Introduction

A. General Introduction

The socio-political context of the Matthean community that is reflected in the kingdom teaching of Jesus in that Gospel might be difficult to appreciate for some readers today. It bristles with contrasts, tensions and exhortations to make choices and take sides. Such a background of social polarisation is, however, very familiar to those communities that face similar situations of persecution and uncertainty where the differences between good and bad, true and false, are matters of life and death.

My investigation of the Matthean community convinces me that it was in a critical situation after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. This community, on the one hand, was faced with great fear because of the ongoing effects of the Jewish war and the pressures of Roman imperialism. On the other hand, because of religious pressure from within and from outside the community, there was a critical question as to the Jewish identity of the Matthean community. Moreover, there were a number of believers who were influenced by the teaching of false prophets from outside who also caused trouble within the community.

1 In this research, I will use the ‘Matthean community’ in singular form, which refers to not one house Church, but a local or wider network of ‘communities’.

Reading the Kingdom Teaching of Matthew from the Context of Myanmar
Like the Matthean community, the churches of my home country, Myanmar, have faced challenges in both the political and religious realms. The kingdom teaching of Jesus that speaks to the author of Matthew and his community also speaks to communities that face similar socio-political contexts. As Teresa Okure rightly states, “God speaks not only in the social location of the biblical authors and their community but also in the different social locations of the interpreters.”² The kingdom teaching of Jesus that is in Matthew, therefore, is particularly relevant to the Christian community of Myanmar because it encounters a social context similar to that of the Matthean community in some important respects.³

### B. The Aims of This Study

In order to understand how the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew speaks to the Christian community in Myanmar, in this research I aim to explore the theological and ethical tensions in the Gospel of Matthew and its social context in dialogue with the socio-political context of Myanmar. This process works both ways, so there is always the danger that I will simply read my own context and issues into the text of Matthew. Of course, it is inevitable that all readers will do this to some extent, but I aim in this research to limit this tendency in three ways. First, I will describe my primary reading site (the historical and social context of Myanmar) through a critical use of available literature (chapter one). This

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² Teresa Okure, “Reading from this Place: Some Problems and Prospects”, in Reading from this Place (eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; vol. 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 56.
³ Here I will also use the ‘Christian community’ of Myanmar in singular form, referring not to one specific house church or denomination, but to the network of Christian communities in Myanmar.
makes the wider context for my analysis of Matthew transparent at the outset. The same social, historical and critical tools will then be used to evaluate the recent literature on Matthew’s context, and to suggest a plausible setting for the formation of this Gospel (chapter two). This will provide a second defence against reading Matthew just to suit my own context.

The third safeguard against uncritical eisegesis will be the careful use of historical-critical and narrative methods in the interpretation of selected texts in Matthew (chapter three). These are the texts that reflect the Two Ways Theme and that function as the primary means of exhortation to Matthew’s community. In many respects, these are also the passages in Matthew’s Gospel that speak loudest in my own context, but in ways that require further analysis and evaluation.

Thus it is my aim here to undertake a sensitive cross-cultural reading of selected texts in Matthew, in order to bring them into meaningful dialogue with the Christian communities in my own context of Myanmar. My methods will be eclectic, embracing historical-critical, narrative and some glimpses of post-colonial criticism, but undertaken with the common aim of illuminating both text and context(s).

C. The Scope of Investigation

This research will involve four major investigations. The first investigation will be a brief historical survey of the socio-political context of the Christian community in Myanmar from the British colonial period (1824) until today. The second investigation
will deal with the recent arguments of Matthean scholars Andrew Overman, Anthony Saldarini and David C. Sim, who argue that the Matthean community was not a Christian community as such, but a sect of Judaism or Christian Judaism.\(^4\) In some agreement with Graham N. Stanton, but more especially with Donald Hagner and Anthony O. Ewherido,\(^5\) I argue in this research that the Matthean community was not a sect of Judaism, but was a Jewish form of Christian community. The polemics found in the Gospel of Matthew, therefore, are not primarily the conflicts between the Matthean community and the rest of formative Judaism. Rather, they are pastoral problems arising from within the Matthean community because of some Torah extremists. These pastoral problems will be explored as part of my third major investigation — into the Two Ways Theme found in some parts of the Gospel of Matthew.

