Chapter Two: A Closer Understanding of the Matthean Community in the Context of the Roman Empire

As many scholars have noted, Matthew emphasises the Two Ways — a particular manifestation of a wider dualistic theme — within the teaching of Jesus. To understand why Matthew emphasises this particular theme within the teaching of Jesus, we need to test this reading against historically plausible settings for the author of Matthew and his community. What challenges provoked Matthew to heighten the contrast between the good and the bad? What purpose did he have in mind in framing these things dualistically? In order to tackle these questions in this chapter, firstly, the setting of the Gospel will be examined, including the issues surrounding the authorship and the location of the Matthean community. Secondly, the possible socio-political contexts behind the author and his community will be surveyed. Thirdly, the social atmosphere of the Matthean community and its relationships within and outside the community will be explored. Then I will investigate the theological issues that are evident in the Matthean community and go on to describe the fruitful parallels between the context of the Matthean community and that of the Christian community in Myanmar. I will then show how the kingdom teachings of Jesus are particularly relevant and meaningful to the context of the Christian community in Myanmar.

A. The Setting of the Gospel

The texts which I have chosen to discuss in the next chapter (5-7; 13:1-52; 25:1-13, 31-46) reflect the Matthean community as a mixed community that contains both good and bad. Scholars today interpret the Gospel of Matthew in different ways. Scholars like Richard Bauckham argue that the mixed imagery of good and bad found in Matthew is referring not to the Matthean community, but to the world as a mixed body. Others like David C. Sim argue that the social setting that is reflected in some texts, like the parables of the tares and the dragnet, is relevant to the Matthean community as a corpus mixtum rather than the world in general, because hostile sectarian groups were transparently part of Jewish life in Matthew’s own time. My own experience of interpreting Matthew within the context of Karen culture in Myanmar, and studying it further within an Australian context, suggests that even when scholars today intend to interpret and write for a wider, global audience (as Bauckham argues for Matthew), they still do so largely from within the cultural assumptions and worldview of the community closest to them. For this reason, I prefer to accept the arguments of those who see the significance of the Matthean community as a corpus mixtum. I would argue further that the antithetical contrast of good and bad in the text primarily reflects the Matthean community as a corpus mixtum. These antithetical contrasts originate ultimately in the

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2 Bauckham argues that the four Gospels were written not for a local church, but for all Christians. Richard Bauckham, “For Whom Were Gospels Written?”, in The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences (ed. Richard Bauckham; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 9-48. Bauckham is correct to point to the wider circulation of the Gospels from earliest times, but not at the expense of disconnecting their composition from a particular community — or network of communities — in a particular time and space. Flemming also comments that Bauckham “goes too far in trying to decontextualize the Gospels”. Flemming argues that if “the Evangelists were all addressing an identical and undefined readership, we have trouble accounting for their distinctive emphases and portraits of Jesus”. Thus Flemming contends that all four Gospels are “contextual documents in that they narrate the gospel story for distinct ‘target audiences’ within the first century Mediterranean world”. See Flemming, Contextualization, 236, 240.

cosmic worldview of the Evangelist, heightened by the critical situation faced in his community.\(^4\)

In order to understand the context of antithetical contrasts reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, it is necessary to analyse the possible social problems occurring in the Matthean community behind the texts. So firstly, I will examine the issue of who wrote the Gospel of Matthew, though it is difficult to determine the precise details of its authorship, and secondly, I will investigate where the most likely locations of the Matthean community might have been, though again it may not be possible to give the exact location. I am seeking here to describe a coherent relationship between the text of Matthew’s Gospel and what can be known about plausible historical reconstructions of its original context. Absolute certainty is neither possible, nor necessary, but to ignore the plausibility of any relationship between text and context is to continue (even if unintentionally) the possibility of reading Matthew from a position of colonial or imperial power, rather than from the position of those who have suffered, as have many in the communities of Matthew and Myanmar.

i) The Authorship of the Gospel

A number of scholars, following early church traditions, assert that the Gospel of Matthew was written by the apostle Matthew in the Hebrew language and was intended for Jewish-Christian readers. According to these traditions, it was probably composed in the early 60s.\(^5\) Conversely, Kenneth Clark proposes that the author was a

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\(^4\) This view is supported by Sim. See Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 181-221; “Rome in Matthew’s Eschatology”, 93-106.

later Gentile Christian. Among those supporting this view, John Meier makes two suggestions. He argues that firstly, unlike Mark and Luke, the author has a lack of knowledge about the Sadducees, and secondly, his mistaken use of Jewish traditions includes his treatment of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem and the Zechariah quotation that he seems to see as fulfilled in the event. These divergent views on the authorship and dating of Matthew illustrate the dimensions of the debate.

Nevertheless, the arguments for later Gentile authorship and for an early dating are unconvincing. Meier’s contention that Matthew misreads the prophets and misunderstands Hebrew parallelism underestimates the thoroughly Hellenistic environment in which many Jewish scholars worked. The arguments for the apostle Matthew as the author of the Gospel by some early church Fathers are also difficult to reconcile with a plausible social context for the Matthean community, as I will discuss later. Whereas much of the Gospel — like the genealogy of Jesus (chapter 1), the interpretation of the Law (chapters 5-7; 19:3-12) and the bountiful use of Jewish Scripture quotations — points to the author being a Jewish-Christian, the inclusion of Gentiles in his mission (8:5-13; 15:21-28; 28:19-20) suggests that he was probably a progressive Hellenistic Jewish-Christian. As the majority of contemporary scholars accept, it is plausible to accept that the author of the Gospel of Matthew was a member of a Jewish Christian group who had left Judea before the Jewish war and settled in a predominantly Gentile environment, probably in Syria. Although the Gospel contains many conservative Jewish themes, the final form of Matthew’s text suggests that its author can be best described, as Kingsbury puts it, as “a Greek-speaking Jewish-

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7 For more discussion, see Meier, The Vision of Matthew, 17-23.
8 Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:7-58. Davies and Allison comment that the author was an unidentified Jewish Christian.
Christian of the second generation after Jesus who possessed a universal missionary outlook and had most probably enjoyed rabbinical training”. He appears to compose this Gospel within his context by claiming the apostle’s authority (and perhaps, traditions) and to have written it about 85 or 90 CE.

In my view, the mixed nature of the Gospel traditions in Matthew (both distinctively Palestinian Jewish and Hellenistic Jewish) means that there is little credibility in those interpretations which seek to locate the Gospel and its author solely within a Hebrew or Hellenistic Jewish context or within a Gentile context. A mixed text reflects a mixed community. It is usually described in terms of a community in an urban area (a city church), probably in or near Antioch of Syria, and I will explore further the arguments regarding suggested locations as follows.

**ii) The Geographical Location of the Matthean Community**

The antithetical comparison of the good and bad in the Gospel suggests that the Matthean community is a corpus mixtum. This community, in my opinion, appears to be made up of persons from both Jewish and Gentile origin. On the one hand, this community appears to be struggling with its mixed membership, facing religious pressure from Torah extremists inside the community, and outside from Jewish leaders and false prophets (7:15-27; 13:24-30, 47-50; 18:15-17). On the other hand, the

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11 I will explore this further later on.
community faces other political challenges. So what are these socio-political problems that provoked the Evangelist Matthew to reflect these issues in his record of the kingdom teachings of Jesus? What plausible hypotheses about the geographical location of the Matthean community can help to shed light on the wider issues impacting on the community? Scholars today are in disagreement over the exact geographical location of the Matthean community and present a variety of views on this matter. While some Matthean scholars argue that the location of the Matthean community is in Syrian Antioch, others suggest Phoenicia, Galilee, Sepphoris or other places. Which place provides a more plausible location for the Matthean community? Though it may well be impossible to designate the exact location with any certainty, I will tackle these scholarly hypotheses with the intention of describing the most plausible location for the Matthean community. I do this in some detail because the issues raised by each hypothesis — concerning rural or city locations, ethnic mixes or exclusions, local or colonial power — are the very issues which are relevant to my reading from the context of Myanmar.

**ii. a) Possible Locations for the Matthean Community**

**Phoenicia:** G. D. Kilpatrick argues that the Matthean community was located in Phoenicia. According to Kilpatrick, the Matthean community was a Greek-speaking community, “but strongly Jewish in character and opposing the aggressive Pharisaic Judaism” which was active at that time. It was ‘a rich city community’ for the greater

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12 I do not assume that the Matthean community was one particular house church in one particular place — or that Matthew was written for all Christians everywhere (as Bauckham, “For Whom Were Gospels Written?”, 9–48, seems to argue). Rather I have in mind a network of gatherings *(ekklesiai* and/or synagogues) in neighbouring areas with a common, though mixed, ethos and history. This will be developed further later on.


usage of πόλις ‘city’ in Matthew than Mark, and more references to money and economic matters in the Gospel than Mark and Luke suggests a community with concerns in these areas.\textsuperscript{15}

In Kilpatrick’s view, Antioch seems to be a likely location for the Matthean community. However, he dismisses the claims of Antioch because of the absence of Pauline influence in the Gospel, whereas Paul himself was in close connection with Antioch. Ignatius, who might have even been bishop at Antioch when the Gospel was written, also “showed no trace of Jewish influence”, whereas it is so strong in the Gospel.\textsuperscript{16} Kilpatrick then suggests Phoenicia as a more probable location for the Matthean community. He points out that the more frequent usages of σεισμός, σείειν ‘earthquake’, ‘tremble’ in Matthew than Mark and Luke, and elements in the story of the Canaanite woman suggest Phoenicia as a plausible location for the Evangelist (15:22). The Septuagint uses Canaan as an equivalent to Phoenicia,\textsuperscript{17} and this evidence suggests Matthew as having a connection in some way with Phoenicia. Kilpatrick thus suggests Phoenicia as a likely location for the Matthean community for Matthew originated in a community in close contact with the Judaism of Jamnia.\textsuperscript{18}

The reasons for Kilpatrick to dismiss the claims of Antioch may be challenged. First, the lack of Pauline influence in the Gospel is not surprising. As Galatians and Acts describe, if Paul was no longer ministering at Antioch after the Peter incident and was more focused on the mission in Asia Minor, and if Peter was taking the leading role in the community and the community followed him as I will argue further, would Paul’s influence still be stronger than Peter’s? Perhaps, since Peter ‘won’ the controversy with Paul, the community there would respect and follow the leading role

\textsuperscript{15} Kilpatrick, Origins, 124-126.
\textsuperscript{16} Kilpatrick, Origins, 130, 134.
\textsuperscript{17} Kilpatrick, Origins, 132.
\textsuperscript{18} Kilpatrick, Origins, 133.
of Peter rather than Paul (16:18-19). Moreover, Paul was not the founder of the church of Antioch (cf. Acts 11:19-30). Thus the Gospel of Matthew shows no evidence of Pauline influence.

Kilpatrick’s argument regarding Ignatius as showing no trace of Jewish influence where it is so strong in Matthew’s Gospel, ignores the fact that Antioch was one of the most prominent Jewish centres. Arguably Ignatius’ interests assumed the strong Jewish influence, and focused more on representing the life and work of the Christian churches to the wider empire. If so, it is not surprising that we do not find strong evidence of Jewish influence in his letters for he argued not for the acceptance of the already legal Jewish community, but for the acceptance of the ecclesiastical and theological understandings of the growing Christian community.

Furthermore, the frequent usage of σεισμος and σείειν in Matthew does not necessarily support Phoenicia as the location of the Matthean community for earthquakes were also severe in Antioch. The story of the Canaanite woman also does not necessarily support Phoenicia as the location for the Gospel, for this passage should be understood primarily as supporting Gentile inclusion. Moreover, as Meier states, in the New Testament period there is no mention of a Christian community on the Phoenician coast and no indication of great Christian influence from there on early Christian churches in other places. The arguments for Phoenicia are thus inadequate to support the location of the Matthean community there.

23 Meier, “Antioch”, 22.
Alexandria: This view is persuasively argued by S. G. F. Brandon.\textsuperscript{24} Like Kilpatrick, Brandon rejects Streeter's Antiochene hypothesis for two reasons: (i) the liberal Christianity in Antioch as inconsistent with the narrowly Jewish and anti-Gentile sentiments of Matthew, and (ii) the community of Matthew must be situated somewhere else since Luke was closely associated with the church of Antioch.\textsuperscript{25}

Brandon suggests that Alexandria was the most plausible location for the Matthean community since it had long been the home of a large Jewish population, being the capital of Egypt and the second greatest city of the Greco-Roman world.\textsuperscript{26} Brandon argues that there was a close connection between the churches of Jerusalem and Alexandria and after 70 CE the church of Alexandria was the only church that effectively represented “the primitive Christianity of Jerusalem”.\textsuperscript{27} The flight into Egypt in the infancy narrative also includes the church of Alexandria as the only church that is vividly recorded in the tradition of its own Gospel.\textsuperscript{28} Brandon argues that the fall of the Jewish nation in 70 CE presented an urgent problem for the members of Alexandrian church, and to meet those challenges, Matthew developed an explanatory philosophy of history by using the Markan and Q material.\textsuperscript{29}

Sjef van Tilborg also supports the claims for an Alexandrian origin.\textsuperscript{30} According to Tilborg, the Gospel of Matthew was first formed and passed on within the Jewish community in Alexandria, then relocated and rewritten within a pagan-Christian community. It was thus strongly anti-Jewish due to this later context.\textsuperscript{31} Unlike Brandon, for whom Matthew represents conservative Jewish-Christianity

\textsuperscript{24} See S. G. F. Brandon, \textit{The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church: A Study of the Effects of the Jewish Overthrow of A.D. 70 on Christianity} (London: SPCK, 1951), 217-43.
\textsuperscript{25} Brandon, \textit{The Fall}, 226-227.
\textsuperscript{26} Brandon, \textit{The Fall}, 221.
\textsuperscript{27} Brandon, \textit{The Fall}, 225.
\textsuperscript{28} Brandon, \textit{The Fall}, 226-7.
\textsuperscript{29} Brandon, \textit{The Fall}, 227-230.
\textsuperscript{30} Tilborg, \textit{The Jewish Leaders in Matthew} (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 171.
\textsuperscript{31} Tilborg, \textit{The Jewish Leaders}, 172.
against Pauline universalism, Tilborg argues that Matthew was a spokesman for a community which was strongly anti-Jewish, and which became a Gentile Christian community.\textsuperscript{32}

The claims for an Alexandrian origin have not gained wide acceptance. It would seem that if the Matthean community were located in Alexandria, there would be some Philonic influence in the Gospel at some stage. Brandon however, shows no interest in why Matthew has no traces of the Philonic thought in his Gospel.\textsuperscript{33} Furthermore, the flight into Egypt in the infancy narrative of the Gospel does not prove the Alexandrian location as scholars see this passage not as an historical tradition, but as part of an Old Testament Moses typology which Matthew recalls in his theological reflection on the theme of Old Testament fulfilment.\textsuperscript{34} Moreover, the important role of Peter (who is associated with Antioch, not Alexandria, in the traditions) and the inclusiveness of Gentile mission in the Gospel (28:19-20) are inconsistent with an Alexandrian location where the Jewish community was more insular.

\textit{Transjordan:} This hypothesis is proposed by H. Dixon Slingerland.\textsuperscript{35} Slingerland argues that the Gospel of Matthew was composed not in Syrian Antioch, but somewhere on the eastward side of the Jordan River. Slingerland’s argument is based on textual problems in Matthew 4:15 and 19:1. In Slingerland’s view, both of these texts represent the redaction of Matthew and indicate the geographical


\textsuperscript{33} Here I agree with Davies and Allison, \textit{Matthew}, 1:139. Though also against the claim of an Alexandrian origin, Sim argues that the absence of Philonic influence in the Gospel is insignificant, for we must not presume that the Jews or Christians in Alexandria necessarily stood in the tradition of Philo. Sim, \textit{The Gospel of Matthew}, 51. In my opinion, however, if the Gospel of Matthew were composed in Alexandria, Matthew would show some hints of Philonic influence (or even opposition) in his Gospel as he undertook the task described by Brandon of using the materials of Mark and Q to reinterpret the events of 70 CE and after. Cf. Brandon, \textit{The Fall}, 227-230.


perspective of the author as being on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Slingerland
thus suggests that the Gospel was composed somewhere in the east part of the Jordan
River, perhaps in Pella.36 This city, in Slingerland’s view, was an important Christian
centre where many members from the Jerusalem church fled to prior to, or during, the
outbreak of the Jewish war and where there would be a continuing struggle between
Judeans and Christians over the Law and Gentiles.37

While arguing for the claim of Transjordan, Slingerland draws attention to the
awkward textual problems found in Matthew 19:1 and 4:15. Slingerland based his
claims only on these two texts without entering into any reflection on other texts in the
rest of the Gospel. His argument thus appears to overestimate the evidence for the
location of the Matthean community in Transjordan.38 I would argue that the Pella
tradition is historically quite uncertain. It is largely speculative and needs to be
considered alongside other contradictory historical evidence and arguments, though all
are of equally disputable origin.39 J. Verheyden states that the Pella tradition was
“preserved (in Eusebius) to illustrate a good Christian motif of deliverance of the
righteous”.40 According to the Pella tradition, though many members of Jerusalem
Church fled to Pella during the outbreak of the Jewish war, no apostles went with
them. This community gradually then “became separated from the mainstream”.41 I
will argue later that as Peter played a prominent role in the Gospel of Matthew, this
could not be consistent with Pella (Transjordan) as the location of the Matthean

37 Slingerland, “The Transjordanian Origin”, 26. Stanton finds the argument of Slingerland particularly
perceptive. See Graham N. Stanton, “The Origin and Purpose of Matthew’s Gospel: Matthean
38 Jack T. Sanders and David C. Sim agree in this regard against Slingerland. See Sanders, “Jewish
Christianity in Antioch before the Time of Hadrian: Where does the Identity Lie?”, SBLSP 31 (1992):
352 footnote 13; Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 41-45.
39 A defence of the Pella tradition has been made by Craig Koester, “The Origin and Significance of the
Flight to Pella Tradition”, CBQ 51 (1989): 90-106. For a critique of Koester, see J. Verheyden, “The
community since there were no prominent apostles there. Thus we should read the geographical location ‘beyond the Jordan’ in these texts as the area where Jesus was occasionally active (8:28-34; 14:22-33; 16:5-20; 19:1).\footnote{Luz, Matthew 1-7, 196; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew (ICC; vol. 3; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 6-7.} Furthermore, Antioch on the Orontes, the most plausible location for the Matthean community as I will argue later, appears to be east of that line and be consistent with the Evangelist’s view of Galilee as on the other side of the Jordan.\footnote{Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:383.} Thus the arguments for Transjordan seem to be inadequate to support the location of the Matthean community there.

