

MATTHEW AND THE TORAH

An Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20

Abstract: Following the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, different religious groups within Judaism, called formative Judaisms, strove to be the legitimate, official group to lead the people of Israel. The Matthean community was one of these formative Judaism groups. The one tool different groups used to legitimize and differentiate themselves was the orthodox interpretation and observance of the Torah. Matthew, too, uses the Torah to present his community as an authentic, law-abiding group and to direct attention to the dominant group's deficiency in their interpretation and observance of the law. Matthew then offers a new hermeneutical principle of interpreting the Torah that is based on love, mercy, and justice, as taught by Jesus.

Key Words: Torah ▪ Interpretation of the Torah ▪ Formative Judaism ▪ Matthean Community

Introduction

Matthew's position vis-à-vis the law remains a debated issue and challenge in Matthean studies and exegesis.¹ While Matthew's Jesus is adamant about observing the law in some passages (5:17-20; 7:12; 11:3; 22:34-40), he seems at first glance to soften or contradict himself with his interpretation and application (15:1-20), or even set aside specific commandments of the law (5:31-42; 12:1-14; 15:11). Elsewhere in his Gospel, Matthew portrays Jesus frequently in debates with the scribes and Pharisees concerning the law. Jesus' lifestyle, views and practices with regard to the Sabbath (12:1-21), fasting (9:14-17), purity (15:10-20), divorce (19:1-12), and association with tax collectors and sinners (9:10-13) differ sharply with many religious

¹ The terms "law" and "Torah" will be used interchangeably throughout the essay.

teachers and the traditional Jewish interpretation of the law of the day, as illustrated in 5:21-48. These episodes are perceived as attacks against the Law of Moses and infringements of the accepted *halakah*. Furthermore, a series of six antitheses in 5:21-48 raises some questions: What was the issue at stake? Did Jesus abolish the law and the prophets? If not, how did he fulfill it? What is the function of the pericope, and subsequently the antitheses, within the Matthean and the second temple Judaism socio-religio-historical context? Did Matthew utilize the Torah, particularly Jesus' authoritative interpretation, to advance a cause of his community?

The aim of this article is to summarize the current interpretation of Matthew's presentation of Jesus and his community's relationship to the Law and Judaism. I will present that Matthew strategically used the Torah (1) to dismiss the charge leveled by his opponents and (2) to compete with other "formative Judaism" groups for legitimacy and the right to lead the people of Israel following the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. To succeed in his cause, Matthew first presents Jesus as a law-abiding Jew who challenges his disciples to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Then he draws attention to his opponents' deficiency in their interpretation and observance of the Torah. Finally, he highlights his community's fundamental "hermeneutical principle" of interpretation and observance of the Torah that centers on love, mercy, and justice as taught by Jesus.² I will conclude with Matthew's vision for the community.

² "The law and the prophets," found in three other key passages (5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40), is likely Matthew's way of referring to the whole Hebrew Scriptures or *Tanak*—an acronym for the *Torah* (the law), *Nevi'im* (the prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the writings). The phrase occurs four times in Matthew as compared to two times in Luke, one time in John, and none in Mark. See Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 57; Richard S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Matthew* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1969), 7.

Setting the Stage

The question “Was the Matthean community within or outside of Judaism?” has been variously hypothesized in Matthean scholarship. Many leading scholars, e.g., Georg Strecker, Graham N. Stanton, David E. Garland, Douglas R. Hare, and Ulrich Luz, posit that the Matthean community had made a decisive break from Judaism and had formed defined boundaries for itself when the Gospel was written. Though the community had broken off from the synagogue, *extra muros*, it was still in debate with Judaism. Evidence for the break includes Matthew’s negative portrayal of Jewish synagogues (6:2, 5; 23:6, 34), the use of the terms “their” or “your” synagogues (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; 23:34) and “their” cities (11:1), the use of the term “Jews” in reference to Israel (28:15), the condemnation of “this [evil, adulterous] generation” (12:38-42; 12:43-45; 23:36), and the portrayal of the Matthean community as having replaced Judaism as the people of God and recipients of God’s promises.³ In the parable of the vineyard, Matthew alludes to the vineyard of God being taken away from the tenants (i.e., the scribes and the Pharisees) and being given to more worthy tenants (i.e., the believers of Jesus) (21:33-46; cf. Mark 12:1-12). The parable of the wedding feast (22:1-14) also parallels the parable of the wicked tenants. It highlights the rejection of Jesus by Israel and the acceptance of him by the Gentiles.⁴

With the same view that the Matthean community was *extra muros*, another group of scholars has maintained that the Matthean community was initially Jewish-Christian, but at the time of the writing of the Gospel, the community had become Gentile and distanced itself from Judaism. This view highlights the “Gentile aspect” of the Gospel and assumes that the anti-Jewish polemics found in the Gospel are from the

³ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 66-67.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-64.

early strata of traditional or pre-Matthean material.⁵ Proponents of this view also argue for Gentile authorship because of 1) the anti-Judaic and anti-Pharisaic features, 2) the positive stance toward the Gentile mission, and 3) the position that God had totally rejected Israel and that the Matthean community had permanently replaced Israel as the people of God, provided that it is faithful to Jesus' commandments.⁶

Hints for the separation from Judaism are ample throughout the Gospel. However, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Daniel Harrington, Anthony J. Saldarini, J. Andrew Overman, David C. Sim, Donald Senior, and others argue the evidence does not necessarily suggest that the community had broken the union with the synagogue and the commitment to their heritage in Judaism, *extra muros*. Quite contrarily, they suppose that the Matthean community was still attached to Judaism, *intra muros*. David C. Sim notes, "The polemical and stereotypical language such as we find in Matthew does not reflect the distance between the parties. On the contrary, it reflects both physical and ideological proximity between the disputing groups, since its very purpose is to distance one party from the other."⁷ The charged language in the Gospel implies that the community engaged in a dispute or

⁵ Hans Dieter Betz poignantly asks, "Could it be that we are dealing with a deliberate caricature, a bowdlerization of a saying of Jesus actually in circulation?" Further, Betz states that being accused of propagating the abolition of the law and the prophets was always a serious matter within Judaism. Matthew perhaps attempts to refute charges of apostasy by insisting that Jesus' interpretation of the Torah was similar to that of any other orthodox teacher and that his teaching was not in itself Torah but his own interpretation. See Betz, "The Hermeneutical Principles of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:17-20)," in *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 41-43.