In this section, I focus on some selected texts, especially the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), 7:13-29, the kingdom parables 13:1-52, and the eschatological parables 25:1-13, 31-46. Each of these texts reflects aspects of the Two Ways Theme and illustrates in different ways the importance of dualistic themes in Matthew’s narrative. In these specific texts we will see that Matthew has arranged his Gospel systematically and deliberately. After describing the teaching of Jesus in the


Sermon on the Mount, Matthew starts admonishing his readers about the two rival ways that lead to different destinations (7:13-29) and challenges them as to which way they will follow. In 13:1-52, Matthew exhorts his readers to see the two parallel ways, which are embodied in Jesus’ teaching in the kingdom parables. And then in 25:1-13, 31-46, he concludes his ethical teaching by painting a picture of eschatological judgment, where there will be two communities separated according to the way they have chosen and followed, one that will be rewarded and one that will be punished.

The fourth major part of this research is to re-evaluate the above exegetical investigations within the context of the Christian community of Myanmar, and to explore the complex array of analogies, parallels, models and dialogues that emerge.

D. Methodological Approaches

Although my basic interest is to pursue a cross-cultural and contextual reading of Matthew, the exegetical methods I use are drawn from the traditional historical-critical and narrative paradigms. These I regard as the ‘basic tools’ of my analysis, used eclectically and where appropriate to elucidate the selected texts outlined above.

These texts were chosen because the differing manner in which they present what has been called the ‘Two Ways Theme’. This Two Ways Theme is found in the Old Testament (Deut 11:26; 30:15, 19; Jer 21:8; Ps 1:6; Prov 14:12), and was widespread both in the ancient Jewish world and in the Greek world, where it “achieved a high degree of
popularity”. The motif, however, “appears to be more Jewish even than Greek”. It “recurs continually throughout the Old Testament and in later Jewish writings” (e.g., Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, the books of the Maccabees, and of Enoch; in Philo of Alexandria; and in rabbinic teaching). It symbolises the ethical choice of people between good and evil.

More than the other three Gospels, the Gospel of Matthew emphasises strongly the Two Ways Theme to describe the contrast between the good and the bad. Because of the plentiful and various usage of the Two Ways Theme in the literature, scholars are in disagreement over the Two Ways comparison found in the Gospel of Matthew. Scholars like David C. Sim argue the antithetical terms ‘good’ (ἀγαθός) and ‘evil’ (παραδόχος) found in Matthew are the result of Matthew’s eschatology, and reflect the critical situation Matthew faced in relation to the Jews, the Gentiles and other groups within his community. Sim states that some of these contrasts are from Q, while some are the result of Matthew’s redaction of the Two Ways motif (e.g., the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet). M. Jack Suggs suggests, on the contrary, that these

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8 Kirk, The Vision, 57.

9 Schweizer, Matthew, 184.

10 David C. Sim, Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew (SNTSMS 88; Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 81. This has been criticised by John Riches who states that though Sim “is aware that different accounts of the nature of evil and its origins are being offered in various kinds of apocalyptic writing of the turn of the era”, Sim’s interest in the texts he reviews is in the dualistic cosmological beliefs which Sim sees as connected to the social situation, not the questions of their coherence with one another. See John K. Riches, Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (SNTW; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 265.
contrasts are derivative from the Two Ways tradition, which stands itself in “continuity with a Jewish Two Spirit/Ways tradition”.11

Though I agree with Suggs that Matthew has taken materials from apocalyptic literature, wisdom literature and his Christian sources, including some from Mark and Q, I argue together with Sim that the Matthean contours of the Two Ways/dualistic theme are peculiar to Matthew.12 I will argue in more detail that the social setting reflected in the texts was decisive in the development of the Two Ways Theme in a way that is peculiar to Matthew and his mixed community. Further, the contrasting motifs are not primarily due to pre-Matthean tradition as Suggs suggests; rather, they reflect the intention of the Evangelist to admonish and challenge his community in the situation that they face. So Matthew heightens the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount from the very beginning of the Gospel in order to admonish his community to see the two rival ways and choose between them appropriately.

To achieve the aim of understanding how the Two Ways Theme is peculiar to Matthew and his mixed community, I employ socio-historical analysis13 as a method for investigating not only the social and historical context of the Gospel of Matthew, but also the context of the Christian community of Myanmar (see chapters one and two).