\textit{Caesarea Maritima:} This view is proposed by B. T. Viviano.\footnote{B. T. Viviano, “Where was the Gospel According to St. Matthew Written?”, \textit{CBQ} 41 (1979): 533-546.} Viviano’s argument is based on two main reasons which he thinks Streeter wrongly dismissed as grounds for Caesarea Maritima being the likely location of the Matthean community. Viviano argues that Caesarea was not the port of entry for Samaria, as Streeter maintained. Rather it was “a fairly recently developed port city” which became the base for the Roman procurators of Judea, and “its port served the whole of Palestine”.\footnote{Viviano, “Where?”), 534.} For Viviano, Caesarea had no special connection with the Samaritans and Matthew 10:5 needs to be interpreted in relation to theological considerations rather than geographical, for “the whole matter of Gentile mission is not settled until 28:19”.\footnote{Viviano, “Where?”), 534-5.} Viviano also argues that Streeter’s arguments actually seem to favour a Palestinian provenance rather than Antioch since Streeter affirms that the Gospel of Matthew “is saturated with Jewish feeling”.\footnote{Viviano, “Where?”, 534-5.}

Viviano believes that the conflict in the Gospel of Matthew was with Pharisaic or formative Judaism.\footnote{Formative Judaism, as I will discuss later, is the label given to Pharisaic Judaism reshaping itself after the destruction of the temple.} In Viviano’s view, the Matthean community was closer to

\begin{itemize}
\item Luz, Matthew 1-7, 196;
\item Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:383.
\item B. T. Viviano, “Where was the Gospel According to St. Matthew Written?”, \textit{CBQ} 41 (1979): 533-546.
\item Viviano, “Where?”, 534.
\item Viviano, “Where?”), 534-5.
\item Viviano, “Where?”, 534-5.
\item Formative Judaism, as I will discuss later, is the label given to Pharisaic Judaism reshaping itself after the destruction of the temple.
\end{itemize}
Palestine. Viviano thus suggests Caesarea Maritima as the most plausible location for the Matthean community. He argues that Christianity was present in Caesarea from the first days of the church as Acts reports (Acts 8:40; 9:30; 10:1, 24; 11:11; 12:19; 18:22; 21:8-16; 23:23, 33; 25:1-13), and that it was the continuing centre of the Palestinian Christianity even up to the fifth century CE. Geographically, it was also close to Jamnia, explaining why Matthew shows contacts with Jamnian Judaism. For Viviano, Caesarea was “not only a center of Christian life as far back as we can trace, but was also from the earliest times a center of Christian learning, dominated by a school and a library and bishops with a taste for learning”. Thus according to Viviano, Caesarea is the most plausible location for the Gospel.

As Meier points out, Viviano’s case is based mainly on late Patristic references. Josephus records that there was a massacre of Jews in Caesarea Maritima by Gentile neighbours in 66 CE. The surviving Jews fled from Caesarea to a safe place (JW 2:284-92), and there is no evidence that the Jews quickly resettled in that city after the war. Thus Caesarea could not be a prominent place for a Jewish centre in the time when the Gospel was probably written. The Gospel also reflects that though the Matthean community was facing different social conflicts, it was moving towards a wider mission (28:19-20). It does not seem that there would be a strong enough Jewish-Christian community in Caesarea Maritima for the expanding and missionary-minded Matthean community to be located there.

53 So Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:141; and Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 45-48.
Galilee: This view is proposed by J. Andrew Overman.\textsuperscript{54} His argument has in turn been supported by Alan F. Segal, Anthony J. Saldarini, Daniel J. Harrington and by other scholars arguing more specifically for Sepphoris.\textsuperscript{55} These scholars see Galilee as playing a central role in early Rabbinic Judaism. For them, Galilee was a prime location for the Pharisees of the late first century and the second century since the Pharisees’ centre of power in Jerusalem was moved to Galilee after the war against Rome ended (70 CE), and again after the Bar Kokhba war of 132-135 CE.\textsuperscript{56} Thus Galilee would have been a place where the Matthean community “came into conflict with the emerging rabbinic movement and its particular mode of Jewish life”\textsuperscript{57}

Overman argues that Matthew’s unusual concentration on Galilee suggests Matthew as knowing Galilee quite well and essentially limiting the “activity of the Jesus movement to Galilee, and Capernaum in particular”.\textsuperscript{58} In Overman’s view, this phenomenon is not merely Matthew’s theological agenda concerning the land of Galilee, but it is “one more reflection of Matthew’s setting and world which has inevitably made its way into his Gospel story”.\textsuperscript{59} Thus a more plausible location for the Matthean community could be one of the Galilean cities, Tiberias or Sepphoris.\textsuperscript{60}

In agreement with the claim of Galilee, Segal also argues that the primitive church had its real roots in Galilee, the native country of Jesus, even though Acts does not mention the Christian communities there. According to Segal, Paul gives some evidence for Christian activities in Galilee, and as I Corinthians 9:5 suggests, the

\textsuperscript{56} Overman, \textit{Matthew’s Gospel}, 158; and Segal, “Matthew’s Jewish Voice”, 27.
\textsuperscript{58} Overman, \textit{Matthew’s Gospel}, 159.
\textsuperscript{59} See Overman, \textit{Matthew’s Gospel}, 159.
\textsuperscript{60} See Overman, \textit{Matthew’s Gospel}, 159; \textit{Church and Community in Crisis}, 16-19.
relatives of Jesus appear to spread the Gospel starting from the villages of Nazareth and Cochaba, both Galilean cities.61 After the time of Jesus, Galilee became an important place for Jewish Christianity, and Isaiah 9 is used to point to Galilee as becoming a place of prophecy. Specifically, the Gospel of Matthew indicates Galilee as the biblical fulfilment for Jesus’ mission (4:15; cf. Isa 9:1). In Segal’s view, Matthew apparently understood the territorial arc of Galilee as the land of promise, where his community was. The community that produced Matthew must therefore be in close association with Rabbinic Judaism in Galilee and living in a place “where Greek was spoken and where there was a significant number of Gentiles as well as Jews”.62

These arguments for Galilee as the location for the Matthean community are not as strong as they first appear. Though Overman and Segal refer to Matthew’s unusual concentration on Galilee, all the synoptic Gospels mention that Galilee was the home of Jesus, the active centre of his mission and “the place where much of the formation of his followers took place”.63 So it is not surprising to see the extent of Matthew’s description of the geographical location of Galilee. The use of biblical prophecy in the Gospel also does not prove Galilee as the location of the Matthean community, but may simply indicate the historical reality of the first followers before Matthew and Matthew’s obvious concern to point to the fulfilment of Scriptures at every opportunity. Richard A. Horsley observes that neither archaeological nor literary evidence supports the existence of ‘Christian’ communities or their remains in Galilee before the establishment of Christianity by Constantine. The ‘Christianity’ that is clearly evident in Galilee by the mid-fourth century was not therefore indigenous to

Galilee. Rather, it was “something developed outside and then imposed on the landscape” of Galilee.\(^{64}\) Horsley’s observations support the view that Galilee was some distance from the Matthean community as the Gospel narrative exhorts a wider missionary mandate (cf. 28:19-20). Although for these reasons I am inclined to reject the Galilee arguments, there are those who have argued more specifically for Sepphoris within Galilee as a likely location for the Matthean community. Thus further arguments against Galilee and Sepphoris in particular will be given in the next section.

**Sepphoris:** Using textual and modern archaeological evidence, Aaron M. Gale argues that the Gospel of Matthew could have been written in Greek from a Galilean city such as Sepphoris, for “Greek became prevalent following the Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE, when the Jewish population was forced to scatter across Judea and Galilee and into other regions”.\(^{65}\) Gale observes the unusual concentration on Galilee in the Gospel and argues that Matthew seems to know Galilee quite well and essentially limits the movement of Jesus to within Galilee. Furthermore Jesus’ opponents in the Gospel are often indicated as being from a Galilean Jewish group. For Gale, the Matthean community was rooted in Judaism, and the formative Jewish group that came in conflict with it was Galilean. In Gale’s view, Antioch would have been too big community, such that the two competing movements could easily avoid each other, whereas it would not be so easy to do in Sepphoris.\(^{66}\)

Gale thus suggests Sepphoris as the location of Matthean community. In Gale’s view (i) Sepphoris provided easy access for those who wished to conduct business;

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\(^{66}\) Gale, “Tradition”, 150-152; and *Redefining Ancient Borders*, 52-53.
(ii) it was one of the most important Jewish cities of that time; (iii) the country around Sepphoris was quite fertile and a vibrant centre of Jewish life and culture in the first century; and (iv) the status of the bureaucracy would make Sepphoris the most important city in Galilee.\footnote{Gale, “Tradition”, 152-153; and Redefining Ancient Borders, 57-59.}

Gale sees the overwhelming Jewish majority in the city as important because Matthew’s Jewish community seems to have been in conflict with formative Jewish groups in close proximity. In Gale’s view, Sepphoris was an active centre of Jewish study and learning in the post-war Rabbinic Age. After the first revolt, many Judean Jewish leaders had settled in Sepphoris and these Jews were more traditional in nature. For Gale, the surrounding Jews that came in conflict with the Matthean community seem to have been quite conservative, much like “an aristocratic or priestly group that wished to continue practicing a traditional Jewish faith”.\footnote{Gale, “Tradition”, 154-155; and Redefining Ancient Borders, 59-60.}

Gale argues that Sepphoris was a wealthy Jewish city with a conservative, aristocratic Jewish population that provided the most likely setting for the Gospel where the emerging Jewish ‘Christian’ church appears to have been in dispute with Jewish group(s) over the interpretation of the Law.\footnote{Gale, “Tradition”, 155-156; and Redefining Ancient Borders, 60-61.} Thus Sepphoris fits the criteria for the location of the Matthean community, so that the author of the Gospel was writing “from a wealthy urban setting that contained a large, conservative Jewish population”.\footnote{Gale, “Tradition”, 156; and Redefining Ancient Borders, 61-63.}

These arguments are helpful and convincing, to some extent. I would point out that if competing groups are within a wider community network and still in tension, how could these groups avoid each other even if they were in a big city like Antioch? Gale is concerned to locate the Matthean community among conservative Jewish
groups, but Matthew’s text does not only dialogue with conservative Jews. A wider range of groups is evident. Moreover, Gale’s view of Peter’s role in the Gospel as theological rather than geographical is inconsistent with the intimate connection of geographical context and theological meaning throughout the Gospel. The emphasis on Syria within Matthew (cf. 4:18 and 4:24) suggests a context beyond Sepphoris and one that invokes the connection between the Petrine traditions and Antioch. No doubt the influence of the rabbinic renewal in Sepphoris is one of the factors that the Matthean community have to contend with — but clearly not the only factor. The situation within and around the Matthean community is more complex still, and suggests a location in a larger metropolis.

**ii. b) Antioch on the Orontes as a Suggested Location for the Matthean Community**

The hypothesis that I have become persuaded to adopt affirms the claims of Syrian Antioch as the most appropriate location for the Matthean community. This argument has been proposed by many, including Burnett Hillman Streeter, and has been accepted by the majority of Matthean scholars today. Streeter’s hypothesis of Antiochene origin is based on the arguments that (i) the author has an extraordinary interest in Peter’s role in Matthew compared with Mark; (ii) the church of Antioch

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follows the Petrine tradition and represents the *via media* between “the Judaistic intolerance” of James (or more precisely, those who put pressure on him in Jerusalem) and the antinomian liberty of some followers of Paul; and (iii) though Christianity is claimed for all nations, the atmosphere that is reflected in the Gospel seems to preserve the particularist concerns of Jewish Christian character, which are consistent with the church of Antioch, a city with a large Jewish population.\(^72\) Though scholars’ conclusions differ in their reasoning from Streeter’s hypothesis, the majority of scholars still support the claim that Syrian Antioch is the most likely location of the Matthean community.

In support of this hypothesis, I would point out that Antioch, specifically Antioch on the Orontes, was the ancient capital of Syria and the third largest city of the Mediterranean world in the Roman Empire.\(^73\) It was a well-established and predominantly Greek-speaking metropolis, with a sizeable Jewish population who had resided there since its foundation and received all the rights of citizenship from Seleucus Nicator.\(^74\) There is considerable evidence that the Jewish group in Antioch remained a well-established community in the middle of the first century CE.\(^75\) Some Antiochene residents were Greeks from Athens and Macedonia, Syrians and other nationalities. The main language was Greek, but Aramaic was also spoken. As its residents were a mixed body of people from different ethnic backgrounds, the city of Antioch had its share of mob violence and crime, often caused by hatred and fear of ethnic antagonisms.\(^76\) Such tensions are consistent with the social climate of the

\(^{72}\) Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 504.


\(^{74}\) Josephus, *Ant.* xii. 3. § 1.


\(^{76}\) Stark, “Antioch”, 198. I will develop this section further below.
Matthean community I will describe further below, and are reflected in the heightened antithetical comparison between good and bad in the Gospel text.

Moreover, Antioch was “a bridgehead of early Christian expansion”, and one of the earliest Christian communities outside Palestine and “the main centre of Christianity in Syria”. It was there where Jewish Christians from the Hellenistic group probably founded the church in the late thirties. The evidence of Acts supports the view that Antioch was a place where believers were first called Christians and where the scattered and persecuted believers eagerly proclaimed the Good News to Gentiles (Acts 11:19-21, 26). Paul and Barnabas were sent out from there for the Gentile mission (Acts 13:1-3). In a number of early traditions, Matthew (and even Luke) wrote their Gospels and lived in Antioch.

Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch, also shows some familiarity with the Gospel of Matthew, as does the Didache, and he was the first among the Christian writers to use the actual term ‘Christianity’ (Χριστιανισμός). In his letter to the Smyrneans, Ignatius cited Matthew 3:15, showing that Matthew was used and therefore known in Antioch by 115 CE. The Gospel of Matthew was also used in the Didache, a Christian writing which might have originated in Syria, close to Antioch, by about 100 CE. Antioch was thus a location where the Gospel of Matthew was known and used in Christian circles from earliest times.

80 Hill, Matthew, 51; Meeks and Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch, 16.
In Christian tradition, Antioch was the place where the controversy of Peter and Paul occurred regarding table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Acts 15:1-21; Gal 2:11-16). This controversy is reflected in the polemic between Jesus and the religious leaders in the Gospel of Matthew. Since the Matthean community comprised many converts from Jewish and Gentile background, the same sort of tensions would arise between Torah extremists and the rest of the community in the time when the Gospel was written (cf. 5:17; 20-48; 7:28; 15:14; and mainly in chapter 23). These external factors above, relating to Antioch, are at least potentially consistent with the distinctive tensions within the text of the Gospel.

Internally, the Gospel itself provides strong evidence for Antioch as the location of the Matthean community. The first factor is that unlike Mark, Luke and John, Matthew emphasises the significant role of Peter in his Gospel. There are three distinctive texts, emphasising the important role of Peter: (i) Σίμων ‘Simon’ from Mark 1:16 to Σίμων τὸν λέγομεν Πέτρον ‘Simon called Peter’ (4:18-22; cf. Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:2-11; John 1:35-42); (ii) the specific description of Peter’s role in the narrative of Jesus walking on the water (14:28-31; cf. Mark 6:45-52; and John 6:15-21); and (iii) Jesus’ vindication of Peter, “On this rock, I will build my Church” in the narrative of Peter’s confession (16:18-19). Traditionally, Peter was

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84 This argument will be developed later.

regarded as the founder and first bishop of the Antiochene church for seven years, so Matthew’s emphasis on Peter’s important role from the beginning and throughout the Gospel is consistent with the location of his community in Antioch where Peter was once in an active role.