⁶ If the Matthean community had distanced itself from and no longer engaged in debate with Judaism, one might ask: why bother to retain anti-Judaic elements in the Gospel? The evidence suggests Matthew anticipates the continuation of missionary outreach of the church to Israel. In 8:5-13, both Jews and Gentiles alike will enter the kingdom of God. Israel is counted with "all the nations" in 28:19.

⁷ David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 186.

competition with different formative Judaism in first-century CE Palestine following the destruction of the temple.

Scholars with this *intra muros* perspective hold that Judaism within the Second Temple period was not monolithic and unified but fluid and fragmented.⁸ The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple gave rise to the existence of various types of formative Judaism competing with one another for authority and monopoly in the interpretation of the Torah. The Matthean community, or a localized deviant sect as suggested by Saldarini, was one among the formative Judaism.⁹ Composed mostly of “Jewish believers-in-Jesus” who had not severed ties with Judaism and still considered themselves as Jews, the community competed with various rival second-temple formative Judaism groups (e.g., Essenes, Zealots, Pharisees) for legitimacy, influence, membership within Judaism.¹⁰ In this competition, Matthew was aggressive in his criticism against the dominant rival, to whom he refers collectively as the scribes and Pharisees.¹¹

With the destruction of the temple, the religious and political center of Judaism, and the traumatic collective experience that left many deeply scarred, all of Judaism faced social and religious questions about leadership, authority, and the future. “What is the Torah?” “Who understands and accurately interprets the Torah?” “Who is best suited

⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991); J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996); Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*.

⁹ Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 198-202.

¹⁰ For different recent developments on the Matthean community's relationship to contemporary Judaism, see Donald Senior, “Directions in Matthean Studies,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 5-21. See also Daniel M. Gurtner, “The Gospel of Matthew from Stanton to Present: A Survey of Some Recent Developments,” in *Jesus, Matthew's Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Graham N. Stanton*, eds. Daniel M. Gurtner, Joel Willitts, and Richard A. Burridge (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 23-38.

¹¹ Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 27.

to interpret the past and lead God's people into the future?" Matthew believed his community had the answers for the community in crisis. His community claimed to speak for Israel and God, to teach and lead, and to fill the political and administrative void resulting from the destruction of the temple. Through the teaching and interpretation of Jesus, Matthew also maintained that the Matthean Judaism was living out Judaism in its deepest and truest sense. He asserted his community was the guardian of the right understanding and the true-intended interpretation of the law and the prophets.¹²

Matthew also directed his attacks on Israel's leaders for misleading the people. His harsh tone toward the rivals may suggest that Matthew's opponents possessed the upper hand.¹³ The recognized leadership rejected the Matthean Judaism's claims and practices concerning Jesus' manifestation of God's forgiveness, presence, and will. They declared Jesus' forgiveness of sin as blasphemy (9:3). They refused to acknowledge Jesus' manifestation of God's presence and regarded him as Beelzebul, the prince of demons (9:34; 10:25; 12:54). They labeled him "a glutton and a drunkard" for his association with tax-collectors and sinners (11:19).¹⁴ Jesus' claim of being God's agent and his violation of Sabbath traditions of the elders ruffled the religious leaders and resulted in the plot to destroy him (12:14).

The antitheses in chapter 5 illustrate Jesus' and Matthean Judaism's greater righteousness over the parent body. Anthony Saldarini rightly and wryly points out, "The underdogs in social and religious disputes typically used differences in interpretation and practice of law to

¹² Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis*, 9.

¹³ The Matthean community was losing in the struggle to influence and lead Israel. Overman suggests that some members in the Matthean community, especially newer or younger members who were vulnerable to the teaching of those outside the group, deserted the community and joined the opposing groups. See Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis*, 20.

¹⁴ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 35-36.

discredit community leaders who were their opponents.”¹⁵ The inflammatory language employed by Matthew suggests that the community was small and fragile, and was hostile and frustrated toward those in power. Matthew is not alone in his use of vituperative language to express hostility and frustration. The Dead Sea (Qumran) community, for example, utilized the same literary form to distinguish its position on the law from that of its opponents and to denounce the apostasy of the established community’s religious leadership (1QS 9, 11).¹⁶ The post-destruction literary works of 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham, and Josephus also contain materials justifying themselves as righteous and denouncing the religious leaders as corrupt (e.g., 4 Ezra 7:17; 2 Baruch 14-15). As Paul Foster helpfully notes that Matthew was not the first sectarian who employed “antithetical *halakhic* debate to claim superior understanding of the law in direct opposition to other groups operating within Judaism.”¹⁷

Mindful of the issues of identity and leadership, as well as the coming to terms with an uncertain future, Matthew took great care when speaking about traditional Jewish matters (e.g., the Torah, cultic practices, the will of God, the future for the chosen people) to show the community’s continuity with the history and scriptural traditions of Israel. Moreover, Matthew presented Jesus, and subsequently his community, as upholding the law in nuanced ways that transcended the manner in which the opponents of the Matthean community claimed the law should be maintained. Matthew’s interpretation and that of Jesus reflected in the Gospel is not radical. The six antitheses (5:21-48) illustrate Jesus’ authority to reinterpret, redefine, and even reject some aspects of Torah tradition. Subsequently, they also represent the Matthean group’s new, radical manner of upholding the law.

¹⁵ Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community*, 160.

¹⁶ Paul Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew’s Gospel* (WUNT 177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 82.

¹⁷ Foster, *Law and Mission in Matthew’s Gospel*, 82.

Why was the issue of the law so relevant to Matthew and many of his contemporaries? Interpreting the law, according to Saldarini, was a political act in first-century Judaism that influenced the power for control.¹⁸ The group recognized as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah would become the established movement. J. Andrew Overman's explanation captures the essence of the law of the day:

In late second-temple parlance, the term 'law' (*nomos* in Greek, *Torah* in Hebrew) was an expansive and fluid notion which, while possessing discrete and very specific connotations in certain contexts, tended to stand for the traditions, divine injunctions, and authoritative corpus pertaining to historic Israel. The law contained instructions about living, ordering life, and helped guide relations within Israel and between Israel and the nations. . . . The proper rendering and interpretation of the law was really, then, an argument about them, who they were, where they had come from and where they were headed.¹⁹

Because the Torah was an essential part of Jewish culture and identity, and because the Torah was crucial to the authentication or legitimization of a community, leaders utilized it for their advantage to establish their reputation as the authentic, accurate, and authoritative interpreters of the law. Thus, the Torah became a basis of sharp divisions and exclusiveness within Judaism after the destruction of the second temple. James D.G. Dunn notes, "In such polemic the need for a group to find in the *Torah* its own self-affirmation had the inevitable corollary of making the *Torah* an instrument by means of which one group condemned another."²⁰ Overman echoes succinctly, "The law

¹⁸ Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 124.