As these two communities have also suffered under colonial domination, post-colonial analysis is a small part of my investigation. R. S. Sugirtharajah convincingly describes postcolonial analysis as “a critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link

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12 Sim, Apocalyptic Eschatology, 75-87.
13 Ewherido, Matthew’s Gospel, 3, describes socio-historical analysis as a method “determining the social context” of Matthew’s Gospel.
between ideas and power which lies behind Western theories and learning".\textsuperscript{14} According to Sugirtharajah, "it is a discursive resistance against imperialism, imperial ideologies, imperial attitudes, and their continued incarnations among such wide-ranging fields as politics, economics, and history, and theological and biblical studies".\textsuperscript{15} In this research, I employ postcolonial method (or rather, an awareness of that perspective) to some extent for exploring the social, political, economic, cultural and religious context of Myanmar today, as it was once a colonised country — by both British and Japanese forces. Postcolonial insights, however, are limited to the period of the British colonial policy of ‘Divide and Rule’ followed by the impact of Japanese fascism, and their social consequences. These include a legacy of mistrust among the people and the disempowerment of their social, political, economic, cultural and religious ideologies. This will be discussed in the context of the theological issues arising for the Christian community of Myanmar today (see chapters one, and two), and the interpretation of kingdom ethics in situations of oppression (see chapter three, pages 183-189).

The initial approach to the Gospel of Matthew in this research will therefore be through a critical interaction with the social-scientific investigations of the Gospel’s context, with due attention given to the socio-cultural context of my own reading


\textsuperscript{15} Sugirtharajah, \textit{Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism}, 93.
location. Questions of tradition and redaction analysis will be treated only insofar as they are evident in the final shape of the Gospel — the text as it now stands.

In order to discover the full reservoir of the meaning of the Matthean texts for the Christian community in Myanmar, the investigations will include not only ‘exegetical’ analysis (what ‘comes out’ from the texts) but also a deliberate and controlled ‘eisegetical’ reading (what we can legitimately ‘read into’ the texts). This means at the outset that my particular reading ‘site’ (Myanmar) is acknowledged openly, since it will inevitably influence the issues and interpretive options I make as I read Matthew. But declaring this will also help to qualify the extent to which this ‘reading into’ the text can legitimately proceed. To put this another way, reader-response considerations will be examined not in terms of a contemporary ideal reader, but from the clearly defined perspective of this flesh-and-blood reader, interpreting the kingdom teaching of Matthew from the Christian community in Myanmar. The major focus of this research then will be a narrative reading of Jesus’ kingdom teachings in Matthew’s Gospel in the light of its social setting using selected and appropriate hermeneutical methods (see chapter three), in order to

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16 In my view, cross-cultural readings do not constitute a new method of biblical interpretation, so much as a new framework within which interpretation takes place. See Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (vol. 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

17 The Greek preposition ἐκ can be translated as out of, and εἰς as into. Here, I agree with J. Severino Croatto who argues that “reading into a text is necessary to discover the fullness of its reservoir of meaning, that meaning which is not limited to the original author and his or her audience”. J. Severino Croatto, “Matthew 5:1-12: A Latin American Perspective”, in *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (eds. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 121-123. I would qualify Croatto’s assertions by affirming that this “reading into” is tested by our “reading out of” — exegesis and eisegesis (or contextual hermeneutics) must occur in dialogue together rather than in isolation.

understand more fully how the kingdom teaching of Matthew is particularly relevant to the context of Christian community in Myanmar, as well as analogous to those Christian communities which face similar crises today (see chapter four). This brings me back to the question of the cross-cultural and contextual framework within which my exegesis has been undertaken.

The most obvious connections made between readings of the Bible in different contexts refer to analogies, parallels and models (or examples). Indeed, these can be very fruitful and I will note many that occur to me in the chapters below. But the relationships between the interpretations of texts in different contexts are more complex than this and move in both directions. It is not just a matter of spotting an analogous situation and re-applying a meta-cultural truth. Each new context (no matter how analogous) brings its own set of questions and begins a new dialogue with the text. It is this dialogue (along with the analogies and examples) that I will pursue in chapter four.

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19 Dean Flemming rightly argues that appropriate contextualisation occurs “in such a way that the gospel both comes to the authentic expression in the local context and at the same time prophetically transforms the context”. Flemming thus states that contextualisation “seeks to enable the people of God to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances”. Dean Flemming, Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 19.

20 So Flemming, Contextualization in the New Testament, 296; and Okure, “Reading from this Place”, 56.

21 Flemming, Contextualization in the New Testament, 297, rightly suggests, “The multitiextured gospel story must be told and lived out in flexible forms as it engages new contexts”. 

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