A second internal factor in support of an Antiochene location is the geographical location following the narrative of Jesus calling the disciples. The narrative tells us that after Jesus continued teaching, preaching and healing in Galilee, the Good News about him first spread “all over Syria” (4:24). Here instead of Jesus’ fame spreading only throughout Galilee as in Mark, Matthew’s geographical description extends far beyond Galilee. This could well indicate Matthew’s emphasis on the geographical location of his community by the deliberate change of “throughout the surrounding region of Galilee” of Mark 1:28 to “all over Syria” (4:24). The emphasis on Peter’s role and the deliberate change of geographical location to “all over Syria” at the very beginning of his Gospel should not be seen as the accidental acts of the author. Rather, they are consistent with Matthew locating Syrian Antioch and its church founded by Peter within the narrative, in order to address his audience more directly.

A third internal factor is the instruction regarding prayer found in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus taught his disciples neither to pray like the hypocrites nor the pagans (6:5-8). The context reflected in these verses indicates that the Matthean

87 According to Hagner, “the extended meaning of the logion” as addressed to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19 coincides with what occurred in the early history of the church as Acts reports. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 474.
88 In similar manner argued by Carter, Matthew and Empire, 36.
91 So Hagner, Matthew 1-13, 80; Hill, Matthew, 50-52, 107; and Harrington, Matthew, 73.
community was not only surrounded by a Jewish religious atmosphere but also by the world of pagans. So the assumed context is consistent with the city of Antioch (rather than say, Sepphoris) where pagan practices of worship were also widely practiced.92

A fourth factor is the phrase ‘the least brothers’ in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which indicates the encouragement of the Evangelist to his community to be a welcoming community to the needy. This fits with Antioch, a place where Christian refugees from the south (mainly persecuted Christians from Jerusalem) migrated as Acts reports (cf. 25:31-46 and Acts 11:19-20).93

A fifth factor is the emphasis on Gentile inclusion (the women in the genealogy; 2:1; 8:5-13; 15:21-28; 22:1-14; 27:19-24), and the universal outlook of the Great Commission in the climactic conclusion (28:18-20). Again, this is consistent with a church in Antioch which had initiated a mission to the Gentiles through Paul and Barnabas as Acts reports (cf. Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3).94

Furthermore, as already noted, Matthew uses the word ‘city’ more than Mark.95 As Kingsbury argues, the presupposed knowledge of Jewish thought, history and traditions and the openness towards Gentiles in the contents of the Gospel indicate that the Matthean community seems to have consisted of Jewish and Gentile people around 80 or 90 CE, whose language was Greek and who lived in a substantial urban area, perhaps in Syrian Antioch.96

My working hypothesis is that though scholars propose a variety of opinions regarding the location of the Matthean community, Antioch on the Orontes is the place

94 See McDonald, “Antioch (Syria)”, 35.
95 So Kingsbury, Matthew as Story, 149-152; and Kilpatrick, Origins, 124-125. See page 68-69 above.
96 Kingsbury, Matthew as Story, 149-152.
that fits most plausibly both the literary character of the Gospel and the internal and external evidence relating to the earliest Matthean community/ies.

Assuming the Matthean community as located in an urban area with a mixed membership, the consequent questions are: What socio-political circumstances prevailed in the Matthean community as the Gospel was written? What was the nature of the relationships within the Matthean community and with the wider community and ethnic groups? How did this community deal with contemporary Judaism(s) and Gentiles? What were the major theological issues in the community as the Gospel was composed? These issues will be investigated further in the next section.

B. The Wider Socio-political Context of the Matthean Community

Unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew draws attention to Herod plotting to kill Jesus in the infancy narratives (2:7-23). In the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew conveys the instruction to love and pray for persecutors (5:10-12, 43-45). In the mission discourse of Matthew 10:17-22, which is based on Mark 13:9-13, Matthew anticipates the coming of persecution upon the missionaries. In Matthew 10:18, especially, Matthew describes these missionaries being dragged before governors and kings to bear testimony to Jesus before them and the Gentiles. This verse indicates that the persecution of the missionaries is not only from the official level of the Gentile authorities, but also from the whole Gentile world. Though the persecution theme of Matthew 10:17-22 arguably might refer to a past or present situation for the community, I agree with Sim that it indicates that the Matthean community, in its mission, has
“encountered opposition and persecution in both Jewish and Gentile circles, and that the Evangelist saw fit to highlight this”.

In the parable of the sower and its interpretation, Matthew reflects the disturbance of the tribulation and persecution in the kingdom (13:5, 21). In the eschatological discourse, Matthew reflects the prediction of the coming persecution of the believers (24:3-14). Some texts reflect the experience of suffering and hardship of the disciples in prison (25:36, 39, 43). It is not surprising that the Gospel of Matthew concludes with a heightened sense of the persecution and killing of Jesus before the resurrection narrative (Matt 27). Thus these distinctive themes of the Gospel of Matthew indicate that the pressure of socio-political crises impacted the community of the Evangelist when he composed the Gospel.

A further indication of the reality of socio-political oppression and persecution for Matthew’s context is the use of the verb διώκω. In Matthew, διώκω occurs six times, while in Luke it occurs three times and in Mark it does not occur at all. It may be argued that many, if not all, of these uses of διώκω originate in pre-Matthean traditions (Q or M). Yet the higher incidence of them (relative to Mark and Luke) still indicates a particular interest in the topic of persecution amongst those who produce and hear Matthew’s Gospel. The beatitude about being persecuted for the sake of Jesus in Matthew 5:10-12 and the commandment to pray for persecutors in 5:44 appear to belong to the oldest traditional material from Q (cf. Luke 6:27). The use of διώκω in Matthew 23:34, which compares the persecution of the disciples with the prophets is also derived from Q (cf. Luke 11:49). The occurrence of διώκω in the logion in 10:23

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98 In Mark the noun ‘persecution’ occurs two times, but not the verb διώκω. Otto Knoch, “διώκω”, EDNT 1:338.
however, is a development of the traditional Q material (cf. Luke 21:12). A clearer description of the political oppression and persecution in the time of the Evangelist is found in Matthew 24:4-14.

Textually, Matthew 24:4-14 closely resembles the Markan apocalyptic discourse (cf. Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:10-17). It also includes, however, the redaction of the Evangelist. Interestingly, in Matthew 24:9, the context of Mark 13:9 is extended to τὸ τέλειον μαθητεύσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς θλίψιν καὶ ἀποκτενούσιν ὑμᾶς, καὶ ἔσεσθε μισοῦμενοι ὑπὸ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου. The apocalyptic persecution logia (Mark 13:9-13 and Luke 21:10-17) seem to be referring to persecution by the Jewish councils. But it appears that Matthew 24:9 refers neither to persecution by the Jews nor the general persecution to come. The additional phrase πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν shows that Matthew is heightening the reality of persecution by Gentiles. As many scholars note, the persecution that occurs in 24:9-13 is referring to the contemporary situation of the Matthean community a few years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

Therefore the context of the Gospel of Matthew reflects that the Matthean community was under the persecution of the Gentiles when the Gospel was composed. So the question is, what socio-political crises and religious pressures were impacting on the Evangelist and his community when he composed the Gospel? How did Matthew confront the impact of these socio-political crises on his community? And how can this ethical response be reshaped to apply to those Christian communities today that face similar socio-political circumstances? In order to understand the socio-political crises that happened in the Matthean community, I will discuss the scholarly

101 Vicky Balabanski, Eschatology in the Making: Mark Matthew and the Didache (SNTSMS 97; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 153-154; See also Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:127.
arguments surrounding the persecution theme found in the Gospel of Matthew. Then I will investigate the socio-political pressures and ethnic composition of Antioch on the Orontes in the time when the Gospel was written.

**i) Scholarly Approaches to the Persecution Theme Found in Matthew**

In order to understand the socio-political context of the Gospel, it is helpful to investigate the persecution theme found in the Gospel of Matthew. Scholars today suggest four different perspectives on the persecution theme found in the Gospel of Matthew, and particularly in Matthew 5:11-12, chapter 10 and 24. The first perspective, argued by Douglas Hare, is that the references to the persecution theme found in Matthew are about *expected* persecution “by unbelieving Jews rather than actual experiences of persecution”.\(^{102}\) For him, the persecution theme in Matthew is a historical and prophetic inevitability, for it is related to Israel’s sin. Israel always persecutes her prophets and the righteous are always persecuted by the wicked.\(^{103}\)

The second perspective, argued by Robert H. Gundry, is that the persecution found in Matthew 5:10-12 “does not have its source in the Roman government”, but “in the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem”.\(^{104}\) According to him, Matthew has deliberately introduced the plot of Herod to kill Jesus into the infancy narrative of Jesus (2:13), a plot which includes the chief priests and the teachers of the Law (2:3-4). Gundry argues that Matthew constantly heightens the guilt of these Jewish leaders, and in the crucifixion narrative Matthew describes Pontius Pilate and his wife in a more positive light in order to win over the Gentiles (27:62-66; 28:11-15; cf. 27:15-16).\(^{105}\) Matthew’s emphasis

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\(^{103}\) Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution*, 144-145.


through this plot development, therefore, “foreshadows not only the passion of Jesus but also the persecution of the church in Matthew’s own day”.  

The third perspective, argued by Justin Taylor, is based on the persecution theme found in Matthew 24:9-13. According to Taylor, Matthew 24:9-13 is not to be seen as parallel to Mark 13:9-13. The real parallel to Mark 13:9-13 is Matthew 10:17-22. Taylor argues that Matthew 24:9-13 cannot simply be seen as a doublet of Matthew 10:17-22 that contains a general warning about the coming persecutions. Rather it is best interpreted as having been written in the light of the Neronian persecution that occurred in Rome in 64 CE, and in view of the great scandal caused on that occasion by Christians who gave into fear and betrayed one another to the Roman authorities. Taylor suggests that the Neronian persecution seems to be the first serious test of Christian faithfulness outside Judea where Christians experienced extreme social pressure and tribulation. It would soon have been known in other Christian communities around the Empire. Thus the references in Matthew 24:9-13 can be understood as genuine predictions of persecution in the future, especially the problem of betrayal even by one’s own family (10:24; Mark 13:12) which reassures those suffering and “points them towards the events at Rome in order, no doubt, to minimise and contain the damage: even they had been foretold”.

The fourth perspective, argued by David C. Sim, is that Matthew imposes his own time frame onto his eschatological timetable. According to Sim, the events in Matthew 24:4-10 are referring to what had already taken place, those in verses 11-12 to what was currently taking place, and those in verses 13-14 to what was still expected.

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108 Taylor, “‘The Love of Many Will Grow Cold’”, 352-357, esp. page 357.
109 Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 232; *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 160-168. A similar argument is put by Vicky Balabanski. Balabanski sees that Matthew 24:6-8 is referring to the past of Matthean community,
Sim argues that though the Neronian persecution may be in the background in the mind of the Evangelist, the date and Roman context discount that event from being the main referent of this text. Sim argues that the mention of war in 24:7 refers rather to the Jewish revolt. Furthermore, the reference to Gentile persecution in 24:9 makes better sense when related to the persecution of his community in Antioch that took place in 66 CE “both during and after the Jewish rebellion against Rome”, according to Sim.110 Sim argues that the Jewish rebellion was followed by the persecution of Jews by Gentiles in many towns of the province of Syria. As the Matthean community existed alongside the Jewish section(s) in the city, on top of the problems of leadership and relations to the parent body, it was also persecuted by the Gentiles. Matthew and his community appear to realise that the crucifixion of Jesus by the Roman authorities and the persecution of Christians by Nero make them vulnerable to Roman targeting. Moreover, their alienation from the larger Jewish community makes them “more identifiable as followers of Christ and more vulnerable in the event of a renewed official persecution”.111 Some Jewish Christians were persecuted by the Gentiles; some were killed. These challenges made the Matthean community live “with the constant fear that more violence could be triggered at any time”.112

In reflecting on these four different perspectives, Sim’s argument appears to be more consistent with the Matthean text and setting than those of the other three. Hare’s argument is inadequate for he generalises the persecution theme in New Testament without entering adequately into the specific context of Matthew.

Although Gundry is right in arguing that Matthew heightens the guilt of the Jewish leaders, he over-emphasises this aspect as the only source of persecution. The

verses 9-12 to the present situation and verses 13-14 to the future. Balabanski, Eschatology in the Making, 153-156.
111 Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 236.
112 Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 236.
Sanhedrin or high council had broad authority on religious, political and judicial matters in Palestine until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.\textsuperscript{113} I would argue, however, that not only the Jews but also the Gentiles are the source of persecution of Matthew’s community. The descriptions of the concern of Herod to hear of the newborn king (2:2-3), the slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem and surrounding areas (2:16-18), the killing of John the Baptist (14:1-12), the question of Pilate about Jesus as the king of the Jews (27:11) and the handing over of Jesus to be crucified (though Matthew heightens the guilt of the Jewish leaders and paints Pilate and his wife as free from guilt [27:19-26]) all indicate that the root of the persecution that Matthew heightens is not merely the persecution by the Jews but by the Romans too.\textsuperscript{114}

Taylor’s argument that Matthew writes in the light of the Neronian persecution is difficult to relate to a plausible Matthean context. There is no evidence to support the hypothesis that Jewish Christians were persecuted by Nero — even in Rome.\textsuperscript{115} The focus of the persecution seems to have been — for the first time — on those identified as ‘Christians’ rather than ‘Jewish’, i.e., on Gentile converts to Christianity. The occurrence of the Neronian persecution in 64 CE does not connect with a plausible chronology for the Evangelist’s eschatological expectations, especially given the likelihood that the Gospel of Matthew was written around 85 CE.\textsuperscript{116} The historical context also shows that Nero’s persecution did not directly affect the Jewish community in Syrian Antioch. The reference (24:9-13) which Taylor focuses on for the

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\textsuperscript{115} Hare, \textit{The Theme of Jewish Persecution}, 79.

\textsuperscript{116} Sim, \textit{The Gospel of Matthew}, 233.
\end{small}
prediction of the coming persecution to the Matthean community is also couched in very general terms.\textsuperscript{117}

The most likely date of the Gospel of Matthew is usually given as around 85 CE, during the beginning of Domitian’s reign.\textsuperscript{118} Earlier scholarship (for example Bernard W. Henderson) commonly held that after Nero’s persecution, the Christians suffered further persecution under the reign of Domitian.\textsuperscript{119} Downey notes that though Christians suffered sporadic persecution during the reign of Domitian, nothing is known about the effect of the persecution at Antioch.\textsuperscript{120} However, the accounts of the descendents of the royal house of David in Judea being searched out under the Flavians and the arrest of some Christians of the family of Jesus initiated by Vespasian would have affected the Christian community of Antioch.\textsuperscript{121} Moreover, as Downey notes, though nothing is known about the effect of persecution at Antioch, the effects of Vespasian and Domitian’s persecution would have been felt by the Christians of Antioch. The prediction of persecution reflected in Matthew indicates that Matthew is warning his community to prepare for the ongoing reality of persecution, perhaps from Vespasian (in the recent past) and from Domitian (5:11-12; 10: 21-23; 24:9-10).

Moreover, hostility to the Jews in Antioch had occurred after the four years of the Jewish war when an apostate Antiochus spread the story that the Jews were plotting to burn the city, which was followed by the actual breaking out of a fire.\textsuperscript{122} Even after the careful investigation of the deputy governor Gnaeus Collega, the Jews were still in

\textsuperscript{117} Taylor, “‘The Love of Many Will Grow Cold’”, 352-357.
\textsuperscript{118} Carter, Matthew and Empire, 12.
\textsuperscript{120} Downey, A History of Antioch, 207-210.
\textsuperscript{122} Meeks and Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch, 4-5; Downey, A History of Antioch, 204. See further details below.
grave danger until the arrival of Titus Caesar. Therefore, as Sim has rightly pointed out, the Matthean community as part of the wider Jewish community would also have suffered the threat of Gentile persecution of the Jews after the Jewish revolt, and the intensified policy of Domitian could affect them too. In order to understand further the socio-political context that is reflected in the Gospel, a closer investigation of the social milieu of the city of Antioch at the most likely time of the Gospel’s composition will be undertaken.

ii) The Socio-political Context of Antioch on the Orontes

If we argue for the Matthean community being located in the city of Antioch on the Orontes, it is necessary to explore further the geographical context of Antioch and its socio-political circumstances in the time when the Gospel was composed. What were the social structure and ethnic composition of Antioch in the days of the Gospel being formed? How were the socio-political and socio-economic systems regulated in Antioch? How did these socio-political, socio-economic and ethnic dimensions impact the Matthean community when the Gospel was composed?