¹⁹ Overman, *Church and Community*, 79.

²⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered. Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 1:292.

was both the common ground and the battleground among and between Judaisms in the post-70 period.”²¹

Though different in their ways, the Matthean community and the rival groups agreed on the validity, importance, and application of the law for daily living. What set them apart were their differences of interpretation. The group that possessed the reputation as the most accurate authoritative interpreter of the law emerged as the dominant force in this period. Therefore, each fought hard for victory.²² Within this situation, Matthew made clear that faithfulness to the law was essential, that his community was a legitimate law-observing community and that Jesus was the authoritative interpreter of the Torah.²³ Matthew presented Jesus as being in the position of authority, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (28:18-20). As well, Jesus set forth the correct understanding and real intention of the law, “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors . . . but I say to you” (5:21-48).²⁴

Overview of the Text

Matthew 5:17-20 is part of the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, the first of five great discourses of the Gospel. As Daniel

²¹ Overman, *Church and Community*, 78.

²² Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism*, 70.

²³ Douglas J. Moo helpfully provides a summary of some representative positions on the question of Jesus’ relationship to the law. The main tendencies are as follows: 1) Jesus abrogates the law; 2) Jesus’ teaching is the new law which replaces the Mosaic law; 3) Jesus is the last and greatest expositor of the law of God; 4) Jesus “radicalized” the law, intensifying the demands beyond what they originally included; 5) Jesus intensified the requirements of the law and brought new demands of his own; and 6) Jesus’ teaching fulfilled the law. See Douglas J. Moo, “Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law,” *JSNT* 20 (1984): 3-49.

²⁴ Though the primary rival was the parent body of Judaism, Matthew’s writing also indicates that the community had to deal with opponents from within. Members of the community were called to be peacemakers (5:9) and not to insult one another (5:22), and to be reconciled with one another (5:24).

Harrington notes, 5:17-20 sets the theme and agenda for the entire Sermon on the Mount, in which the Matthean Jesus affirms and explains the fuller meaning of the law, which comprises the antitheses outlined in 5:21-48 and the better righteousness described in 6:1-7:12.²⁵ Further, Klyne Snodgrass observes that the placement of 5:17-20 at the beginning of the main part of the Sermon on the Mount highlights its fundamental importance for Matthew. It provides the reader with a foundation to understand the rest of Jesus' teaching and relationship to the law and Judaism.²⁶ This relationship is expressed as “fulfillment” (5:17).

Many scholars see 5:17-20 as a “programmatically statement” that contains four sayings of Jesus concerning his relationship to the law and the fidelity required of his followers.²⁷ In these verses, Matthew makes clear that 1) Jesus had not come to set aside or nullify the law or the prophets but to fulfill it, 2) even the smallest part of the letter of the law would continue to be valid until heaven and earth passed away, 3) those who broke the law and taught others to do the same would be called least in the kingdom of heaven, and 4) Jesus' followers were exhorted to respond to a righteousness superior to that displayed and accepted by the scribes and Pharisees. While these four sayings are understood as independent thoughts, Jeffrey A. Gibbs suggests that they best be understood as a continuous argument in two movements connected by the conjunction οὖν, “therefore.”²⁸ The first movement focuses on Jesus' declaration concerning his fulfillment of the law (5:17-18). The second movement, therefore, challenges the disciples and followers to obtain better righteousness (5:19-20). Further, the programmatic

²⁵ Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 82.

²⁶ Klyne Snodgrass, “Matthew and the Law,” in *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, eds. David R. Bauer and Mark Alan Powell (SBLSymS 1; Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 114.

²⁷ Donald Senior, *Matthew*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 73.

²⁸ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 267.

statement on the law is illustrated by the antitheses (5:21-48), in which Jesus shows how his authoritative teaching fulfills the law (5:17).

Establishing the Validity of the Law

In Matt 5:17-20, Matthew is responding to charges leveled against members of the Matthean community by the broader community for their lax or opposite attitude to the law, a charge to which Matthew emphatically responds and objects.²⁹ In this pericope, particularly v.17, Matthew has Jesus set the record straight: he has not come to abolish, *καταλῦσαι*, the law and the prophets; on the contrary, he has come to fulfill, *πληρῶσαι*, it.³⁰ The phrase *μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι* (“do not think,” “do not suppose”) serves as a device to counter-argue against those who did suppose that Jesus was against the law and the prophets. Jesus warns the believers explicitly that they are not free from the law, no matter how small or insignificant the law, until heaven and earth passed away (v.18). In Jewish thinking, the heaven and earth would remain permanent until God recreated them (Isa 65:17; 1 Enoch 91:16; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1).³¹ It is another way of saying “never.” The written law

²⁹ Ulrich Luz interprets the introductory negative imperative *μὴνομίσητε* as addressing to members of the community. Matthew may use 5:17 to address the antinomian, which had infiltrated the church. See Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 260.

³⁰ Luz notes that decisive interpretation of the verse depends on “(a) the meaning of the words *πληρῶω* and *καταλύω* and (b) the Matthean context.” See Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 264. Most exegetes agree that *καταλῦσαι* means 1) to tear or thrown down, 2) to destroy, dismantle or demolish, or 3) to do away with, abolish, cancel, annul, or make invalid the law. The meaning of the verb *πληρῶσαι*, however, is variously interpreted and frequently debated in the context of Matthew. See also Matthew Thiessen, “Abolishers of the Law in Early Judaism and Matthew 5,17-20,” *Biblica* 93.4 (2012): 543-56.

³¹ The meaning of the temporal reference in v.18 is challenging to determine. There are three possibilities. (1) The law remains valid until the time of the eschaton (“until heaven and earth pass away”) as some Jewish traditions speculated. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1:490-95. (2) The law remains valid until “all that the law intends is fully revealed in Jesus’ teaching and fully reflected in Jesus’ community.” See Richard B. Gardner *Matthew, Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1990), 104. (3) Until Jesus’ death and resurrection usher in

is authoritative and inviolable, down to its smallest details. Those who neglect the details of or break the law and teach others to do the same would be called least in the kingdom of heaven (v.19). As for the oral law, Jesus is to show the disciples a new hermeneutical approach to interpreting and applying it. For both the oral and written law, the followers are exhorted to respond to righteousness (i.e., conducting themselves per Jesus' teaching) superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees (v.20). This exhortation indicates a high standard of religious life and behavior for members of the Jesus movement, both in Jesus' and Matthew's times. They are to obey the demands of the law as they understand it through Jesus' teaching.

