhile. “Life wrestles in it [the ideal] and through it with death and *against* death; the ascetic ideal is an artifice for the preservation of life” (Nietzsche 120).

As much as they do things for show, the Pharisees and Sadducees truly desire to live a righteous life, but become too accustomed to holding power. When Jesus usurps their power very subtly but quite noticeably, Jerusalem's priests begin to resent him and to seek ways to eliminate him. He knows their ways best, along with their hearts, and the Beatitudes mainly show the differences between the lives of the Pharisees and Sadducees and those of followers of Christ. In effect, however, by fasting, praying, and denying themselves, the Pharisees and Sadducees attempt to glorify God and thus preserve their lives through what they perceive as obedience to the Lord. To disobey the Lord implies consequences akin to the fiery judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus also fasts, but not for show. In chapter 4, he is “led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil” (4:1). After fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus resists temptation from Satan himself. This instance of fasting coincides with Nietzsche's conclusions on self-denial and the amount of emphasis placed on this concept in the teachings of ascetic priests. However, Jesus does not fast in order to feel pleasure, just as the Pharisees do not abstain from nourishment for the enjoyment brought by suffering. In fact, when questioned about his disciples' lack of fasting, Jesus replies, “Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast” (9:15). He implies here that fasting does not bring pleasure as Nietzsche insists, but that it carries along with it a sense of a troubled soul. With the Pharisees, it simply brings prestige and attention as they attempt to portray a righteous image to the Jewish public. Yet, in practice, Jesus does deny his basic human nature of pride and sin. This, according to Nietzsche, should make Jesus a priest full of *ressentiment*, but instead, Jesus feels no hatred whatsoever. He may disagree with the practices of the old guard, but he does not hate them, nor does he brag about his works to them and create tension. He, in fact, orders

those whom he heals not to tell anyone their story. In *Matthew*, there is no record of Jesus's feeling guilty, fearful, or self-punishing in order to alleviate his suffering. That is, since he remains sinless and lives a perfect life, he has no cause to feel any sort of *ressentiment*. This factor also distinguishes him from Nietzsche's ascetic priest.

These practices of Nietzsche's ascetic priests produce social consequences which, in turn, create "earth . . . the distinctively ascetic planet, a nook of disgruntled, arrogant, and offensive creatures filled with a profound disgust at themselves, at the earth, at all life . . ." (117). The disgruntled sick of Nietzsche's earth congregate into flocks, creating hordes of unhealthy souls which serve to infest the strong and create Nietzsche's "great nausea at man" (Nietzsche 125). The sick subsequently develop a guilty conscience and "inward-turned glance of the born failure" through which "a man speaks to himself . . . 'If only I were someone else . . . but there is no hope of that. I am who I am: how could I ever get free of myself? And yet – I *am sick of myself!*'" (122). So, through this method of self-criticism, the sick have poisoned the healthy with misery and gained control over the strong as a result of their slave revolt (124). This misery stems from the absolute truths of good and evil by which the priests swear. "Man's 'sinfulness' is not a fact, but merely the interpretation of a fact" (Nietzsche 129). Using this "interpretation of a fact" to create more misery and sickness, the ascetic priest becomes vital to the lives of the unhealthy (Nietzsche 142). Nietzsche's ascetic priest then uses this abundance of sickness, guilt, fear, etc. as a "will to nothingness," based on his absolute truths. "According to the same logic of feeling, all pessimistic religions call nothingness *God*" (134). Not only do religions will this nothingness; so does science, according to Nietzsche. For science itself also depends on absolute truths that cannot be shaken, or its entire foundation will crumble. So, the most ironic social consequence comes about as pessimistic religions and science become unacknowledged allies because of their presumption of truth (Nietzsche 155).

In concurrence with Nietzsche, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jesus all use absolute truths upon which to base their positions. For the Pharisees and Sadducees, the law stands as the one single truth of their life, which, in turn, points to God, thus giving them a clear path to righteousness. Thus, they directly oppose Jesus's healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (Matthew 9:1-8), Jesus's interpretation of the law of divorce (Matthew 19:3-13), the times Jesus casts devils out of afflicted people (Matthew 8:28-32, 9:32-34, 12:22-30), and the Sabbath when his disciples pick corn from the fields to satisfy their hunger (Matthew 12:1-8). Upon seeing what seem to them blatant offenses, the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of blasphemy (9:3), "[casting] out devils through the prince of devils" (9:34), and "doing that which [is] not lawful to do upon the sabbath day" (12:2). Through their strict attention to the letter of the law, the Pharisees and Sadducees force their own "interpretation of a fact" to actually create and then guard a different type of morality and goodness than Jesus espouses. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus also uses absolute truths, those dealing with him as the Son of God and the inherent sinfulness of man. In chapter 16, Jesus asks his disciples about the different names given to him by the Jews. The disciples relay what Jesus knows, that some see him as Elijah, others as Jeremiah, and some as John the Baptist. He then asks, "But whom say ye that I am?" To which Simon Peter immediately replies, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:14-16). Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man coming to "save that which was lost" (18:11), with the lost constituting the multitudes to whom Jesus preaches throughout his ministry. According to Nietzsche, Jesus as an ascetic priest encouraged the multitudes to congregate, in order to gain more power. Interestingly enough, Jesus does not seek recognition for his miracles; the recognition naturally follows from the unique

nature of the miracles and his charismatic presence. He charges those whom he heals to keep it to themselves; however, they inevitably spread their good news. Therefore, the multitudes who gather and whom he feeds (Matthew 14:13-21, 15:29-39) cannot be put in the same category as the herd of sick of whom Nietzsche speaks, because they are not disgruntled; they are simply searching for truth in Jesus. But, Nietzsche would dispute that Jesus actually held the truth, and point to that as a presumption of truth leading to absolutes. The Pharisees and Sadducees, on the other hand, perfectly adhere to the social consequence of Nietzsche's ascetic priest, as they cause grumbling and sorrow in their followers with their insistence on ultimate devotion to the letter of their law. The entire priestly class of Jerusalem fully relies on absolute truths, but the Pharisees and Sadducees guard their flock with such immense pride and protection that they can not recognize the real thing once he arrives.

In conclusion, the Pharisees and Sadducees lead disgruntled multitudes filled with *ressentiment* and a critical inward eye, whereas Jesus ministers to the masses and attempts to bring them the good news. As Nietzsche points out, though, Jesus' message of good news and love carries behind it an absolute judgment of death, permanent separation from God, and Nietzsche does not accept absolutes. Jesus's message of love directly contradicts Nietzsche's shepherd of a flock full of *ressentiment*, even though it is based on absolute truths. It also touches the heart of the sinful human condition, which Nietzsche dismisses as an interpretation of a fact. In the end, Nietzsche cannot explain the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as well as he explains the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees. For Jesus leads a perfect life in which he obtains the perfect relationship with God, yet he sacrifices his life for the salvation of the imperfect human race. He subjects himself to an inordinate amount of pain so that an imperfect man or woman can achieve the perfect relationship with God and spend eternity with God in heaven, which is denied to him or her without trust in Jesus. Jesus holds no *ressentiment* and has nothing to gain by sacrificing himself, which leaves one to wonder in whose eye, Nietzsche's or Matthew's, is the truth really seen?