The city of Antioch was founded by Seleucus Nicator around 300 BCE on the Orontes River, as it flows through the southwest corner of the Amuk plain. It was the capital city of the Seleucid Empire. In 64 BCE, the city of Antioch was seized by the Roman Empire. In the Roman period, Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria. It was also the capital of the Roman province of Syria. Its growth is described by Carter:

123 Meeks and Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch, 5. See further details below.
125 Though Stark claims Antioch was the fourth largest city of the Roman Empire, I agree with the majority of scholars who see it as the third largest city at the time. See Rodney Stark, The Rise of
Subsequent expansion onto the island in the river to the north, toward Mt. Silpius to the east, and the suburb of Daphne to the south, had increased its size. It was laid out in a typical grid pattern with the main axis, the famous colonnaded main street, running northeast to southwest.126

The total estimated population of Antioch at the time of the Evangelist was about 150,000 to 200,000, excluding the slaves.127 As Antioch was under the Roman Empire, like other urban areas it “extended Rome’s political, economic, and cultural power throughout the Empire”.128 Thus its socio-political and socio-economic system was totally controlled by the empire’s practices and the Romans made use of the local elite in order to exercise control.129 The social structure of Antioch consisted of two groups: the small number of the elite, about 5 to 10 percent of the population, who politically and economically controlled the power of the city for their own advantage, and the majority non-elite, that comprised “a spectrum of the very poor to the somewhat wealthy, who served the needs of the elite”.130

As Antioch was the capital city of the important Eastern Roman province of Syria, it was a place where the provincial government was based, headed by the governor or legate appointed by the emperor.131 Carter observes that this governor represented the emperor and was responsible for “the four tasks of provincial

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126 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 17.
128 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 37.
129 See Philip F. Esler, “Rome in Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature”, in The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context (eds. John Riches and David C. Sim; JSNTS 276; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 12. Carter also observes that control over the surrounding area of Antioch was crucial “since control meant income from taxes, tributes, and rents, and goods for the city’s inhabitants”. See Carter, Matthew and Empire, 37; Matthew and the Margins, 17-18.
130 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 38; Matthew and the Margins, 17.
governors: raising taxes, social order and defence, judicial matters, and supervision of the local government”. Under the governor, there were the governing elite, who were allies of Rome, consisting of a number of groups who controlled the political, military, commercial, and administrative life of the city. The political power of the elite was exercised, as Carter helpfully describes, through “the boulē, or council, which comprised perhaps up to five hundred members, and was responsible for legislative and executive matters (in consultation with the legate), including appointments to various civic positions”.

The power of the elite was assisted by two groups: “priests and priestesses, who were appointed or elected to city temples”, and “retainers” who “carried out the elite’s wishes as bailiffs, tax collectors, government bureaucrats or administrators/clerks, educators, judges, and soldiers”. They derived their power from “their association with the elite, and so they were subject to their favour”. Under the elite was “the nonelite”. They were “most of city’s population” including “small merchants, artisans (who could not produce enough to gain significant wealth) and labourers”, who “supplied skills, labour and goods, which sustained the elite’s way of life”.

At the lowest level were the socially marginalised and outcasts who were regarded as the unclean and the expendables. These people comprised the completely destitute, day labourers, some slaves, those who depended on begging, women without family support, the sick and physically impaired, prostitutes, bandits and criminals.

Outside the city, there were “the peasants, heavily taxed and always scraping for even

132 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 38.
133 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 18-19.
134 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 19. See also Maas, “People and Identity in Roman Antioch”, 16.
135 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 19.
136 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 19.
a subsistence existence. Some were freeholders with varying sizes of landholdings; others were tenant farmers, day labourers (see Matt 20:1-16) and slaves”.138

The social life of the city was marked by hostility between the elite and the non-elite. The elite “generally despised the nonelite” and regarded them as “ungrateful and physically threatening”.139 On the other hand, the nonelite were “resentful, jealous, contemptuous and at times violent toward the rich”.140

Socio-economically, as Antioch was under the Roman Empire, it was controlled by the Roman imperialist system of an ‘aristocratic empire’.141 This meant that a small group of “2 percent of the population ruled vast areas of territory through a small bureaucracy in alliance with provincial elites”.142 That small group exercised their basic power through the military might of the Roman Army and its allies.143 Politically and economically, they controlled over 90 percent of the population, “the primary resource of the land and its production”, and “acquired vast wealth for themselves through taxes, rents and tribute”.144 The rest of the population were peasants or artisans who paid about 30 to 70 percent of their production in taxes.145 Carter notes that “forced labour or corvée, along with slaves, provide the elite with a ready supply of cheap labour for major building projects or schemes to improve the productivity and profitability of land”.146

So it is clear that since the city of Antioch comprised these competing social classes, exploitation existed in their midst under the Roman imperial system. The elite, both local and Roman, created their income from taxes which enabled them to

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139 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 20.
140 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 20.
141 Maas, “People and Identity in Roman Antioch”, 16.
142 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 9.
143 So Maas, “People and Identity in Roman Antioch”, 16; Carter, Matthew and Empire, 9.
144 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 9.
145 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 18-19.
146 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 18-19.
maintain their way of life.\textsuperscript{147} They understood that the taxation system was necessary to pay the cost of maintaining and administering the empire. So payment of taxes was seen as an expression of tacit support and submission to Rome. Not paying the taxes and tributes would be an act of rebellion against Roman sovereignty, and discontent with tribute was a factor in several revolts.\textsuperscript{148} As Carter observes, “taxes and tribute reinforced the divide between the elite and the rest, and as instruments of the exploitation of the rest for the benefit of the elite, contributed significantly to the majority’s endless poverty”.\textsuperscript{149} Nero was apparently aware of widespread complaints about the indirect taxes and considered (according to Tacitus)

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whether he ought not to decree the abolition of all indirect taxation and present the reform as the noblest of gifts to the human race. His impulse, however, after much preliminary praise of his magnanimity, was checked by his older advisers, who pointed out that the dissolution of the empire was certain if the revenues on which the state subsisted were to be curtailed.\textsuperscript{150}
\end{quote}

Moreover, after 70 CE, the Jews in Antioch were humiliated by a new tax levied by Vespasian.\textsuperscript{151} This tax reminded the Jews that they had been conquered by Rome at the will of Jupiter, and that the Jewish God was unable to defend his people. For decades, many Roman coins bore the inscription ‘Judaea Capta’, to make this victory plain to all. The further insult of that tax was that it was used to rebuild and renovate the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome while Yahweh’s Temple in Jerusalem lay in ruins.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{147} Carter, \textit{Matthew and Empire}, 134.
\textsuperscript{148} Matthew refers to not paying the tax as a sign of offending Roman sovereignty (17:27). There is no parallel to this in Mark or Luke. In Matthew 22:15-22, when the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking the question about the Law and taxes, Jesus answers them, “Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God” (cf. Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26). The narrative indicates how paying tax was very significant under Roman imperialism. See also Carter, \textit{Matthew and Empire}, 15, 44; and Gale, \textit{Redefining Ancient Borders}, 78-79.
\textsuperscript{150} Tacitus, \textit{Ann}. 13.50, quoted in Carter, \textit{Matthew and Empire}, 14.
\textsuperscript{151} Zetterholm, \textit{The Formation of Christianity}, 185.
\textsuperscript{152} Carter, \textit{Matthew and Empire}, 44. Zetterholm observes that all Jews, including slaves from three to sixty or sixty-two years old were legally required to pay 2 denarii annually for rebuilding the temple of
Thus everyday the inhabitants of Antioch experienced the impact of an imperial system “sustained through taxes, tribute rents, and tolls on their productivity and at their expense”. So we can imagine that the hostility to the injustice of Roman imperialism would provoke the inhabitants to protest against the authorities. Josephus records a description of a fire occurring around 70 CE in Antioch, where considerable damage was done to the market place, the law courts, the magistrates’ quarters, and the record-office. It was started by some men “who, under the pressure of debts, imagined that if they burnt the market-place and the public records they would be rid of all demands” (JW 7:55, 61). This incident indicates that these men were not only hostile to the social system of the city but also retaliating against the injustice and exploitation of the elite. The majority of the inhabitants were under the heavy burden of the system of Roman imperialism and in such circumstances, they were longing for freedom, justice and relief from their suffering.

As Antioch was the capital of Syrian province, it was a significant place for the Roman military and an administrative centre. It was a “stronghold for defending the border with Persia”. Thus Antioch played a critical role in defending the eastern borders of the Roman Empire, especially against the dreaded Parthians, and was important for maintaining peace and security within the Province, for example, during the Jewish War in Galilee and Judea (66-70 CE). In the time of Trajan in 114 CE, Antioch became the headquarters for his preparation for the war against the Parthians.

“Jupiter Capitolinus which had been burnt down in 69 CE”. Zetterholm, The Formation of Christianity, 185.
153 Carter, Matthew and Empire, 46.
156 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 37.
Moreover, the governors and the troops of Antioch also played an active role in the south, and especially in the Judean crises throughout the first century. In 40 CE, when the Jews protested against the installation of Gaius Caligula’s image in the temple, the governor Petronius took two or three legions and auxiliaries (JW 2:186) from Antioch to Ptolemais to control the situation. During the reign of the Judean procurator Cumanus, the Syrian governor Quadratus intervened in disputes between Galileans and Samaritans (JW 2:232-44). In 66 CE, when an initial revolt occurred in Caesarea, the governor Cestius left Antioch with a legion, plus six thousand soldiers from the other three legions, along with cavalry, infantry and auxiliaries in order to subdue the rebellion in Galilee (JW 2:499-555). He marched to Jerusalem but was forced to retreat hurriedly to Antioch by the resistance of the Jerusalem crowds.\(^{157}\) Josephus claims six thousand were killed during the retreat, the equivalent of a Roman legion (JW 2:555). In 67 CE, Vespasian, who was appointed to command Rome’s response by the emperor Nero, based his troops in Antioch prior to marching south to conquer Galilee and Jerusalem (JW 3:8, 29). Josephus records that “abundant supplies of corn and other necessaries from Syria”\(^{158}\) sustained Titus’ army in its siege of Jerusalem in the latter stages of the war of 66-67 CE (JW 5:520).\(^{159}\)

Another event described by Malalas indicates the extent of Jewish humiliation in Antioch after the Jewish War:

> Out of the spoils from Judaea Vespasian built in Antioch the Great, outside the city gate, what are known as the Cherubim, for he fixed there the bronze Cherubim which Titus his son had found fixed to the temple of Solomon. When he destroyed the temple, he removed them from there and brought them to Antioch with the Seraphim, celebrating a triumph for the victory over the Jews that had taken place during his reign. He set on an upper level a bronze statue in honour of Selene (the moon) with four bulls, facing Jerusalem, for he had captured the city at night by moonlight. He also built the theatre of


\(^{159}\) The Judea war was finished by Titus who took Jerusalem in July 70 CE and destroyed the temple (though Masada held out until 73 CE). See Coote, *Power*, 109; Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 40.
Daphne, inscribing on it, ‘Ex praeda Iudaea’ (from the spoils of Judea). The site of the theatre had formerly been a Jewish synagogue but he destroyed their synagogue to insult them [προς ἔβρειν αὐτῶν], and made it a theatre, setting up there a marble statue of himself, which stands to the present day (Malal. Chron. 260-61). This would be a sign of the victory of Roman power over the Jews and remind them that they were defeated people. Thus they would live with constant fear and humiliation under the rule of Roman imperialism. It would be no surprise that a leader capable of setting up his statue in Antioch on the site of a desecrated synagogue would also profane the most holy of all places — especially since the victorious Roman soldiers had already “sacrificed to their standards within its gates”. In sum, as Antioch was a significant place for Roman Empire, both economically and politically, it was totally controlled by the elite. The provincial government was based in Antioch, and the governors and their troops played a crucial role there. For the Roman military at Antioch, “force [was] the foundation of political sovereignty”. As Benjamin Isaac comments, The fact that [Antioch] became a centre of administration and, at times, a military command centre was the cause of great misery for its inhabitants. Occasional munificence was not enough to compensate for the rapaciousness of the soldiers and the greed of officials. So under Roman imperialism, the inhabitants of Antioch experienced the pressure and misuse of the insulting power of the Roman governors and their military, and the injustice and the exploitation of the elite through heavy taxes and tributes. The majority of inhabitants, and especially the Jewish community (and so no doubt the

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163 Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 276. Though Isaac’s investigation of the governors and the Roman army of Antioch was after the first century, it can be argued that the same circumstances also occurred in the time of the Evangelist Matthew.
Matthean community) were under a heavy burden of suffering and lived with constant fear. Even in these circumstances, the inhabitants were also facing ethnic conflicts amongst themselves. So a closer investigation of the ethnic dimensions of Antioch follows.

iii) The Ethnic Composition of Antioch on the Orontes

The city of Antioch was a multi-ethnic metropolis. When the city was founded by Seleucus I, it was designed as a segregated community, one area for Syrians and the other for Greeks. The king even had the two areas walled off from each other because of his pessimistic view of ethnic relations. The original inhabitants of the city comprised retired soldiers from the Macedonian army of Seleucus including Cretans, Argives, Cypriots, and Herakleidae from Mount Silipius, Athenians from Atigonia, Jews from Palestine, native Syrians and a number of slaves of diverse origins. There were also substantial numbers of Romans after the city was conquered by them in 64 BCE. In the time of Roman rule, there were also other ethnic groups such as Germans, Gauls and other ‘barbarians’, variously brought as slaves or as legionnaires. Scholars therefore estimate that there were about eighteen divided ‘tribes’ with their eighteen identifiable ethnic quarters in Antioch.\(^{164}\)

As a typical Greco-Roman city with a mixed population, therefore, Stark argues that Antioch was severely troubled by persistent internal ethnic divisions, often based on the eighteen distinct ethnic precincts. This ethnic diversity and the frequent arrival of newcomers led to a serious lack of social integration, resulting in many harmful

consequences, “including high rates of deviance and disorder”. The final result is rather bleak, as Stark observes:

Any accurate picture of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. Antioch was a city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. The city was filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers. This city was so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence. Crime flourished and the streets were dangerous at night. And perhaps above all, Antioch was repeatedly smashed by cataclysmic catastrophes. A resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, proving that he or she was among the survivors.

So as Stark rightly states, people who lived in such circumstances must have often despained and thought that the end of their days drew near and they must have longed for relief, hope and salvation. Such circumstances of suffering in the city of Antioch have happened also in the country of Myanmar where most Christians have thought that the end of time is drawing near and they are longing for relief, hope and salvation.

Furthermore, among the inhabitants of Antioch the Jews were those who had experienced not only conflict with the Roman authorities but also the ethnic hostility of the rest of the inhabitants. When the city was founded, Antioch was an important Jewish centre, and the Jews were bestowed full rights from its foundation. These rights seem to have comprised not merely the right of attaining formal citizenship in the polis of Antioch but also the right to assemble and to observe their laws. During the Roman period, the population of Jews was growing and was augmented by many proselytes. The situation of the Jews had deteriorated, however, in 40 CE and 66-70 CE. In 40 CE the Jewish community of Antioch experienced conflict with the Roman authorities in Antioch because they protested against the expedition of the Roman

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168 For a more criticism on the rights of Jewish community in Antioch, see Zetterholm, The Formation of Christianity, 31-37. See also Flusser, “Antiochi”, 71.
governor Petronius to place a statue of Gaius Caligula in the Jerusalem Temple on imperial orders. The Jews were attacked, some of them killed and many of their synagogues were burnt down.¹⁶⁹

During the reign of Nero (54-68 CE), the anti-Jewish activity occurred partly because of the long-standing Gentile resentment at privileges accorded to the Jews, such as exemption from military service and from worship of the emperor, and partly because of widespread Jewish disaffection that led to a revolt. Internal dissension among the Jews led to violence in Palestine, with massacres of Jews in Caesarea and Jerusalem. In 66 CE, Nero appointed Vespasian to govern Judea, with large forces to enable him to establish and maintain order. Leading up to and during the war between Rome and Jerusalem in 66-70 CE, Josephus records that though there were various massacres of Jews in other parts of Syria (JW 2:457-79), the Jews in Antioch were initially not affected (JW 2:479).¹⁷⁰

The effects of civil unrest were felt strongly by the Antiochene Jews, however, after the arrival of Vespasian in Syria, when a Jewish apostate named Antiochus and son of the archōn of the Jews in Antioch, incited the rumour that the Jews were plotting to set fire to the city (JW 7:47). This was followed by the actual outbreak of a fire in 70 CE that endangered the whole city.¹⁷¹ At this time the Antiochene Jews were experiencing hostility from the rest of inhabitants. Josephus suggests that though the deputy governor Gnaeus Collega, saved the Jews from mob action by investigating the events and exonerating the Jews of any blame (JW 7:58-61), they were still in some danger until the arrival in Antioch of Titus Caesar. The inhabitants of Antioch greeted Titus with cries and urged him to expel the Jews from the city (JW 7:100-103). The

¹⁷⁰ Meeks and Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch, 4.
¹⁷¹ Meeks and Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch, 5-6; Wallace-Hadrill, Christian Antioch, 4-5.
petition was repeated when Titus came back to Antioch from Zeugma on the Euphrates, but Titus refused (JW 7:109). The inhabitants of Antioch also demanded that Titus destroy the tablets on which the Jewish privileges were inscribed. Though nothing is reported in Josephus’ account about the humiliating action taken against the Antiochene Jews, Titus again refused a petition to drive the Jews out of Antioch and withdraw the customary rights of the Jews (JW 7:110-111).\(^{172}\)

All the above evidence indicates that as the Matthean community apparently looked similar to the Jewish community in the eyes of the Roman authorities and the rest of the inhabitants of Antioch, it would be likely that the threat from the inhabitants and from the Roman authorities against the Jewish community would also affect them severely and that fear would reign. The evidence of Matthew’s distinctive reference “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (10:16), supports the view that the Matthean community was affected by these kinds of socio-political issues. Thus in the next section, a closer investigation of the Matthean community and its relationship to contemporary Judaism and to the Gentiles, and the resulting theological issues arising from the community, will be explored.