Jesus illustrates how to accomplish this righteousness in the antitheses (5:21-48). The Torah commands one not to murder; Jesus orders not to be angry (5:21). The Torah commands one not to commit adultery; Jesus orders not to commit adultery even in one's heart (5:27). The Torah allows divorce under several conditions; Jesus rules that one cannot divorce except in the case of adultery (5:31). The Torah instructs to fulfill one's vows; Jesus says not to make vows (5:33). The Torah says to love one's neighbor; Jesus says to love one's enemies (5:43). In each of these antitheses that deal with human relationships, Jesus first appeals to the authority of the Torah texts ("you have heard it said") and then asserts his interpretation of the Torah ("but I say to you").³²

a new age. See Donald Senior, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 75.

³² A standard view is that some of the antitheses constitute an annulment of the law. Günth, for example, argues that Matthew was inconsistent in his antitheses and was not aware of the inconsistency. Bornkamm argues that the first, second, and fourth antitheses are a sharpening of the law. The other antitheses, on the other hand, abolish it. See Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, eds. Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz J. Held (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 15-51. However, it will be argued that in none of the antitheses does Jesus abrogate the law; in each case, he brings out its radically absolute meaning instead.

Matthew highlights the continuing and intensified demands of the written law and promotes a pattern of conduct among members of the community that is distinct from that of his opponents. Matthew records Jesus' authority to interpret and append to the Mosaic laws concerning divorce, oaths, and the law of retaliation (5:21-48). Jesus completes the law's inadequate *halakhic* teaching with his teaching. In 7:28-29, the crowds are amazed at Jesus' teaching, for he teaches as one having independent authority, and not as their scribes. Jesus interprets the law differently from the current interpretation, yet in a way far exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. As 7:28-29 indicates, the crowds recognize Jesus' authority in his teaching.

As discussed earlier, Jesus' intention is not to abolish the law but to explain the original intent of the written law. Thus, he challenges certain interpretations and applications of the law claimed by his critics, and he does so authoritatively as one who expounds the will of God and sets forth the true meaning of the law.³³ Snodgrass asserts that in Matthew's mind, the most crucial part of the ministry of Jesus is his teaching on the proper understanding of God's law.³⁴ Thus, Matthew demonstrates Jesus' accurate and knowledgeable interpretation of the law, over and against the accusations of the opponents. Jesus' authority rests in his intimate relationship with God: he is the Messiah and God's Son; he is the son of David and son of Abraham; he is teacher and healer; he is prophet and Wisdom personified.³⁵ As Saldarini puts it, "Jesus is God's presence with humans (1:23; 18:20; 28:20) to save them from their sins (1:21; 20:28)."³⁶ Matthew builds on these Christological titles to stress Jesus' Jewishness and his ultimate authority in Israel's tradition.

³³ Richard S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Matthew* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1969), 26.

³⁴ Snodgrass, "Matthew and the Law," 113.

³⁵ Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 165-93.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

Delegitimizing the Opponents

In the minds of first-century Jews, as Craig Evans points out, the measure of fidelity to the law had been established by the scribes and Pharisees.³⁷ However, the Matthean Jesus is unimpressed with either their interpretation or observance. In contrast to the deficient understanding and practice of the scribes and Pharisees, he offers examples in which the righteousness of the disciples may surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The commands cited are murder (5:21-26), adultery and lust (5:27-30), divorce (5:31-32), oaths (5:33-37), nonviolent resistance (5:38-42), and love for enemies (5:43-48). In each of these examples, Jesus begins with a citation from the scripture to serve as a point of departure, demanding a higher standard of righteousness from his disciples. Righteousness from mere ethical adherence is insufficient for those aspiring to enter the kingdom of heaven, for fulfilling the law involves both internalization and intensification of its meanings and demands.

Matthew intends to weaken his rivals' legitimacy, particularly the scribes and Pharisees, by aggressively drawing attention to their lack of proper interpretation and application of the Torah. He rejects their hypocritical manner of Torah observance. He simultaneously establishes his community's understanding and interpretation of the law as appropriate, viable, and a genuine response to the broader community in crisis, not to mention the only proper interpretation of the Torah. In 6:1-6, he records Jesus criticizing his opponents' acts of righteousness as "an empty show of hypocritical conceit and showy displays of religious zeal."³⁸ In 12:7, his Jesus states, "If you knew what this meant . . . you would not have condemned these innocent men." In 15:1-20, the scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus and blame the disciples of Jesus for transgressing their tradition: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their

³⁷ Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 118.

³⁸ Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew's Gospel*, 205.

hands before they eat” (v.2).³⁹ It is the scribes and Pharisees who demand to know why Jesus does not instruct his followers to adhere to the traditions of the elders (oral law). Jesus responds with a question, or rather an attack, about their transgressing the commandment of God: “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (v.3). Jesus goes on to say that defilement does not derive from what goes into a person, but what comes out (v.11). Therefore, it is not eating with unwashed hands that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. Robert K. McIver puts it succinctly, “The debate is not about *whether* to observe this particular law, but *how*.”⁴⁰ The disciples of Jesus are to observe the Sabbath law as interpreted and taught by Jesus, and not as interpreted by the scribes and Pharisees. What Jesus is rejecting is the oral law, not the written law. The commandments of the written law remain the authoritative word of God and cannot be dismissed.

Matthew consistently draws attention to the Pharisees’ lack of proper application and correct understanding of the law. They disregard the obligation to honor and care for their parents, as commanded in the Torah (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; 21:17); and they teach that once people declare their possessions as “corban” or a gift dedicated to God, people can excuse themselves from the obligation to assist their parents (15:4-6). In Matt 15:7-8, Jesus makes a further rebuke highlighting those who give lip service to God, but whose hearts are far from him (cf. Isa

³⁹ Many scholars have contributed to the discussion on handwashing before meals. Some suggest that handwashing practice before everyday meals in the first century CE, spearheaded by the Pharisees, was widespread. Others suggest that handwashing before the meal was optional. Isaac W. Oliver maintains that the Pharisee and scribes' objection deals more with the "traditions of the elders" than with the issue of handwashing before eating. According to the Mosaic Torah, only the priests are supposed to wash their hands and feet before offering sacrifices (Ex 30:18-21; 40:31). One of the three possible scenarios on the issue of handwashing before meals, as proposed by Oliver, is that the practice reflected more of the purity habit of particular groups (e.g., certain Pharisees) than the tendency among the ordinary people. See Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE* (WUNT 355; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 255-75.

