Conclusion

The impact of context, both ancient and contemporary, on interpreting biblical texts cannot be avoided — indeed, attempts should be made to declare and describe them at the outset of the hermeneutical task. Consequently, after describing my own reading location in Myanmar, I have sought to analyse the possible social and political contexts of the Matthean text. The arguments and evidence given in this research support the following views about Matthew’s context and concerns and about what the Christian community in Myanmar can gain from them.

The socio-historical, literary and redaction-critical analyses of the kingdom teaching of Matthew in this research indicate that firstly, the Matthean community was situated in troubled times in the city of Antioch. In my reading of the kingdom teaching of Matthew as a flesh-and-blood reader from the context of Myanmar, this community was not a sect of Judaism as some contemporary scholars argue, but was a Jewish form of Christian community — a mixed body, encountering false prophets as well as aspects of formative Judaism, different groups of Antiochene residents, and struggling under the influence of Roman imperialism. In the time when the Gospel was composed in written form, this community was impacted by the ongoing effect of the Jewish war as well as resurgent Roman imperialism, and suffered similar threats from majority Antiochene residents as did other apparently Jewish groups. Thus this community was under considerable socio-political pressure from various directions over their involvement in the mission of Jesus towards the last quarter of the first century CE.

Secondly, the Two Ways Theme found in the Gospel of Matthew is not predominantly pre-Matthean material as some scholars argue, but distinctively Matthean
editing to meet the pastoral problems resulting from the mixed nature of the Matthean community. The community included some Torah extremists who wanted to continue to observe the Mosaic Law as interpreted by ‘the scribes and the Pharisees’. The impact of formative Judaism and false prophets from outside also posed a threat to the Matthean community. For Matthew, the kingdom teaching of Jesus was particularly important for shaping the identity of his community in such a context. He thus arranges the kingdom teaching of Jesus in the Sermon, the parables and the eschatological warnings to challenge his community to re-examine themselves as to the way they should follow.

Thirdly, Matthew points out that Jesus is the Son of God, who came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets by his words and deeds (5:17). Thus his community should fix their eyes on all that Jesus has taught. They should embody Jesus’ way of better righteousness, transforming initiatives and radical discipleship taught through the kingdom teaching, and thereby enlighten their surrounding world. In the Great Commission, Jesus has commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations as well as to give them baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and to teach them everything they have been commanded. For Matthew, these commandments are directly speaking to his community as they engage in a wider mission.

Fourthly, because of socio-political oppression and the threats from Gentiles, some members of the Matthean community did not want to engage in mission to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5-6). In response, Matthew climaxes his Gospel with the Risen Lord commanding his disciples not to make disciples only among believers, but among all nations (28:19). Thus they should go and instruct them to observe everything Jesus has commanded and as salt and light, they should embody the words and deeds of Jesus amongst them (cf. 5:13-16).
Finally, Matthew also reminds his community to be alert for the parousia — even if it seems to be delayed — and to do the will of God by helping practically the ‘little ones’ in their midst (cf. 25:1-13, 31-46).

Thus in composing the Gospel, Matthew does not just retell the story of Jesus. He arranges the kingdom teaching of Jesus systematically in three main distinctive phases: beginning the Gospel with the teaching of Jesus on the Mount, setting the kingdom teaching in parables in the middle part and, in the climactic part of the Gospel, reminding his community to be prepared for the delay of the parousia and to engage in mission.

In conclusion, Matthew’s kingdom ethics not only provide a model for engaging his own community, but also confront every Christian community in similar situations — in Myanmar as well as in many places devoid of salt and light in this world. I suggest that we must read the Gospel texts within our context by polishing our contextual reading lens. Through entering into the texts and the context of the Gospel of Matthew, we will see that the kingdom teaching of Jesus in Matthew “shapes and forms us into communities of disciples. It points us to a way of life which continues Jesus’ mission of manifesting God’s saving presence. It challenges us to live this mission in our daily lives”.

This close reading of aspects of Matthew’s Gospel from the Myanmar context — which has some significant parallels and analogies with that of the Matthean community — has resulted in many points of fruitful dialogue between the emphases of Matthew and the gospel needs of Myanmar. Whether in addressing a troubled church, offering warnings and promises (the Two Ways Theme), calling disciples to Jesus’ better righteousness, urging them to engage in mission to the world or encouraging them to be alert, caring and expectant, Matthew’s emphases in presenting the good news of Jesus

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1 Carter, “Learning to Live”, 293.
resonate with great clarity and relevance when heard from the context of Myanmar, and other contexts where Christian communities are under great pressure both from outside and within. My exploration is necessarily a specific and modest venture. My hope, however, is that Christians in many different contexts will continue to read Matthew’s Gospel conscious of what they bring to their reading, what this helps them to see clearly and consequently, what they contribute to the worldwide church as it endeavours to lives out its continuing mission to co-operate with God’s desire to transform all societies and cultures.