C. The Characteristics of the Matthean Community

Assuming the Matthean community existed in the city of Antioch, we should now explore how a picture of it might plausibly be reconstructed in Antioch. What was the nature of the Matthean community itself? What theological issues arose from the

\(^{172}\) Meeks and Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch, 5; Flusser, “Antioch”, 71; and Downey, A History of Antioch, 204-206.
community and how did they claim their identity in the midst of other religions and especially contemporary Judaism? A closer investigation of these questions follows.

**i) Recent Scholars’ Views on the Matthean Community**

As part of the process of reconstructing the Matthean community, I will briefly review and evaluate the argument of recent Matthean scholars who maintain that the Matthean community was a ‘sect’ within Judaism. The prominent Matthean scholars J. Andrew Overman, Anthony J. Saldarini and David C. Sim share the consensus that the Matthean community should not be understood in terms of Jewish Christianity, but Christian Judaism.\(^{173}\) They argue that the Matthean community is best seen as a Jewish sect which discovered itself to be in tension with the emerging dominant form of Judaism in the decades following the first Jewish war.\(^{174}\)

According to Overman, the members of Matthean community claimed to follow Jesus as messiah, but did not understand or name themselves as ‘Christians’.\(^{175}\) Overman argues that just as in formative Judaism, “the Matthean community was struggling to survive and make its way through what was doubtless an uncertain and unstable period in Palestine following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple” in 70 CE. The Matthean community developed its identity and leadership, and articulated them in terms of their view of the Jewish Law and the future of God’s chosen people in

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\(^{175}\) Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 4-5.
their setting.\textsuperscript{176} Initially, formative Judaism and Matthean Judaism grew and developed alongside each other, but by the time the Gospel was written, the two groups began to separate.\textsuperscript{177}

Saldarini also argues that the Matthean community was a fragile minority group that continued to identify itself within the Jewish community and was still naming and thinking of itself as Jewish.\textsuperscript{178} He maintains that the Matthean community was “a Christian-Jewish group that keeps the whole Law, interpreted through the Jesus tradition”.\textsuperscript{179} For him, in many cases, the interpretation or actualisation of the Law that Matthew modifies conflicts with other Jewish groups.\textsuperscript{180} He argues that the Matthean community was a ‘deviant group’ not because of disagreement with a ‘normative’ Judaism but because it was a minority against the majority view, for the Evangelist Matthew recommended a more fundamental reorientation of the tradition than many other Jewish movements.\textsuperscript{181}

Similarly, Sim argues that the Matthean community was a Jewish sect that opposed the emerging formative Judaism in the decades following the first Jewish war.\textsuperscript{182} In the post-war period, the emergent Judaism now described by scholars as ‘formative Judaism’ dominated by a coalition of the scribes and the Pharisees quickly consolidated their position in Antioch. In Sim’s view, “this coalition attempted to impose some uniformity within Judaism, and as a result its members came into conflict

\textsuperscript{176} Overman, \textit{Matthew’s Gospel}, 72.
\textsuperscript{177} Overman, \textit{Matthew’s Gospel}, 5.
with Jewish Christians (or Christian Jews)

including the members of the Matthean community. After a period of bitter dispute, the Matthean community began to split itself from the synagogue and existed as a rival minority group and independent institution apart from the Jewish parent body.

The Matthean community, according to Sim, called itself the *ekklesia* and legitimated itself by rooting its origin and distinctive character in Jesus the Messiah (16:18-19). It claimed “complete acceptance of the fundamental concepts of Judaism, especially the observation of the Mosaic law”.

The Matthean community had its own prayer (6:9-13), which was totally different from its opponents (6:5-6), and followed its own interpretation of the Torah according to Jesus who came to fulfil the Law (5:17). On the other hand its opponents, the scribes and Pharisees, who are criticised intensely throughout the Gospel, belonged to the synagogue (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; 23:4). These opponents took “the tradition of the elders as the definitive exegesis of the Law”.

Thus in agreement with Overman and Saldarini, Sim argues that the conflicts in the Gospel of Matthew are evidence of “an inner Jewish debate (Christian Judaism versus formative Judaism) and not a dispute between Judaism and Christianity”. Sim offers two significant points in support of seeing these polemical attacks as those of the Evangelist and his Jewish community on the scribes and Pharisees. The first point is that these opposing groups still appear to be very close to each other, and not only physically or geographically, but also at the level of faith and practice at the time the Gospel was written. This closeness reflects the nature of sects, which generally share

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the same broad framework as their parent body with which they are struggling. The second point is the clear desire of the Evangelist to put a good deal of distance between the two groups by denouncing the scribes and the Pharisees as the representatives and leaders of the opposition (cf. 23:4-39), and by asserting that his group does not belong to them.\(^\text{188}\)

Sim thus concludes that the Matthean community was “a (Christian) Jewish group firmly within the orbit of late first-century Judaism”.\(^\text{189}\) It came into some conflict with the growing leadership of emergent formative Judaism through its particular interpretations of the Law, shaped by the teaching and stories of Jesus. But the Matthean community also saw itself as law-observant in contrast to “the law-free wing of the Christian movement”.\(^\text{190}\) Going still further, Sim sees the Matthean community as an anti-Gentile community whose religion and self-understanding continued to be Judaism, not Christianity.\(^\text{191}\)

One of the helpful insights of these scholars is the clearer picture of the diversity of Judaism, which was marked by ‘factionalism’ and ‘sectarianism’ in the post Second Temple period.\(^\text{192}\) According to Overman and Sim, the sects that arose within Judaism at this period have three characteristic features: (i) they use dualistic language — ‘the righteous’ and ‘the lawless’ — and describe themselves as insiders who stand against outsiders; (ii) they are hostile to the Jewish leadership; and (iii) they focus on the centrality of the Law.\(^\text{193}\) The best known sect can be seen as illustrative of this period is the Qumran community.\(^\text{194}\) Overman, Saldarini and Sim argue that the Matthean community shared all the basic features of a sectarian nature with the

\(^{188}\) Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 121; and “Christianity”, 188.

\(^{189}\) Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 139.

\(^{190}\) Sim, “The Gospel of Matthew and the Gentiles”, 25-28. This section will be discussed later.


\(^{193}\) Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 111.
Qumran community and thus can be best described as a sect within the religion of Judaism.\(^{195}\) I will explore the arguments against this position shortly, but first I will outline the arguments of Graham N. Stanton who also sees the Matthean community as sectarian — but as recently separated from Judaism.

Stanton sees the Gospel of Matthew as “a sophisticated writing which legitimates the painful separation of sectarian Christian communities which have been in prolonged conflict with Judaism”.\(^ {196}\) Stanton relates the Gospel of Matthew to the Damascus Document and argues that they come from strikingly similar settings: they were both written for ‘sectarian’ communities which were in sharp conflict with parent bodies from which they had recently parted company painfully. Both writings functioned as ‘foundation documents’ for their respective communities; they used several strategies to ‘legitimize’ the separation.\(^ {197}\)

Stanton states that Matthew and his community consider themselves to be a ‘new people’ over against both Jews and Gentiles.\(^ {198}\) He claims that Matthew and his community are “extra muros, but they are still responding in various ways to local synagogues and they still hope that even if Israel has been rejected by God, individual Jews will be converted”.\(^ {199}\) Thus the Gospel of Matthew, according to Stanton, was written “in the wake of a recent painful parting from Judaism”.\(^ {200}\)

Stanton identifies the polemic of the Evangelist against Judaism in six key texts. The first text is the conclusion of the beatitudes found in Matthew 5:11-12, and the second text is Matthew 5:10 and 5:20, which Stanton regards as added by the Evangelist as part of his reinterpretation of his tradition. The third text is Matthew 8:11-12, where Matthew has extended the rejection theme of ‘the sons of the kingdom’

by contrasting it with a new context showing the faith of the Gentile centurion. The fourth text is Matthew 21:43, which Stanton sees as added by the Evangelist at the end of the parable of the wicked husbandmen as an indication that the Matthean community has separated from Judaism. The fifth text is the parable of the king’s marriage feast in Matthew 22, which immediately follows the parable of the wicked husbandmen, and the sixth text is the seven woes addressed to the scribes and the Pharisees which is found in chapter 23 containing the Evangelist’s most sustained anti-Jewish polemic. Stanton suggests that these intensifications of Matthew’s anti-Jewish polemic are most plausibly understood in the context of the trauma of separation from Judaism and with the continuing threat of hostility and persecution. This anti-Jewish polemic indicates that Matthew’s community was separated from Judaism, but still defined itself over against its Jewish parent community. According to Stanton therefore, it should be seen as “part of the self-definition of the Christian minority which is acutely aware of the rejection and hostility of its ‘mother’, Judaism”. The harsh words of the Evangelist directed against the scribes and the Pharisees also represent “in part anger and frustration at the continuing rejection of Christian claims and at the continued hostility of Jews towards the new community”.

Though Stanton notes that the openness of the community to the Gentiles in Matthew 28:18-20 is far from the outlook of a sectarian group, he is still persuaded that the Matthean community was a sect recently separated from Judaism. Stanton argues that since “sects need to recruit in order to survive”, and often change their nature and character quickly, especially when they are successful, “the rapid dissemination and wide acceptance of Matthew within early Christianity do not tell

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against its sectarian origins.” Stanton fails to note, however, the improbability that a beleaguered minority sectarian group that has been in conflict with the parent body should ever be considered successful. Moreover, the claim of the Matthean community in the Great Commission is not just to wide acceptance, but it is a universal claim: \( \pi\alpha\tau\alpha\; \tau\alpha\; \varepsilon\theta\nu\eta \) (28:18-20). In my view, Stanton’s arguments for the continuing sectarian nature of the Matthean community are inadequate to demonstrate his thesis.

Other recent scholars like Donald A. Hagner and Anthony O. Ewherido, agree with Stanton that the Gospel of Matthew is the product of a ‘new community’ — but not with its sectarian nature — and they certainly find it difficult to accept the view of the Matthean community as a sect within Judaism. They offer two significant arguments against such claims: the distinctive use of \( \varepsilon\kappa\kappa\lambda\nu\sigma\iota\alpha \) in the Gospel of Matthew (16:18; 18:17), and the focus on Jesus rather than the Law. Firstly, Stanton, Hagner and Ewherido are right in my view to point out that the new community of Matthew was more distant from its parent body as evidenced by Matthew’s distinctive use of “my church” (\( \varepsilon\kappa\kappa\lambda\nu\sigma\iota\alpha \), in 16:18 and 18:17). Hagner thus argues that it is “the sheer extent of the newness one encounters in Matthew that seems to prohibit the conclusion that Matthew’s community be considered as a sect within Judaism”. More specifically, Ewherido argues that the distinctive religious characteristics of Jesus’ \( \varepsilon\kappa\kappa\lambda\nu\sigma\iota\alpha \) such as prayer (6:5-14), Eucharist (26:26-30), and

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210 Hagner, “Matthew: Christian Judaism or Jewish Christianity?”, 278.
Baptism (28:19) in the Gospel of Matthew “maintain the otherness of Matthew’s community (outside Judaism)”.  

The second factor is the claim by Overman, Saldarini and Sim that the Mosaic Law plays a major part in the gospel of Matthew. Again Hagner and Ewherido argue that it is not the Law which is central in the Gospel of Matthew, but Jesus the Messiah. Here, I find Ewherido’s argument more convincing. He states, “The ‘validity of the Law’ and ‘the centrality of the Law’ are not synonymous. For Matthew, the centre has shifted, and the community lives by the command of Jesus (28:20a).” For Matthew, the centre is not the Law but the Christological fulfillment of it (cf. 12:8; 18:20; 20:28). Thus Ewherido argues, “This in itself was unacceptable to Judaism”.

I would argue further that if the Matthean community were a Jewish sect that opposed formative Judaism as Overman, Saldarini, and Sim argue, Matthew would be more specific in labelling particular groups of his opponents. The polemical attacks in the Gospel of Matthew, however, are between Jesus and the scribes and the Pharisees. There is no evidence of Matthew’s community being labelled as deviant by other Jews. Though the polemic of Matthew 23 indicates similar forms of negative labelling, as Riches rightly argues, direct evidence of Matthew’s response to the dominant Jewish groups is lacking.

We should note that in the main polemical attack of chapter 23, Matthew does not describe Jesus as attacking the Jewish leaders directly. Rather, Matthew describes

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216 Sanders rightly argues that the polemics in the Gospel suggest that “there was such an argument, but we gain no information about what the actual relations were between Matthean Christians and non-Christian Jews in Syria”. Sanders, “Jewish Christianity in Antioch”, 356.
Jesus as proclaiming the woes on the scribes and the Pharisees and opposing their practices (23:1, 3) to the crowds. Thus we can argue that the indirect polemics in chapter 23 are evidence not for an intra-Jewish debate (Christian Judaism versus formative Judaism) as Sim argues, but for a debate within the Matthean community itself (‘the crowds’) regarding interpretation of the Law. More clearly, I suggest that as the Matthean community was a mixed body made up of Jews and Gentiles, there would be some Jewish conservatives (Torah extremists) who were still preserving their traditional Pharisaic way of teaching and urging their fellows Jews to follow that way. The Gospel itself distinctively gives evidence that some of these Jewish conservatives became trouble for the rest of the community (18:15-17). This group might include some Jewish Christian leaders who came into the Matthean community and caused trouble for the community (cf. 7:15).

Furthermore, I would argue that if the Matthean community were a profoundly Law oriented Jewish community and a sect within Judaism, and if the conflict between it and its opponents were an intra-Jewish debate as Sim and Overman argue, Matthew’s Gospel would reflect in some way a vigorous discussion about the circumcision of Gentile converts. Sim particularly argues that this is not so because the number of Gentile converts in Matthew would be few and they would have been circumcised anyway. But this is not a tenable argument given the clear interest in

\[218\] According to Viviano, on the level of the historical Jesus, this Jesus material, which is part of Jesus’ conflict with the Jewish religious authorities “was kept alive in the early Palestine church by its ongoing polemic with the Jewish community”. Viviano argues further that on the level of the Evangelist Matthew, “it seems reasonable to see a critique of synagogue offices and titles which are emerging in and around the rabbinic academy of Jamnia/Yavneh at this time (vv. 8-10), as well as the (loose) construction of offices for a growing and expanding church (v. 34), and a warning against arrogance to this emerging Christian officialdom” (vv. 11, 12). Benedict T. Viviano, “Social World and Community Leadership: The Case of Matthew 23:1-12, 34”, *JSNT* 39 (1990): 9-10. Contra to Viviano, I would argue that the polemics in Matthew 23:1-36 are also found in Mark and Luke (cf. Mark 12:38-40; Luke 11:39-52; 20:45-47). Since Matthew did not mention any particular Jewish groups of his opponents, it seems more plausible that Matthew rearranges these polemics, which are part of Jesus’ conflict with the Jewish religious leaders, in order to warn particularly the Torah extremists in his own community to see that Jesus is opposing the old Pharisaic way of interpretation and practice (cf. 9:16-17; 13:52) for they are unfaithful to their heritage. See Craig S. Keener, “‘Brood of Vipers’ (Matthew 3.7; 12.34; 23.33)”, *JSNT* 28 (2005): 11.
Gentiles within the Gospel text and the evidence that the Matthean community was stepping up to a wider mission to all nations (28:19). Circumcision of Gentiles was not required just because circumcision was an important part of Jewish identity. Clearly there was conflict among the apostles regarding this issue, but it was resolved in favour of Gentiles before Matthew’s Gospel was written — and not only by Paul (cf. Acts 11:1-18; 15:1, 5). Therefore the Great Commission at the climax of the Gospel mentions only baptism and is silent about the need for circumcision (28:19). We should note that, as Acts reports, Peter had silenced the apostles and other believers who criticised him about not circumcising Gentile converts in Antioch as well as other places during the apostolic period (Acts 11:1-18; 15:7-11). As the Matthean community stood in Peter’s tradition, as I will discuss further (cf. 16:18-19), circumcision would no longer be required for Gentile converts in the Matthean community. This is because the Gospel does not raise circumcision as a separate issue, for the Matthean community was not concerned with the issue of Gentile

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219 Paul Foster, Community, Law and Mission in Matthew’s Gospel (WUNT II/177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 20.
221 Sim offers two answers in responding to this question. First, the Matthean community engaged a mission not to the Gentiles but solely to the Jews who would already have been circumcised. Second, the Evangelist therefore focuses on the entry requirement for Jews alone to be legitimate followers of Jesus. Sim refers to the admission requirements of the Qumran community and suggests that the same requirement would apply in the Matthean community, that “potential Gentile members would become Jews as a necessary first step”. Sim further states that circumcision was not an issue between the Matthean community and its opponents, and that the number of Gentile converts in the Matthean community was also comparatively small. Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 253-254. Contra to Sim, I would argue that as the narrative of the Gospel suggests, and as I will discuss later on, the Matthean community engaged in a mission not only to the Jews but also to Gentiles as well.
222 See also Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 254.
223 Arguing to the contrary, Mohrlang, like Sim, suggests that Gentiles in Matthew’s group were circumcised. Roger Mohrlang, Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 44-45. Sanders also suggests that the Matthean community continued practising circumcision but no longer observed the Sabbath or the Jewish dietary law. Sanders, “Jewish Christianity in Antioch”, 358. If this were the case, it is puzzling that there is no mention of it in the Gospel at all.
circumcision but rather to actively evangelise Gentiles (28:19).\textsuperscript{224} Thus the Great Commission as the climax of the Gospel distinctively mentions only baptism of all believers and teaching them what Jesus has commanded (28:19-20). Thus Sim’s arguments for the Matthean community as a sect within Judaism requiring the circumcision of Gentile converts are not the only way to explain the absence of circumcision as an issue within the Gospel. The Petrine solution to the problem is entirely consistent with a predominantly Jewish Matthean community which welcomes Gentile believers on the basis of faith and righteousness and not circumcision.