⁴⁰ Robert K. McIver, *Mainstream or Marginal? The Matthean Community in Early Christianity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 157.

29:13). They are corrupt and false leaders because they teach human precepts as God's word. By throwing the blame back to the Pharisees, Matthew claims that Jesus' interpretation and application of the Torah are ultimately authoritative. In 21:28-22:45, Matthew intensifies Jesus' conflict with the religious authority through three parables (21:28-22:14) and three conflict stories (22:15-45). This intensity concludes with the silence of Jesus' opponents (22:46).⁴¹

In chapter 23, Matthew has Jesus up the ante by accusing them of being blind guides and fools (23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26), liars (23:18), corrupt and lawless men (23:25, 28), and of committing murder against God's own messengers (23:29-39). He accuses them of being hypocrites and ignoring the more significant parts of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23:16-25). He ridicules their teaching: "[They] say, 'whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath'" (23:16). Their inappropriate practices hinder God's purposes. Thus, their righteousness will preclude them from entering into the kingdom of heaven (5:20; 5:48).⁴² Jesus instructs his disciples not to be guided by what the scribes and Pharisees do, for they do not practice what they preach (23:2-3). They do their deeds only so that others will see them and be impressed by them (23, cf. 6:1, 5, 6). They are outwardly righteous but inwardly full of hypocrisy and evil-doing (23:28). Jesus urges the followers not to sound a trumpet when giving alms, praying, or fasting. When giving alms, they are to do so in silence; when praying, they are not to do so in public but in a quiet place; when fasting, not to make it appear to others that they are fasting. The

⁴¹ John P. Meier conjectures that 5:17-20 does not serve as a defense against the Pharisees, but rather is an explanation and a warning to the disciples. In this light, Matthew was more concerned about the ethical life of his disciples. See Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel: A Redactional Study of Matt. 5:17-48* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 66.

⁴² The critique of the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 has served "as a mine of anti-Jewish stereotypes and as a goad toward verbal and physical attacks against Jews." See Harrington, *God's People in Christ: New Perspectives on the Church and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 100.

significant difference between Jesus' teaching and the current practices of the religious leaders results in the hostility of Jesus' criticism.

For reasons mentioned above, Jesus rejects the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees, and does not consent to their interpretation of the Torah; rather, he observes his own interpretation. That is why he heals on the Sabbath (12:9-14) and defends the disciples in their plucking and eating ears of grain on the Sabbath (12:1-8). The issue in this controversy is not solely in plucking or eating a little grain (Deut 23:25) but on reaping or "working" on the Sabbath, which is prohibited (Exod 32:21) and which the Pharisees deem unlawful. Jesus responds to their criticism by pointing out two occasions in which the Sabbath rules are put off. He notes that David and his companions, when hungry, ate the bread of offering given them by the priest Ahimelech at Nob (12:3-4, cf. 1 Sam 21:2-7). Hunger is seen as a valid rationale for suspending or overriding the Sabbath regulations. What Jesus does, in the case of the Sabbath, is in line with what the Old Testament allows. Jesus argues that not all works on the Sabbath are prohibited. The temple priests, for example, are exempted from Sabbath regulations concerning work because of their temple service (Lev 24:8; Num 28:9-10).

In light of these two situations, Jesus' disciples are innocent and have not violated the law. Nevertheless, in the eye of the scribes and Pharisees, the disciples violate the Sabbath law. The position of Jesus on the Sabbath is summed in the statement that concludes the grain-plucking episode: "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (12:8). This declaration directs the believers and the opponents to Jesus' authority over the Sabbath, and Jesus' claim that his interpretation of the law comes directly from God. Thus, the Matthean community, through the words of Jesus, dismisses the Pharisaic Judaism claim of authority to interpret the law. Jesus reiterates his authority and *modus operandi* with a citation from Hosea: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matt 12:7; cf. Hos 6:6). After this, he proceeds to heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath and in the synagogue. The Pharisees' confrontation does not suspend Jesus from performing deeds of mercy.

The Pharisees do not see Jesus' actions, and those of his disciples, as fulfilling Israel's laws.

Matthew is aggressive in responding to his opponents' critiques with the use of controversial stories. Turning to an aggressive mode, he highlights the continuing and intensified demands of the written law and promotes a pattern of conduct among members of the community that is distinct from that of his opponents. Matthew records Jesus' authority to amend and interpret the Mosaic laws concerning murder, lust, divorce, oaths, nonviolent resistance, and love for enemies (5:21-48). Jesus completes the law's inadequate *halakhic* teaching with his teaching. Jesus interprets the law in a way different from the current interpretation, yet far exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew's response to the dominant religious leadership was similar to that of other near-contemporary sectarian groups within Judaism—the Dead Sea (Qumran) community, the writings of 1 Enoch, Psalm of Solomon, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, and the Testament of Levi.⁴³ These groups were hostile to the dominant leadership and saw themselves as “the righteous remnant, the true embodiment of Israel.”⁴⁴ It implies that the other Jewish groups were not being faithful to the law. The Qumran

⁴³ Many Gentiles and philosophical and ethnic groups in the ancient world also used the charged language as a standard way of attacking the other groups. Josephus calls the Apion and Zealots blind. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.132, 142; *The Jewish War*, 5.343, 572. See William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987). Philo also states that the Alexandrian pagans “infect with their folly” and implies that they remain bereft of vision (*The Contemplative Life*, 2.10). See David Winston, trans., *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). A disciple of Epicurus insults his (Gentile) opponents as buffoons, charlatans, assassins, prostitutes, nincompoops. Plutarch responds to the attack by noting their lack of friendship, absence of activity, irreligion, sensuality, and indifference. See Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Benedict Einarson and Phillip H. De Lacy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1086E, 1100C, 1129B. See also Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 449-51.