Moreover, the main purpose of Matthew’s Gospel is not to claim the same identity for the Matthean community as its parent body, Judaism, but to present the universal implications of spreading the Good News of Jesus. The Great Commission at the end of the Gospel indicates that Matthew is highlighting the mission mandate to his community in order to remind them not only to make disciples, but also to teach them to observe not just the Law, but “everything that I have commanded you”, that is, every teaching that Jesus commanded in Matthew (28:19-20).\textsuperscript{225} So if the Matthean community were a sect within Judaism, how would Matthew’s disputes over the Law and life interpreted through the Jesus tradition assist his community to win over the majority groups of Judaism? How could the Great Commission of Jesus at the end of the Gospel enable such a minority group to claim their identity for all nations? Would a minority group or a sect within Judaism that experienced conflict with its parent faith have such a universal outlook as to proclaim the Good News to all nations?

Thus I conclude that the major thrust of the Gospel is not a polemic between the Matthean community and the Jewish community. Rather, the Gospel provides a universal outlook to proclaim the Good News to all nations (28:19-20). Matthew has

\textsuperscript{225} Hagner, “Matthew: Christian Judaism or Jewish Christianity?”, 268.
anticipated this universal outlook since the beginning of the Gospel (1:3, 5-6; 2:1-2; 8:5-13; 15:21-28) and advocated it once again in his redaction of Mark 13:10 in Matthew 24:14 (‘the whole world’). As Acts tells us, the Christians of Antioch were willing to spread the Good News to the Gentiles in the apostolic period. This universal outlook of the Christian churches in Antioch provides the best fit with the Matthean community and its mission mandate to make disciples of all nations (cf. 28:19-20 and Acts 11:20-21).

If the above argument is correct, the Matthean community was not a Christian form of Judaism, so much as a Jewish form of Christianity, as Hagner and Ewherido argue. It was a new autonomous Jewish Christian community that was facing internal conflict involving a small number of Jewish conservative Christians who still wanted to maintain their identity through observing the Law. This conflict was heightened by the instruction of outsiders (‘false prophets’) into the community. Matthew was a Jewish Christian with a more open mind who heightens the Sermon on the Mount in the beginning of the Gospel and creates the polemical attack between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in order to correct the theology of his fellow Jewish Christians to see Jesus as the one who comes to fulfil the Law (5:17). This brief outline of the Matthean community needs further testing and investigation.

### ii) The Consolidation of the Matthean Community at Antioch

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Acts reports that after persecution of some Jesus followers began in Jerusalem at the time of the execution of Stephen, some believers fled from Jerusalem as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19). In Antioch, the refugees of Hellenistic Greek-speaking Jews (from Cyprus and Cyrene) began to preach to Greek-speaking Gentiles. Their efforts were successful and this mission to the Gentiles soon became firmly established. When the elders in Jerusalem heard about the great success of the believers from Antioch, they sent “Barnabas — a native of Cyprus like some of the early missionaries in Antioch — to inspect the undertaking and report on its success and prospects”. Barnabas then went to Tarsus and asked Paul to come and help him in Antioch. Both of them stayed in Antioch for a year to teach the new converts. As the numbers of believers were growing, in the early 40’s, these believers first attracted the ‘nick-name’ ‘Christians’ in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

In the time when the Gospel of Matthew was written, there would have been at least four different ‘Christian’ groups in Antioch. Jerome Crowe observes that the first group consisted of representatives of Paul’s adversaries in Jerusalem and Galatia, “ultraconservative Jewish Christians and their converts who insisted on the full observance of the Mosaic Law, including circumcision”. The second group contained the Jewish Christians led by James and the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, who did not require circumcision for Gentile converts but insisted on the observance of some Jewish laws. The third group, led by Paul, was a mixed group of

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228 Downey, A History of Antioch, 273-274.
229 Barnabas was sent to Antioch because “a Cypriot would have felt quite at home in Antioch, and the people of the city would have recognised him as a member of a neighbouring community with which they were familiar”. See Downey, A History of Antioch, 274-275.
231 It is difficult to avoid the anachronistic use of ‘Christian’ at this stage. Of course, neither Jesus, Paul nor Matthew ever use the word as far as our New Testament texts know, so we should be careful in the way we apply the term to them or their communities. I argue that since Matthew uses ekklesia in connection with his community (16:18 and 18:15, 17), it is better to describe it in terms of emerging Christianity than of formative Judaism.
232 Crowe, From Jerusalem to Antioch, 103.
both Jewish and Gentile converts, who neither insisted on circumcision nor observed the Jewish laws. The fourth group was a more radical group, which perhaps contained representatives from the Hellenist missionaries who first evangelised Antioch. This group neither insisted on any elements of Jewish Law nor saw any significance in any of the Jewish cults and feasts.\footnote{Crowe, \textit{From Jerusalem to Antioch}, 103.} The Matthean community appears to have belonged to the second group as the Gospel of Matthew mainly emphasises observing the Law in the way of Jesus’ interpretation in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7; 28:19-20). Acts records that these Christian groups met in different houses for their prayer meetings and fellowship (cf. Acts 2:42, 46). This coincides with the internal evidence of Matthew “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). In the time of the Evangelist, as the total estimated population of Antioch was about 150,000 to 200,000, Arlo J. Nau observes that there would be about 1,500 to 2,000 Christians both within the Jewish circle and in the larger Gentile portions.\footnote{As Acts reports (Acts 11:26), the believers of Antioch were large in number and they were bearing the name Christians. So, by the time of the Evangelist, with the number growing for about forty years, the estimated number should be closer to what Nau has stated. See Nau, \textit{The Impact of Context}, 35-36; Carter, \textit{Matthew and the Margins}, 28-29.} The Jewish ‘Christians’ and Gentile ‘Christians’ most probably met separately (possibly for language reasons) while the conservative Jewish ‘Christians’ would naturally be still observing the Law to a greater extent.\footnote{It would be undeniable that there were different Christian groups since the time when Peter visited Antioch in the early period (Gal 2:12). Cf. Downey, \textit{A History of Antioch}, 277.}

In the time of the Evangelist, there would most likely be around thirty scattered ‘house Churches’ with perhaps fifty members at each gathering, many of whom were involved in the wider missionary enterprise.\footnote{Nau, \textit{The Impact of Context}, 36; Stanton, \textit{A Gospel for A New People}, 50-51; and “The Communities of Matthew”, 58.} As Acts reports (Acts 11:26), since the followers of Antioch were first called ‘Christians’ in the 40s, the Christian community were regarded as a well-defined group, distinguishable from the Jews who did not
believe in Jesus. Matthew gives a clear picture of his community as distinguishable from synagogues in his specific terminology ἡ ἐκκλησία ‘the Church’ (16:18; 18:17), ‘their scribes’ (7:29) and ‘their synagogues’ (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54). The saying of Jesus, “On this rock I will build my church”, indicates that the Matthean community was defending itself as totally different from the synagogue by claiming itself as rooted in Jesus himself (16:18; 18:18-19).

Moreover, the isolated saying of Jesus, “two or three gathering in my name” (18:20), indicates that the Matthean community gathered together in the name of Jesus, not on the basis of the Mosaic Law. The Matthean community therefore appears to be a ‘group of house churches’, primarily made up of Jewish ‘Christians’ but remaining in contact with, and open to the local Gentile ‘Christian’ groups. Though disagreeing about this relationship to Gentile ‘Christians’, Sim rightly points out that the Matthean community justifies and describes its existence as an assembly that rivals the synagogue, and defines itself as a community within whom Jesus remains “in the period between the resurrection and the parousia (18:20; 28:20)”.

Downey suggests that there were charismatic teachers who had gone from house to house teaching the congregations since the apostolic period. In the subsequent history of the ‘Christians’ of Antioch, this suggests that there were a variety of these gatherings and that these groups often adopted different approaches in their worship and teachings. In the time when the Gospel of Matthew was written, it seems that some of these problems still existed in the Matthean community. The

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237 Meier, “Antioch”, 49.
238 Sanders, “Jewish Christianity in Antioch”, 355.
240 Meier, The Vision of Matthew, 16.
242 See also Sim, Apocalyptic Eschatology, 187.
243 Downey, A History of Antioch, 278.
warning “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” in Mathew 7:15 indicates these circumstances.

As I have argued, since the beginning of the Gospel, Matthew anticipates the crucial role of Peter: ‘Simon’ to ‘Simon Peter’, that is the ‘rock’ (4:18). This indicates that Matthew and his community looked upon Peter and his teaching with special reverence. The vindication by Jesus of Peter — “On this rock, I will build my Church (16:18)” — indicates that the Matthean community defines itself as based on Jesus as taught by Peter. Whether or not these precise words were actually spoken by Jesus, since they appear only in the Gospel of Matthew, they still faithfully represent the traditions of Antioch concerning the origins of the church there and indicate that the Matthean community claimed for itself a supremacy over Jerusalem. \(^24^4\) They also indicate that Matthew wanted his community to maintain their identity through laying the foundation of their faith on the teaching of Jesus according to Peter (cf. 7:24-27).

As the Matthean community was mainly made up of Jewish Christians, it would no doubt include at least a small number of Jewish conservatives. Because his community also included the membership of Gentiles, as I will discuss further, Matthew’s redaction indicates that he wanted his conservative community members to be more open and inclusive. Since the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the beginning of the Gospel are more related to Jewish context, and since Jesus’ teachings are correcting the Pharisaic traditional way of interpretation (5:17-48), there is no doubt that Matthew was admonishing his community to interpret the Law through the Jesus tradition. Moreover, in the Great Commission at the climactic part of the Gospel, as the Matthean community was moving to a wider mission, the members of

the Matthean community were encouraged to make disciples of all nations and to teach them to observe not the Torah, but the commandments of Jesus (28:19).

Within the community, as the parables of the wheat and the tares, the parable of the dragnet in chapter 13, and the formation of the community in chapter 18 reflect, the members of the Matthean community comprised a mixed group. The advice to “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” in Matthew 18:17 indicates that there were some bad members who caused trouble for the Matthean community and it was even difficult to include them in the community. The warning that not all who called Jesus ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21), the collection of the tares and the tying of them into bundles to be burned, the gathering the wheat into the barn in the time of harvest (13:30) and the warning to watch out and be prepared in the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13) all reflect the admonishment of the Evangelist to his community to examine themselves and be prepared for the eschatological judgment.

As this community was in an urban area, the metropolitan city of Antioch, it had been associating with both Jewish and Gentile neighbours. The text (e.g., Matt 25) suggests that the boundaries of Matthew’s community should be more open. Though the Gentiles, the poor, the sick, the sinners and the tax collectors were socially and religiously regarded as marginalised and outcast in some Jewish communities and perhaps even in some members of the Matthean community (cf. 18:17), they were welcomed in Matthew’s community (8:5-13; 9:9-10; 10:3; 11:19; 15:21-28; 21:31-32; 22:1-14; 27:19-24; 28:19-20).

Non-Jewish examples are included systematically in the story of Matthew’s community from the Magi in chapter 2 to the Great Commission to proclaim to all

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245 This argument will be developed later.
nations (28:19). As Anthony Saldarini rightly points out, though the Matthean community is “very Jewish in tradition, thought, and practice, it has in principle (though perhaps not very much in fact yet) opened its boundaries to non-Jews”.

The best explanation for this variety of texts and traditions is that Matthew was wanting his community to be more inclusive of Gentiles. The beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (5:3-12) followed by the direct implication of the second person — “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world” (5:13, 14) — indicate that Matthew is reminding his community to transform their daily lives by expressing their mercy, meekness, pureness of heart and peacemaking in the midst of others.

Moreover, a main focus of the Matthean community is for it to be a welcoming community to the needy (25:31-46), and to spread the Good News of Jesus and make disciples of all nations (28:18-20). Thus as the Matthean community is moving to a wider mission approach, how did it relate to contemporary Judaism and to the Gentiles? These questions will now be explored further.

**iii) The Relationship of the Matthean Community to Contemporary Judaism**

In many respects, Matthew’s Gospel is very Jewish in its many plausible references to Jewish materials. Moreover, the Gospel heightens the polemics between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders more than Mark and Luke, the polemics

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of Jesus against the scribes and the Pharisees in chapter 23 being an obvious example of this tendency.

The ejection of the ‘sons of the kingdom’ from the Messianic Banquet (8:11-12; 21:43; 22:7, etc), the condemnation of Jesus before Pilate by Jewish religious leaders and the crowds who claim responsibility for Jesus’ death by shouting “His blood be on us and on our children” in the passion narrative (27:25) all indicate that Matthew and his community appear to be in conflict with some aspect of Judaism or its leadership when the Gospel was written.\(^{250}\) So the question of how Matthew and his community relate to the contemporary Jewish communities is a key question. What socio-political and religious crises were occurring in the communities behind the texts and how did Matthew reshape his traditions in order to address these situations?

As we have seen previously, the polemics in Matthew suggest to many scholars today that there had been a rift between the Matthean community and the rest of the Jewish community.\(^{251}\) Around this issue, however, there are a variety of opinions regarding the precise relationship of the Matthean community to the rest of Judaism. Some scholars argue that the Matthean community had already separated from the rest of Jewish community while others argue that though the Matthean community was in some way marginalised from the main body, they still had some connection with the main parents. So the specific question here is, was the Matthean community divorced from the dominant parties in contemporary Judaism, or was it still connected in some way with the main body?

\(^{250}\) Matthew carefully uses the Jewish religious leaders in his narrative to fit the context of his own Jewish circle. During Jesus’ ministry, the Jewish religious leaders who came into conflict with Jesus were initially the scribes and the Pharisees. In the passion and resurrection narrative, the Jewish religious leaders who accused and handed Jesus over to be killed were the Jewish council, which included the Chief Priests, the scribes and elders, as Mark and Luke also attest. Unlike Mark and Luke, only Matthew includes the Pharisees in urging Pilate to give orders to guard the tomb (27:62), so as to verify what Jesus has said about his resurrection in his earlier teaching. This supports the suggestion that Matthew and his community are involved in ongoing disputes with the Pharisees and their successors over the nature of Jesus’ authority.

\(^{251}\) Senior, The Gospel of Matthew, 73.
Scholars such as Stanton, Senior, Hare and Strecker argue that Matthew’s community had separated from Judaism and defined their identity over against dominant Judaism. On the other hand, as above, Bornkamm, Overman, Saldarini and Sim argue that Matthew’s community had not yet definitively broken from the synagogues and was still within the orbit of Judaism. Saldarini goes so far as to suggest that even if Matthew’s community represents “a group which has ‘broken away’ from a parent community”, it would still retain “multiple relationships and cannot be understood in isolation”. These scholars maintain that Matthew’s community was a fragile minority of Jewish Christians, who were still thinking of themselves as Jews and still identified themselves as a Jewish community. They were Jews who claimed to follow Jesus and believe in him as Messiah and Son of God. They were strongly opposed to other Jews, and especially those who rejected the message of Jesus and were associated with the Pharisaic renewal movement.