⁴⁴ McIver, *Mainstream or Marginal?*, 31.

community denounced the Jerusalem leadership, left Jerusalem, and took up residence along the shores of the Dead Sea, where its members lived in solitude and sought to interpret properly and fulfill the Scriptures. The author of 1 Enoch, like Matthew, accuses the leadership of being corrupt and faithless. They are sinners who commit adultery and blasphemy, and they pervert the law for their own purposes. In contrast, he regards his community as understanding and remaining faithful to God's law (1 Enoch 91:2, 93:1; 94:94-104).⁴⁵ The Psalms of Solomon also charge the Jewish leaders with violating and corrupting the law (Ps. Sol 4:1, 8, 22). Its community, on the other hand, is faithful to the principles of God's law (Ps. Sol 14:10). In the Testament of Levi, the author draws attention to the priests' profane and shameful behavior against the Savior of the world behind the temple veil. The Lord will rend the covering of the temple so that their shame shall no longer be hidden (10:2-3).⁴⁶ In both 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, the authors compare and contrast the people who keep the law with those who neglect it: the wicked forget the law (2 Baruch 15:5-6; 41:3) while the righteous remember it (2 Baruch 44:7; 46:3-5); the law does not destroy but glorifies those who follow it (4 Ezra 9:28-37). Furthermore, in 2 Baruch 64:2, the wickedness of Manasseh in the shedding of innocent blood is connected to the action of the Jewish leaders. These writings stress the centrality of the validity and interpretation of the law. The interpretation and observance of the Torah become the powerful feature differentiating the righteous from the wicked, the dominant force from the subservient.

Emphasizing the Community's Hermeneutical Principle

Matthew rejected the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees and used the occasion to emphasize his community's distinctive interpretation and application of the law as personified in Jesus Christ. When asked

⁴⁵ Francois P. Viljoen, "Matthew's *Sitz Im Leben* and the Emphasis on the Torah." *AcT* 32 (2, 2012): 257.

⁴⁶ H. W. Hollander and M. De Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1985), 158-61.

poignantly by one of the Pharisees to name the greatest commandment, the Matthean Jesus responds to the interlocutor by citing two texts from the Pentateuch—one should love God with one’s whole soul and mind (Deut 6:1-7; cf. Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28; John 13:34-35) and, equally, one should love one’s neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18; cf. Matt 5:43). Jesus’ summation of the whole law resonates with other legendary first-century Palestinian leaders and teachers. Hillel and Yohanan ben Zakka, for instance, also conjoined the love of God with the love of neighbor and summarized the whole of the law similarly. The conjunction of the two commandments implies Jesus’ view that love of God and love of others are inseparable, and together they constitute the “greatest” commandment. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (22:34-40). Moreover, the command to love is placed or alluded to throughout the Gospel (5:43-48; 7:12; 19:19; 24:12) to emphasize the importance of love and the law.

The love commandment gives the Matthean community its internal orientation and identity and sets it apart from other rival groups within Judaism.⁴⁷ The believers’ love of God and neighbor is actualized in their preaching the kingdom of God (10:7), healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons (10:8). They are not to be angry or insult (5:21-23), not to seek vengeance (5:38-48), to forgive (6:14-15), and not to judge others (7:1-5). In the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stresses the attitudes of mercy, meekness, purity of heart, and peace-making (chaps 5-7). These are the core of Jesus’ teaching and the Matthean community’s way of life. They stand in sharp contrast to the attitudes and actions of the scribes and Pharisees: neglecting justice and mercy (23:23), placing burdens on people (23:4), keeping cups and dishes clean but not their hearts (23:25), appearing just but being hypocritical (23:28).⁴⁸ Love of God and neighbor stands as the interpretative force of Jesus’ disciples and

⁴⁷ Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community*, 163. `

⁴⁸ Saldarini, “The Gospel of Matthew and Jewish-Christian Conflict,” 53.

the Matthean community's understanding of the law and its application. If the Matthean community's righteousness is rooted in its "motives and driving force in love for God and neighbor."⁴⁹ It is acceptable to save life on the Sabbath and to associate with tax collectors and marginalized people.

To add validity to the community's fundamental hermeneutical principle of Torah interpretation and application, as well as the Christological claims that Jesus is the legitimate teacher, holy man, and interpreter of the law, Matthew situates Jesus and the Matthean community within Israel's history, scriptural traditions, and heroes of great antiquity. He quotes the Scripture extensively and associates Jesus with Israel's admired prophets and heroes like Solomon (6:29; 12:42), Jonah (12:39-41), and David (12:23; 22:42-46). Jesus is identified as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Matthew uniquely associates and compares Jesus to Moses. Moses' mother is barren, and Jesus' mother conceives through divine intervention. Just as Moses is threatened by Pharaoh's decree to kill all the baby boys of the Hebrews (Exod 1:22-2:10), Jesus too is threatened by Herod's decree to kill all the male babies in Bethlehem (Matt 2:13-18). Both figures flee when in danger, live in Egypt, and return after many years (Exod 2:15; 7:6-7; Matt 2:13-21). Just as Moses goes up to a mountain to receive the Law from God (Exod 19:3), Jesus also goes up to a mountain to teach and interpret the Law (Matt 5:1; 8:1). Just as Moses fasts for forty days and forty nights while recording God's law on the mountain (Exod 34:28), so also Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights in the desert while being tempted by Satan (Matt 4:2). Jesus commissions his disciples to continue his mission in his name parallel Moses' sending Joshua forth to lead Israel in his place (Matt 28:16-20; Josh 1:5, 7, 17). Not only does Matthew compare Jesus with Moses, but he also contrasts the two to show that Jesus was not a clone of

⁴⁹ McConnell, *Law and Prophecy*, 36.

Moses but rather someone greater.⁵⁰ Matthew applies divine titles to Jesus: Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man. Moreover, Jesus is presented as one who forgives sin (3:1-6; 9:1-8; 26:28), manifests God's presence (1:23; 18:20; 25:31-46; 28:18-20), and interprets God's will (5:17-48).⁵¹ He bans what Moses allowed (e.g., oath-taking, all killing, adultery of the heart).

Another method with which Matthew connects Jesus to Jewish history and traditions is the use of biblical or formula quotations. The purpose is two-fold: to establish Matthew's Christological claims and his credibility as a narrator.⁵² There is a series of fulfillment formula quotations in the Gospel of Matthew drawn from the Old Testament prophets and the Psalter. These fulfillment formula quotations peculiar to Matthew's Gospel are often preceded by an introductory formula that varies slightly—"In order that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet saying"—whose keyword is the passive of πληρόω ("be filled," "be fulfilled," "be completed"). Matthew's deliberate effort to incorporate the fulfillment quotations into the Gospel is to relate Jesus' redemptive work to the Old Testament contexts, including the extraordinary nature of his birth (Matt 1:22-23 // Isa 7:14), his flight to Egypt as a child (Matt 2:15, 18, 23 // Hos 11:1) and his betrayal with thirty pieces of silver (Matt 27:9-10 // Jer 19:1-13; 18:2-12; 32:6-15; Zech 11:12-13). The fulfillment quotations also appear in connection with Jesus' preaching ministry in Galilee (Matt 4:14-16 // Isa 8:23-9:1; 58: 10), his healing activities (Matt 8:17 // Isa 53:4, 11; Matt 12:17-21 // Isa 42:1-4), his teaching ministry (Matt 13:35 // Ps 78:2), his kingship or entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matt 21:4-5 // Zech 9:9), and his betrayal by Judas (Matt 27:9-10 // Isa 62: 11; Zech 9:9). Matthew's deliberate incorporation of the Old Testament quotations

⁵⁰ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 19.

⁵¹ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 34-35.

⁵² Charles E. Carlston and Craig A. Evans, *From Synagogue to Ecclesia: Matthew's Community at the Crossroads*, WUNT 334 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 340.

arose from his conviction of Jesus' coming as the fulfillment of messianic promises, of the hopes of Israel.⁵³ For Matthew, Jesus' life from birth to death was in perfect harmony with the Jewish Scriptures.

Matthew's Vision for the Matthean Church

Matthew's primary goal for the Matthean community was to legitimize the community's authority to interpret the Torah and the right to lead the people of Israel into the future following the destruction of the temple. The goal entailed the unseating of current leadership from positions of prominence within Judaism, as well as defining and protecting the community's core values. With the composition of the Gospel, Mathew creates a document that affirms Jesus' Jewishness and the Matthean community as the true Israel. At the same time, he addresses the accusation of rival groups against his community. He envisions Judaism in new circumstances, and he proposes an alternative model of Torah interpretation, community life, and leadership for Jewish society—the model that derives from the teaching of Jesus.

The survival or success of a community depends on maintaining its current members and recruiting new ones. Matthew hoped that his community would have a stronger voice in its contention with its established Jewish rival authorities. He fought for the attention of the Jews. The Matthean community's coalition with the Jews, especially people of the lower classes, would be perceived as a stumbling block to the dominant group's power and authority. They maneuvered to retain their status quo. With the exertion of the Pharisees in curbing the Matthean community's recruiting effort, the majority of the people of Israel did not accept Jesus as Messiah and Son of David, or one whom Matthew claimed Jesus to be. Regardless of the Jews' reception or rejection of Jesus' authority and teaching, the mission to Israel would

⁵³ Robert H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (NovTSup XVIII; Leiden: Brill, 1967), 89-104. Matthew sees Jesus' life as in continuity with Judaism, its Scripture, and its history.

continue. The commission to preach to all nations comes as a surprise. Matthew's Jesus was adamant about restricting his activities and those of his disciples within the boundaries of Judaism.

The inherent issues in the Gospel's mission to the Gentiles are by themselves complex and problematic, and they warrant some attention. Matthew's concept of mission contains two contradictory strands, one restricting the mission to the Jews and one extending the mission to all nations.⁵⁴ In 10:5, the mission is strictly confined within the borders of Judaism, and in 15:23-24, Jesus says that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In both statements, the mission is for the Jews alone.⁵⁵ However, there are two occasions in which the mission extends beyond the borders of Judaism. In 24:14, which scholars interpret as the basis for an *extra muros* community. It indicates that the preaching of the good news of the kingdom throughout the world is more important than signs of earthquakes, famines, and wars. In 28:19, the disciples are commissioned to make disciples of "all nations." Georg Strecker correctly points out that Matt 10:5 and 15:24 were probably a historical reflection of Matthew.⁵⁶ Michael J. Cook elaborates on Strecker's view by suggesting that the ministry of Jesus

⁵⁴ Scholars have suggested that the conception of Christian missionary activity in Matthew's Gospel reflects two different sets of texts: the "particularist" texts and "universalist" texts. The "particularist" texts (10:5-6, 23; 15:24) originate from Jesus' restricted mission to the "lost sheep of house of Israel," and represent Jesus' view and that of his disciples during his lifetime. The "universalist" texts (28:16-20; cf. also 24:14) reflect a conviction that arose after the resurrection. If this view were correct, the "universalist" texts would probably have served as an expansion or correction of the "particularist" texts. See Carlston and Evans, *From Synagogue to Ecclesia*, 264-66.

⁵⁵ Overman points out that the mission to "only the lost sheep of Israel" in 10:6 does not imply that Gentiles are excluded from Matthew's community. In the same way, the mission to all the Gentiles/nations (28:19) does not suggest that Jews are excluded from being members of the kingdom of heaven. See Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis*, 152.

⁵⁶ Georg Strecker, "The Concept of History in Matthew," *JAAR* 35 (1967): 222-23. Strecker divides the Gospel of Matthew into three periods: the time before Jesus, the time of the ministry of Jesus, and the time of the church. Strecker's theory has not gone unchallenged.

was restricted to the Jews, but they rejected him and his teaching. The mission/salvation was then extended to other nations.⁵⁷

The term ἔθνη, “nations” or “Gentiles,” is ambiguous and a point of debate for scholars. Does it refer to the mission exclusively to the Gentiles and thus the end of the mission to Israel? Or does it imply that the mission to Israel is continuing while reaching out to Gentiles? Scholars like Senior and Harrington view Israel as part of the ἔθνη, meaning the mission to Israel would continue, as evidenced in Matthew’s portrayal of the Jewish crowds.⁵⁸ They are receptive to Jesus’ teaching and open to being won over by him (7:28; 23:33; 12:23). Matthew depicts Jesus as having compassion for the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (9:36). He is the answer to the needs of the people, and he needs the twelve disciples to help him accomplish the mission for the people of Israel, who are without leadership and direction. Matthew acknowledges that there is much work to be done, but few people are available to engage in the mission (9:37). He requests that people pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers (9:38). Those sent in the name of Jesus and the community are given the authority to preach the kingdom of God, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper, and cast out demons (10:7ff). Their central focus is “to renew and revitalize God’s people Israel.”⁵⁹

What can be said is that Matthew called for competent leadership and care for the people. However, Jerusalem’s leadership (i.e., chief priests, elders, and scribes) chose to manipulate public opinion to oppose Jesus

⁵⁷ Michael J. Cook, “Interpreting ‘Pro-Jewish’ Passages in Matthew,” *HUCA* 54 (1983): 135-46.