Scholars who claim the Matthean community was a sect within Judaism generally agree with W. D. Davies, who argues that the Gospel of Matthew was in confrontation with Pharisaic Judaism in the critical period following the Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Pharisees, under the leadership of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, began to consolidate at Jamnia. This period introduced what has become known as ‘formative Judaism’. This formative Judaism meant the

253 Saldarini, Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community, 2; and “The Gospel of Matthew and Jewish-Christian Conflict”, 40.
254 Günther Bornkamm, “End-Expectation and Church in Matthew”, in Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew (eds. Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth & H. J. Held; NTL; London: SCM, 1963), 19-20. Bornkamm refers to the pericope concerning the Temple tax (17:24-27) as evidence that the community of Matthew is still attached to Judaism. See also Overman, Matthew’s Gospel, 4-5; Saldarini, Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community, 1.
evolution of a new self-identity for Jewish people, centred on the family, the synagogues and observance of the Law. Thus the Pharisaic and Jewish Christian communities were competing for the loyalties of Jewish people. In this period, apocalyptic and other fringe groups including the Christians were eventually expelled from the synagogues. The expansion of the twelve benedictions into the eighteen benedictions — *Birkath Ha-Minim*, which literally means, ‘the blessing of the heretics’ — excluding the Christians from the synagogues, provoked the rift between the Jewish Christians and the larger body of Pharisaic Judaism.\(^{257}\) Since Jewish Christianity was thus excommunicated from the synagogues, according to Davies and others, the Gospel of Matthew was written to respond to Jamnia in defence of the Christian movement as ‘Church’ — the assembly of the righteous (16:18; 18:19). It does this by presenting Jesus as the Son of David and Messiah (1:1-17) and insisting that Christians observe the Torah (5:17-20, 21-48).\(^{258}\) These scholars therefore contend that the polemical attack on the Pharisees and Jewish leaders in the Gospel of Matthew is not simply reflecting the conflict between Jesus and his contemporary Jewish leaders. Rather it is a direct response of Matthew’s Gospel to the bitter conflict emerging between his community and his Jewish contemporaries, as the Gospel was being shaped and written.\(^{259}\)

Recent studies find it difficult, however, to accept the view that argues a close link between the *Birkath Ha-Minim* and the Matthean community, considering the problems “in dating this material, establishing its original form and purpose, and

\(^{257}\) Davies, *The Setting*, 256-315, esp. pages 275-276; Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 48-56. Against this Luz argues that Matthew is not involved in a direct dialogue with Pharisaic Judaism. The rift with the synagogue is past history. Rather, Matthew’s concern with the leaders’ rejection of Jesus has a theological purpose. Thus the Gospel of Matthew is not as such a Christian response to Jamnia, but “a Christian answer to Israel’s no to Jesus or the attempt to cope with this no in a fundamental definition of a position”. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 88.


determining the extent of its influence in different locations”\(^{260}\). The Gospel of Matthew itself also has no reference that suggests a direct influence of the *Birkath Ha-Minim*.\(^{261}\) As Stanton rightly points out, since we do not know the precise date and location of the Matthean community, it would be rash to consider the Gospel of Matthew as the product of a direct response to Jamnia.\(^{262}\)

Whether the Matthean community was separated from the main body or not,\(^{263}\) all these recent scholars generally agree that the Matthean community at least had conflict with the main body of Judaism. Yet I would argue that it is not helpful to ask whether the Matthean community was still connected, or separated from, the main body of Judaism. It is still too early at this stage to speak of ‘the main body of Judaism’ or ‘formative Judaism’. As I have argued above, the Matthean community should not be seen as a sectarian group within Judaism set against the main body of Judaism. Rather, it was a Jewish form of Christianity which was made up of a majority of Jews that had positive and negative relationships with a number of other Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities. Sim is emphatic that “the dispute between the Matthean community and formative Judaism was an internal Jewish debate”, and not “a debate between Judaism and Christianity” as many scholars have argued.\(^{264}\) I agree that the debate is not between Judaism and Christianity as such — but is rather an internal Matthean struggle — yet it seems to me that the issues are particularly ‘Christian’ (i.e., to do with Jesus and his interpretation of the Law). The absolute use of the labels ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian’ at this time is not appropriate, in that they are both still to some extent nick-names rather than self-designations. Here, Robert H. Gundry rightly


\(^{263}\) For more details about different scholars’ ‘inramural’ and ‘extramural’ positions, see Ewherido, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 20-27.

argues that the critical sociological problem of the Matthean community is not to do with the relationship of Christian Judaism to the rest of Judaism, but rather with “relations inside Matthew’s community between tares and wheat, bad fish and good, true disciples and false”.  

In agreement with Gundry, I would like to point out three factors for reconsidering the argument of the scholars above. Firstly, if the Matthean community was in conflict with the main body of Judaism as these scholars have argued, this would mean extreme danger for the whole Matthean community, because the wider Jewish community had protested even with the Roman authorities in defence of their religious identity, as I have argued above. So how could a minority group such as the Matthean community dare to conflict with its main parent body in such a situation? Secondly, since the hostility resulting from the fire provoked the inhabitants of Antioch to drive out the Jews from the city in 70 CE, the solidarity of the wider Jewish network would have increased under the persecution in Antioch. So there would be less likelihood that the Matthean community would come into conflict with the other persecuted Jewish groups. Thirdly, if the Matthean community was involved in conflict with its main parent body, how would a focus on that conflict relate to Matthew and his community’s universal outlook and aim to proclaim the gospel to all nations? I propose the following possible reconsideration of the relation between the Matthean community and the Jews.

As Acts reports, believers had been eager to spread the Good News of Jesus since the apostolic period, and as Antioch was a prominent Jewish centre in the time of the Evangelist, there would be many Jews as well as Gentiles who converted to

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266 See pages 99-100 above.
Christianity (Acts 11:19-21). So given that the Matthean community was made up of an ethnic majority of Jews, as argued before, the polemics that are reflected in Matthew indicate that some of its leaders or members within the community included a number of Jewish conservatives — or Torah extremists — who still wanted to preserve the full Mosaic Law according to their Pharisaic traditional way of life. These are among those causing problems.

It is not surprising that the polemical debate over the Law had existed since the apostolic time, when Paul and Barnabas had encountered some extreme men (perhaps James’ group) from Judea who came to Antioch and taught believers to observe the Law of Moses regarding circumcision (Acts 15:1-2, 5) and eating (Gal 2:11-14). As Paul and Barnabas met together with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem regarding the debate on circumcision for Gentiles, Peter stood as a voice of moderation:

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are (Acts 15:10-11).

So it is not improbable that in the time of the Evangelist, the Matthean community would include a number of Torah extremists who continued in observing the Law of Moses amongst believers. The accusation of John the Baptist about the Pharisees and the Sadducees who traced their descendents from Abraham in Matthew 3:7-9 indicates that Matthew is anticipating the nature of this problem from the beginning of the Gospel, and that these Torah extremists claimed the Pharisaic traditional thought-form as their ideal. In order to respond to and correct their claim, Matthew, through John the Baptist, warns that tracing Abraham as their ancestor alone does not lead to escape from the punishment of God (3:7-10). This response is very similar to that of Acts and Paul (Acts 15:10-11; Gal 2:11-21). The following prediction of one who comes after

267 This way of thinking appears similar to the early Burmese Christians, whose way of thinking led them back to the Buddhist thought-forms even after becoming believers.
John the Baptist indicates that Matthew was not only warning these Torah extremists about their way of thinking, but also preparing them to see the later comer (Jesus) as the superior one through whom his community should find their identity and interpret the Law of Moses (3:11-12; 5:17-7:12).

In the kingdom parables chapter, Matthew’s distinctive editing indicates that his community contains both good and bad members (13:24-30, 33, 37-43, 45, 47-50). These ‘bad members’ could refer to the small number of Torah extremists. John Meier rightly points out that when the Gospel was composed, the Matthean community faced theological and pastoral problems regarding the identity crisis between the Jewish conservatives and the Gentile members and Matthew’s intention was to fashion an ‘inclusive synthesis’. Following Meier’s argument, I would suggest further that that tension was especially between a small number of Jewish conservatives and the rest of the mixed Jewish and Gentile community. This is clearly seen in the instruction to the community: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you…. If he refuses to listen even to the Church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector” (18:15-17). The second person ‘your brother’, ‘you’ and the ‘church’ indicate a clear and direct address to the Matthean community. Moreover, those who create the tension, as the passage indicates, were a small number of the total community. That they were Jewish conservatives is indicated by the use of ‘pagan/Gentile’, and ‘tax collector’, against the positive use of these words in the rest of Matthew’s narrative (8:5-13; 9:9-10; 10:3; 11:19; 15:21-28; 21:31-32; 22:1-14; 27:19-24; 28:19-20). The usages of ‘their scribes’ (7:29) and ‘their synagogues’ (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54) indicate Matthew’s comparison between the teaching of Jesus

269 There is no parallel in Mark and Luke.
and the Pharisees’ way of teaching to the minority who based their identity on the scribes and the Pharisees they still revered.  

The saying of Jesus “no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment” and “neither is new wine put into old wineskins” indicates that Matthew reminded his community to observe the Law as re-interpreted in Jesus as they are a new community of Christ, rather than to observe the Law in the old Pharisaic way of interpretation (9:16-17; 13:52). This is because the way of Jesus clearly surpasses that of the Pharisees’ old way (cf. 5:17, 20; 9:16-17; 13:52).  

The warning “be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” also indicates that Matthew was warning his community to be careful of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees that came to infiltrate the community through a small number of Jewish conservatives (16:5-12). Moreover, the sequence of Peter’s confession of Christ and Jesus’ vindication of Peter — “On this rock I will build my Church” — indicates that Matthew was warning his community to build their identity of faith solely on Jesus in the Peter tradition (16:13-20) — a tradition distinct from Paul, on the one hand (Gal 1-2), and from Torah extremism on the other.  

A clear distinction about the identity of the Matthean community is rightly made by Brendan Byrne:

For what was now becoming mainstream Judaism, the key to interpreting Torah and establishing the true Israel on that basis is the body of the tradition handed down in oral form from Moses and regulated by the rabbis. The Matthean community, on the contrary, believes that it has the key to interpreting the Torah in the person of Jesus. For them Jesus is the interpreter of the Torah, enjoying as unique Son of God an authority far beyond that of Moses or any oral tradition purported to derive from him. Jesus is more than a

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270 So here I argue that the designations ‘their scribes’ and ‘their synagogues’ seem not to indicate the polemic between the Matthean community and the rest of Judaism in Matthew’s time. Rather, they are the transparent issues of Jesus and his earthly life which Matthew shapes in addressing the situation he specifically faced within his community. Cf. Richard C. Beaton, “How Matthew Writes”, in The Written Gospel (eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 126-127.

271 See also Schnackenburg, The Gospel of Matthew, 90.
Furthermore, Matthew presents Jesus as not attacking the Pharisees exclusively. For Matthew, Jesus still recognises the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees. His attack against them is directed principally to their deeds (23:3-4). So the polemics found in Matthew, and especially in chapter 23, are inconsistent with a supposed conflict between the Matthean community and the main body of Judaism. Rather they indicate that Matthew is portraying Jesus as attacking the scribes and the Pharisees in order to warn a small number of Torah extremists within his community to see the inadequacies of their revered scribes and Pharisees. Matthew further indicates this in the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). So Matthew encourages his community to observe the Law through Jesus, for he is the one who came to fulfil the Law (5:17). Matthew also admonishes his community not to be merely superficial Law observers, but to enact their observing in their practical life as Jesus has taught (5:13-16; 25:31-46).

Matthew also concludes his Gospel by heightening the role of the Jewish religious leaders as those who handed Jesus over to be crucified on the cross, who claimed the responsibility for Jesus’ death by shouting “His blood be on us and on our children” (27:25) and who even created false testimony for blocking the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection (28:11-15). All this evidence indicates that Matthew was correcting his community’s picture of the Jewish religious leaders. Their teachings were good (23:3) but they cleaned the outside of the cup and were like whitewashed tombs (23:27). Inwardly they were snakes, the brood of vipers, those full of greed and self-

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272 Byrne, Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 2004), 5.
indulgence and those who killed the prophets (23:25-26, 31, 33, 38). They were hypocrites who shut the kingdom of heaven in the face of people (23:13) and who made people twice as much a child of hell as they were (23:15), blind guides who led people to fall into a ditch (23:24//15:12-14). In order to warn a number of Torah extremists and admonish the rest of his community, Matthew draws attention to the scribes and the Pharisees, as they represent the erroneous teachers who came to in conflict with Jesus. Thus the polemics against the scribes and the Pharisees in chapter 23 and elsewhere are not directed against the Jewish religious leaders in Jesus’ time alone. Rather, they are also directed against such proponents within the community of Matthew.

In sum, the most plausible explanation of the Jewish material and the polemic found in the Gospel of Matthew is not to see the Matthean community in conflict with the main body of Judaism. Rather, it is to see them as the pastoral and theological response to the problems that arise from within the Matthean community. Writing his Gospel partly to clarify and maintain his community’s identity, Matthew therefore not only retells the story of Jesus from Mark but also recontextualises the kingdom teaching of Jesus to fit the context of his mixed community.

iv) The Relationship of the Matthean Community to the Gentiles

Matthew has introduced the involvement of Gentiles into his story of Jesus from the genealogy (1:3, 5) and the infancy narrative (2:1-2, 7-12) and throughout the Gospel (28:19-20). In a distinctive way and quite unlike Mark and Luke, the Gentiles

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273 See page 113-114 above.
play an unusual role in the Gospel of Matthew. While in some texts Gentiles are presented in a negative way and seem to be excluded from the Matthean community (5:47; 6:7, 32; 10:5-6; 15:24, 26; 18:17), in other texts they are portrayed in a positive way and seem to be welcomed and included in the Matthean community (Matt 1: the Gentile women in the genealogy; 2:1-2, 7-12; 8:5-13; 15:21-28; 22:1-14; 27:19-24; 28:19-20). So the key question that arises here is how the Matthean community, which shapes this seemingly ambiguous text, related to the Gentiles. Are the Gentiles excluded or welcomed in the Matthean community? Why did Matthew arrange such contradictory texts regarding Gentile involvement in the Gospel? What was occurring behind these texts?

A few decades ago, scholars like Douglas Hare, Daniel Harrington and John P. Meier debated the precise meaning of πάντα τὰ ἔθνη found in the conclusion of the Gospel. The question is whether πάντα τὰ ἔθνη includes Israel or refers only to Gentiles and excludes Israel. Hare and Harrington argue strongly that the plural ἔθνη, with or without πάντα, normally means non-Jews in Jewish and Christian writings. They point out that Matthew chose to use ἔθνη, which is equivalent to the Hebrew word ḡōyīm, because for Greek-speaking Jews it was a designation for ‘foreigners’, as in non-Jewish Greeks. The phrase πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, therefore, for them, refers only to Gentiles and does not include Jews. Richard Ascough also suggests more recently that Matthew stresses mission to Gentiles rather than just a mission to the Jews in the diaspora.

277 Hare and Harrington, “Make Disciples of All the Gentiles (Matt 28:19)”, 359-369.
On the other hand, Meier argues that πάντα τὰ ἐθνή is referring to all nations including Jews. Meier points out three types of occurrences of ἐθνη/ἐθνος in Matthew. Firstly, he explicitly lists the seven cases of the usage of ἐθνη/ἐθνος that occur in Matthew (4:15; 6:32; 10:5; 10:18; 12:18, 21; and 20:19), which clearly refer only to the Gentiles. Secondly, he lists two cases of the usage of ἐθνη/ἐθνος in Matthew 20:25-26 and 24:9, which are considered of doubtful origin. Thirdly, he points to the distinctive usage of ἐθνη/ἐθνος in Matthew 21:43; 24:7; 24:14; and 25:32, which refer not only to all the Gentiles but also to the Jews, that is all nations. Meier therefore points out that πάντα τὰ ἐθνη in Matthew 28:19 is best located within this third group, which means it should be understood as referring to ‘all the nations’ or ‘all people’.

In these matters I agree with Meier. As Davies and Allison rightly comment, for Matthew, the word ἐθνη means those who are outside Israel (4:15; 6:32; 10:5-6, 18; 15:24; 20:19) but it can also have a universal sense where πᾶς is used (24:9; 25:32). Here ἐθνη in 28:19 is referring to all nations including Israel: “universal lordship means universal mission” because πᾶς is also used in 28:19. In my opinion, this indicates that for Matthew the issue is not Jew versus Gentile, but a vision or an understanding of a Jewish form of Christianity that, potentially if not actually, includes all humanity.

279 According to Meier, three of them come from OT citations: Matthew 4:15 is from Isaiah 8:23; Matthew 12:18 and 12:21 are from Isaiah 42:1-4. And others such as 6:32, “come from Q (=Luke 12:30), 20:19 comes from Mark 10:33, 10:18 arises from a reworking of Mark 13:9-10 and Matt 10:5-6 is generally judged to be pre-Matthean tradition rather than Matthew’s redactional creation”. Meier, “Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19”, 95-96.