⁵⁸ Douglas R. Hare and Daniel J. Harrington, on the other hand, argue that the term does not include the nation of Israel. They base their argument on the usage of the term in the Septuagint, the intertestamental literature, and Matthew. See Hare and Harrington, “‘Make Disciples of All the Gentiles’ (Mt 28:19),” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 359-69.

⁵⁹ Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis*, 143.

(26:47, 55; 27:15-26).⁶⁰ At the beginning of the Gospel, the people are either neutral or receptive to Jesus. They follow him, listen to his teaching, and marvel at his miraculous deeds. However, as the Gospel unfolds, they take side with the leaders of Israel and call for Jesus' crucifixion at his trial before Pilate. Twice, the crowds respond to Pilate's questions concerning Jesus' fate with "Let him be crucified!" (27:15-23). When Pilate declares that he is innocent of Jesus' blood, they make it known that they and their children take accountability for his death (27:25).

Though the people rejected Jesus, the mission for the Jews remains. In the eyes of Matthew, the Jewish people need direction and instruction. The Matthean community still has the task of disengaging the crowds, which seem to represent the people of Israel, from the false leaders and sow the teachings of Jesus concerning Judaism. For Matthew, these leaders are responsible for keeping the people from Jesus and, subsequently, the Matthean community (23:13). For this reason, Matthew exposes their deficiency in the interpretation and observance of the Torah. He seeks to undermine the dominant, established rivals in control and to bring about the reforms within Judaism as taught by Jesus. At the same time, he appeals to fellow Jews to accept Jesus.⁶¹

Donald Senior points out that Jesus does not forbid a continuing mission among Jews in 28:19.⁶² Daniel Harrington adds that the instruction to incorporate Gentiles into the community does not mean that the mission to the Jews was entirely over or that the Gentiles were free from the law.⁶³ The aim of the mission for the Jews, Harrington elaborates, was not to convert them to Christianity, as from one religion to another. Instead, it was the community's effort to present to the broader Jewish community that they were law-abiding, that they were wholly and correctly living out the righteousness expected of them, and

⁶⁰ Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 29.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶² Senior, *Matthew*, 347.

⁶³ Harrington, *Matthew*, 143.

that Christian Judaism was the best way to carry on the Jewish traditions following the destruction of the temple.⁶⁴

In the face of hostility that often characterized the relationship between formative Judaism and the Matthean community, as well as the poor reception of Jesus' message, the Matthean community was fighting a losing battle against the hostile majority.⁶⁵ This prompted the community, still within the boundaries of Judaism, to look beyond the institution of the synagogue for "mission and perhaps a home"⁶⁶ Furthermore, to turn to other nations or people who would "receive them and their message more productively or fruitfully."⁶⁷ The community's openness to receiving and welcoming new converts or God-fearers should not be interpreted as the rejection of Israel or the replacement of Israel by Gentiles. Saldarini is correct in pointing out that Gentiles are peripheral—"Within the [Gospel] narrative, the gentile characters are secondary to members of Israel, and their story is partial and unfinished."⁶⁸

At several points in the Gospel, Matthew alludes to such Gentile inclusion and positively portrays their exemplary faith. The positive characterization of Gentiles begins with the inclusion of the four Gentile women in the genealogy of Christ (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba; 1:1-6) and progresses with the story of the Magi (2:1-12) who come from the East to acknowledge Jesus. The positive characterization reaches its climax with Jesus' instruction to the disciples to teach all the nations (28:19-20). In between, there are references to Jesus' visit to Gadara (Matt 8:28-34) or Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15:21-29), where he heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman. In 15:21-28, the Canaanite woman is persistent in her plead for the healing of her daughter, who is tormented by a demon (15:21-28).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, 82.

When Jesus states that he is sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, she argues that both Gentiles (dogs) and Jews (children) are under the same authority (15:27). The story concludes with Jesus healing her daughter and complimenting her faith. Jesus makes a similar favorable judgment about the centurion's faith when he pleads with him to cure his ill son/servant and trusts that Jesus has the power to heal from a distance (8:5-13). In response, Jesus marvels at his faith: "Amen, I say to you, nowhere in Israel have I found such faith" (8:10). Another story that accentuates the recognition and confidence the Gentiles have in Jesus is the story of the centurion at the cross. After having witnessed Jesus' death and resurrection, the centurion and the guards confess that Jesus is indeed the Son of God (27:51-54). All these represent further positive examples of Gentile faith, and their faith stands in contrast to the rejection of the Jewish authorities.

From Matthew's vantage point, Jews and Gentiles may come into the community if they understand and accept Jesus' fresh interpretation of the law that centers on love, mercy, and justice.⁶⁹ The Matthean community is the one that faithfully observes the Jewish law, not in the way the Pharisees do, but according to Jesus' principals. In this light, new converts are expected to follow the law in full (Matt 23:23).

Conclusion

The Matthean community, as posited by several scholars, was one of the formative Judaism groups that fought for power and the right to lead and interpret the Torah from within the confines of the synagogue. At the center of the competition was the right to be considered authoritative interpreters of the Torah tradition. To succeed at competing with other Jewish groups and convincing the broader Jewish community how to think and act, Matthew utilized the Torah as a

⁶⁹ Alan F. Segal, "Matthew's Jewish Voice," in *Social History of the Matthean Community Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. David. L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 25.

means to gain an upper hand in the struggle for a voice, to vindicate the beliefs and practices of his community, and to discredit the pattern of discipleship shown by the scribes and Pharisees.

Like other competing groups, Matthew claimed to speak for Israel and God, to teach and lead, and to fill the administrative and political vacuum resulting from the first Jewish revolt and the destruction of the temple. Thus, Matthew utilized the Torah in the competition, specifically the interpretation and observance based on the double love commands and mercy and justice, to differentiate his community from its rivals. To accomplish this, Matthew had to: 1) present Jesus as a law-abiding Jew who did not encourage his followers to break the law, 2) establish his community's interpretation of the law as the most correct way by presenting Jesus as the par excellence teacher whose program for interpretation and observance of the Torah was far superior to that of his opponents, and 3) delegitimize his opponents by pointing out their hypocritical observance of the law and by highlighting his community's fundamental hermeneutical principle of interpretation that centered on love, mercy, and justice. In Matthew's mind, this was the only proper interpretation and application of the Torah, both of which came straight from the words and life of Jesus, the Christ.

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