281 For more details, see Meier, “Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19”, 94-102.

282 Davies and Allison, Matthew, 3:684.
Some recent scholars see the Matthean community as an anti-Gentile community while others see it as a pro-Gentile community. For example, Overman claims that there are few Gentiles in the Matthean community for the Gentiles do not play a major role in the Gospel.283 His argument has been questioned by Douglas Hare, who rightly points out that firstly, in contrast to Mark, Gentiles are more prominent in the Gospel of Matthew and secondly, that like Mark, Matthew is concerned with writing a Gospel, rather than a history of the earliest followers of Jesus.284

Sim is foremost among those scholars who claim that the Matthean community was not open to the Gentile community. He offers four passages for consideration to support his anti-Gentile conclusions concerning Matthew’s community. The first and second passages are Matthew 5:46-47 and 6:31-32, which Sim sees as reflecting unfavourable attitudes towards the Gentiles. The third passage is the introduction of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:7-8. Sim thinks that this passage originates from a distinctive source. He argues that the Evangelist openly criticises not only the Gentile lifestyle but also their religious practice. The final passage, in Matthew 18:15-17, concerns discipline within the community. Sim sees this passage as reflecting “the belief that Gentiles are outsiders and contact with them is to be discouraged rather than encouraged”.285

These four passages are then used by Sim to reconstruct the implied attitude of the Mathean text towards Gentiles and the broader Gentile culture, which is that the Gentile world is “a godless place whose practices are not to be imitated”286 by his readers. Sim concludes that the Evangelist and his community are “clearly Jewish,  

284 Hare, “How Jewish is the Gospel of Matthew?”, 266.
while the world of the Gentiles is a patently foreign place to be avoided at all costs". 287

Going even further, Sim states that the Matthean community saw that the revelation through Christ was that “only Jews could share in the salvation brought by the Christ”. 288

Though Sim’s thesis offers a clear interpretation of the anti-Gentile texts, it is ultimately not persuasive for he only focuses on these statements and fails to recognise the positive references to Gentiles in Matthew’s Gospel. 289 If the Matthean community rejected Gentile inclusion totally, why did he also emphasise the universal outlook of Gentile mission from the genealogy to the climax of his Gospel? Gentile inclusion is not added merely in the final part of the Gospel: Matthew heightens stories of Gentile inclusion throughout his Gospel, as noted above.

As the Matthean community was a Jewish Christian community, made up of a majority of Jews, they would have experienced the impact of Gentile persecution. So Sim is right when he contends that

The Matthean community had been the recipient of violent persecution at the hands of Gentiles and that it perceived itself to be universally despised as a result of this mistreatment. Such a situation sufficiently explains the Evangelist’s anti-Gentile perspective and his community’s avoidance of Gentile people. 290

This is an unavoidable part of the Matthean story, but unlike Sim, I would argue that the Matthean community is not an anti-Gentile community as such. All the passages which Sim uses to argue for it being an anti-Gentile community are valid evidence for this recent experience of Gentile persecution and for the typical Jewish abhorrence of Gentile immorality. But this evidence alone is insufficient to describe the current attitudes of the Matthean community and its version of the story of Jesus. I would

288 Sim, “Christianity”, 194.
289 Sim’s argument on anti-Gentile sentiment has been debated by Donald Senior. For more details, see Donald Senior, “Between Two Worlds: Gentiles and Jewish Christians in Matthew’s Gospel”, CBQ 61 (1999): 10-13.
suggest that Matthew’s Gospel is heightening two aspects in its treatment of the Gentiles.

The first aspect is the negative critique which Matthew offers of the general ungodly nature and morality that typified the Gentile world from a Jewish perspective. As discussed above, Antioch was a multi-ethnic metropolitan centre, with more than eighteen ethnic groups. So the Matthean community was surrounded by many ethnic groups. As Stark observes, “the city was filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers”. Moreover, the Matthean community had suffered exploitation and oppression under Roman imperialism for a long time. So in the eyes of most of the Matthean community, Gentiles in a general sense were bad and godless. The same attitude can be found amongst Christians in Myanmar, reflecting the tendency for persecuted Christian minorities everywhere, in their extremity, to see their non-Christian oppressors as godless and immoral. So the negative references to Gentiles should be seen in this stereotypical way and not as the exclusion of Gentiles from the Matthean community. The texts used by Sim can be interpreted as stereotypical examples of Jewish critique of Gentile immorality and abuse of power and Matthew includes them to admonish his community not to imitate their ungodly nature.

The second aspect, however, is the positive treatment of particular Gentiles where Matthew specifically demonstrates the faith and righteousness of individual Gentiles. I list here as examples some texts where Matthew emphasises the faithful actions of Gentiles within the Jesus tradition. From the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew heightens the significant role of Gentiles. In the genealogy, Matthew

292 Warren Carter, “Matthean Christology in Roman Imperial Key; Matthew 1:1”, in *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context* (eds. John Riches and David C. Sim; JSNTS 276; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 150-151; and *Matthew and Empire*, 113-115.
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surprisingly mentions five women: Tamar (1:3), Rahab (1:3), Ruth (1:5), the wife of Uriah (1:6), and Mary (1:16). Arguably, four of them: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, are non-Jewish. These four women are not only Gentiles but also prostitutes or victims of abuse. They are, however, qualified to share God’s salvation of Israel by their faith and virtue. In the infancy narrative, when Jesus was born the magi from the east came to worship Jesus (2:1-2, 7-12, 16). Again Matthew highlights Gentiles as the first to seek the Messiah and rejoice in God’s salvation of Israel (2:2, 4).

According to the Gospel narrative, when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him and begged for help for his servant who suffered terribly (8:5-13). Matthew’s narrative highlights the fact that a centurion approached Jesus directly and that through his tremendous faith his servant was healed (8:13). When Jesus went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman came to him and begged him to heal her daughter who was tormented by demon (15:21-28). Again Matthew portrays the Canaanite woman as ‘a woman of great faith’ and her daughter was healed (15:28; cf. Mark 7:29). These two healing narratives indicate that in Matthew’s eyes Gentiles are qualified and able to share God’s salvation of Israel through their tremendous faith.

In the passion narrative, when Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat for the case against Jesus, his wife sent a message to him not to have anything to do with Jesus

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296 Cf. Luke 7:1-10. In Luke the centurion did not come to Jesus by himself but sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal his servant on his behalf.
for due to a revelation in a dream, she saw Jesus as an innocent (‘righteous’) man (27:19). Matthew portrays this Gentile woman as gaining more insight into Jesus than the male Jewish religious and political leaders.\footnote{Carter, \textit{Matthew and the Margins}, 526.} The narrative tells of Pilate’s acceptance of his wife’s advice by washing his hands in front of the crowds to avoid his involvement, thereby claiming himself to be free from the blood of Jesus (27:24). These two distinctive references are not found in Mark and Luke (cf. Mark 15:6-15 and Luke 23:13-25). They are probably Matthew’s additions,\footnote{M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew”, in vol. 8 of \textit{The New Interpreter’s Bible} (eds. Leander E. Keck et al.; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 486.} which heighten the virtues and deeds of Pilate and his wife as those who stand on Jesus’ side, as distinct from those who clamour for his crucifixion.\footnote{Gundry, \textit{Matthew}, 562, 564-565; Hill, \textit{Matthew}, 350-351. On the contrary, Davies and Allison argue that the act of Pilate’s washing hands is hypocritical. This means his act “acknowledges that Jesus is about to be murdered”. Davies and Allison, \textit{Matthew}, 3:590-591. Dorothy Jean Weaver also argues that Pilate neglects the divine warning from her wife and instead he “takes action to save himself rather than his ‘righteous’ prisoner”. Weaver, “Thus You Will Know them by their Fruits: The Roman Characters of the Gospel of Matthew”, in \textit{The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context} (eds. John Riches and David C. Sim; JSNTS 276; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 121.}

Some of these references are parallel to Mark and Luke, with Matthew’s editorial alterations. Some are Matthew’s own materials (especially 2:1-2, 7-12, 16; 27:19, 24). All the positive references to Gentiles indicate that the Gentiles are commended not because of what they say but because of their practical deeds (2:1-2; 8:8-10; 15:22-28; 27:19, 24). Here, unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew appears to symmetrically arrange the gender balance of Gentiles in his Gospel (in the infancy narrative: women in genealogy, magi; in the healing narrative: centurion, Canaanite woman; in the passion narrative: Pilate’s wife, Pilate) and presents them as those who first seek Jesus to worship, those whose faith and deeds surpass that of many of the Jews and the Jewish leaders. So Donald Senior rightly contends that though Matthew also has neutral and negative references to Gentiles, the quite extensive list of more positive and even inclusive material indicates that Matthew at least sees Gentiles as
“persons capable of exemplary faith in Jesus, foresees that the Gospel will be proclaimed to them, and expects they will thus be incorporated into the community”.

Matthew consistently emphasises good deeds, rather than status or ethnic identity, as the criterion for righteousness, and thereby paves the way for the acceptance of Gentiles who exhibit faith and good works. As Matthew explicitly indicates on many occasions, the hallmark of righteousness in entering the kingdom of heaven is to do the will of God in practice (7:21-23; 21:28-32; 22:45; 25:31-46).

Thus because the Matthean community was being exhorted to respond to a wider mission mandate, Matthew appears to correlate these negative and positive texts about Gentiles in order to encourage his community to develop a theology of Gentile inclusion. On the one hand, some members of his community were convinced that the Gentiles were ungodly persons who had persecuted them unjustly, and who would only be accepted in the kingdom of heaven after the renewal of Israel, if at all. This tradition is reflected in Matthew’s story of Jesus’ mission mandate to the twelve: “Do not go among the Gentiles” (10:5).

Matthew’s presentation of the earthly Jesus’ mission mandate seems to contradict the Great Commission of the risen Lord in the final part of the Gospel (cf. 28:19 and 10:5-6). Schuyler Brown rightly argues that the tension of the two-fold representation of mission in Matthew 10:5-6 and 28:19-20 is not simply the result of two competing conceptions in the Evangelist’s community, but is explained by the fact that while firmly adhering to the universal mission, Matthew “encountered a particularist current in his community which he was unable to ignore, since it expressed the strongly Jewish consciousness of his own special tradition”.

Meier also points out that there are two expressions of the same tradition, indicating debate in

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300 Senior, “Between Two Worlds”, 16.
the early Church regarding the Gentile mission, and Matthew uses these expressions to express an understanding of a general principle according to which he works Jewish-Christian material into his Gospel. The same Jesus, who limits the mission of his disciples in his ministry, is also the Jesus who is the Risen Christ, who commands his disciples to make disciples of all nations. Meier states:

There is no sloppy, eclectic, or schizophrenic juxtaposition of contradictory material. Rather, Matthew is quite consciously ordering an ‘economy’ of salvation: to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles. The public ministry of the earthly Jesus stands under geographical and national limitations: the gospel is to be preached only to Israel, and only in the Promised Land. After the death and resurrection, however, this ‘economical’ limitation falls at Jesus’ all-powerful command (Matt 28:16-20).

As discussed earlier Meier argues persuasively that πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (28:19) refers to all nations, including Jews. Thus it should be concluded that the mission paradigm of Mathew involves a two-fold mission which is firstly to the Jews and then to all nations.

So as Brown argues, “Matthew’s inclusion of a particularist form of the mission mandate in his Central Section suggests that the Gentile mission was controversial at the time of his Gospel’s composition”. For Matthew, the Jewish mission began with the historical Jesus (10:5-6), as also did the Gentile mission, but only for those with eyes to see, whereas the confirmation of this wider mission came after the resurrection (28:19). Sim rightly argues that these “two missions were equally important in so far as the gospel needed to be preached throughout the whole world prior to the arrival of the Son of Man (24:14)”. As Hagner points out, Matthew preserved the particularistic emphasis of the mission to the Jews (10:5-6) because it was of special significance to

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his Jewish-Christian readers, affirming that Israel has priority, for through Israel God brings salvation to all nations.\(^{306}\)

Matthew presents the mission paradigm of his community as an affirmation that the Jews were God’s promised people, though some rejected the mission of Jesus. On the other hand, by faith and virtue, Gentiles have been accepted through Jesus’ mission, as I have argued above. Matthew distinctively recounts Jesus assuring his listeners that “many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven” (8:11). Moreover, Matthew’s presentation of the tearing of the temple curtain into two from the top to the bottom at the time of Jesus’ death (27:51; cf. Mark 15:38; and Luke 23:45) can be understood to indicate that through the death of Jesus, the salvation of God is open to all people, Jews as well as all the nations. Thus in the Great Commission, the risen Lord commands his disciples to make disciples of all nations (28:19-20).

In this way Matthew points out to his community that though the Gentiles were generally bad, there were Gentiles whose faith, righteousness and deeds surpassed those of many Jews and especially of the Jewish religious leaders. Through the mercy and love of Jesus, the Gentiles are invited to share the salvation of God, and the kingdom of heaven is also open to them for they bear good fruits (4:12-16, 23-26; 8:5-13; 15:21-28; 12:21; 21:43; 22:1-14). Before the end comes, the gospel also needs to be preached to all nations, including the Gentiles (24:14). So the Great Commission with which Matthew encourages his community in the climactic part of the Gospel is to go and make disciples of all nations (both Jews and Gentiles), and to instruct them to observe the commandments of Jesus (28:19-20). In Matthew 10:5b-6 the disciples were convinced they were prohibited to go “in the way of the Gentiles”, but by

Matthew 28:19-20 the narrative thrust of Matthew’s Gospel encourages his community to go and make disciples of all nations. The exclusiveness of the disciples’ first mission has now been widened to be inclusive and to open the door to all nations.

D. Theological Issues Arising from the Matthean Context

As I have argued above, the Matthean community was wrestling with conservative Jewish Christians who wanted to revive the full observance of the Law. It was also faced with the problem of Gentile inclusion amongst some who saw Gentiles through negative eyes, and with itinerant false prophets whose teachings were leading some members astray. Moreover, the socio-political pressures from Roman imperialism were a big challenge for the faith identity of the Matthean community in the midst of their suffering. So as the Matthean narrative exhorts the community to a wider missionary mandate to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to all nations, what theological issues emerge from the community?

i) The Issue of Socio-political Pressure

Given the location of the Matthean community in Antioch, capital of the Roman province of Syria and a significant Roman military and administrative centre, we must consider the impact of Roman imperialism on the community. As force was the instrument supporting Roman sovereignty, the Matthean community was under the power and exploitation of Roman authorities. Insofar as the Matthean community was part of the Jewish community, both the impact of socio-political pressure on the Jews...
by the Roman authorities and the hostility of the inhabitants of Antioch after the Jewish revolts would have affected the Matthean community, especially after 70 CE when the fire broke out in Antioch. So the Matthean community would have experienced both the oppression of the Roman authorities and threats from the inhabitants of Antioch.

As the inhabitants of Antioch in general had experienced the injustice and oppression of Roman imperialism for a long time, they would long for justice, peace and salvation. In these circumstances, Matthew, perhaps as a leader of the Matthean community understood the needs of his people. He therefore encouraged his community to express the ‘salt’ and ‘light’ of mercy and love in their daily lives to the world surrounding them, in order to be a welcoming and open community so that those who were weary would find rest in Jesus (5:13-16; 25:31-46). The invitation of Jesus, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened”, expresses the invitation of the Good News to those who were under the heavy burden of Roman imperialism (so 11:28). Many scholars discuss this text in the religious realm only, concluding that the invitation of Jesus is the call to be freed from the burden of sin or the burden of the Pharisees’ laws. They ignore, however, the socio-political atmosphere and the social life of the inhabitants of Antioch in the late first century which form the context of the Gospel. Since the description “all you who are weary” indicates the inclusion of all people, this pericope refers not merely to those who were under the burden of religious issues, but also to those who were under the burden of the Roman yoke. On this point, I agree with Carter, who argues that the heavy burden that Matthew highlights is not primarily the burden of sin or the legal burden imposed by the Pharisees. Rather, it is

the heavy weight of Roman imperialism.\textsuperscript{308} As Carter rightly suggests, “Jesus’ call is addressed to all those who labor desperately to keep themselves alive in the economically oppressive and destructive system of Roman imperialism, the daily reality of most people in the late first century”.\textsuperscript{309} So the call of Jesus to those who are weary is a call in the Matthean context to those who were under oppressive Roman rule and a heavy taxation burden.\textsuperscript{310}

It is a truth too obvious to be taken seriously by some that the Gospel of Matthew needs to be read against the background of socio-political pressure from Roman imperialism. Reading through the lens of the Myanmar context, however, the evidence of political oppression affecting the Matthean community is clear. The Gospel reflects the reality that some believers will be persecuted (5:11; 24:9), some will be arrested and put into prison (10:18-19; 24:9; 25:36, 39, 43) and some will be killed (10:21; 24:9). Because of these dangers, some believers will betray one another to the persecutors, even within their own family (10:21-22; 24:10a). Some will please the persecutors to avoid persecution, some will give up their faith (24:10b), and the “love of many will grow cold” (24:12). All these texts are consistent with the indications that the Matthean community were not only under the pressure of Roman imperialism, but also lived with constant fear of betrayal. In order to escape this suffering, some of them would be tempted to give up their identity as followers of the way of Jesus. Matthew therefore uses texts from Mark and Q to form the basis for the persecution theme, which, with the addition of his special material (M), recalls these worst-case situations in order to win back the faith of his community and encourage

\textsuperscript{308} See pages 96-101 above.
\textsuperscript{309} Carter, \textit{Matthew and Empire}, 113.
\textsuperscript{310} See Carter, \textit{Matthew and Empire}, 115.
them to be steadfast.\textsuperscript{311} Basically he follows and adapts the literary solution of the Markan story about the suffering of Jesus and his disciples, and the predictions of Jesus about the coming of persecution foreshadowing the coming of the Son of Man (24:15-27).\textsuperscript{312} Matthew also sees the suffering of his community as the source of, and motivation for, a more radical discipleship (16:24-27; 24:13).

\textit{ii) The Issue of Religious Identity}

The Gospel indicates that the members of the Matthean community included true and false disciples (13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 22:11-14; 25:1-13).\textsuperscript{313} As I have argued above, within the community there were a small number of Torah extremists who wanted to maintain a full observance of the Law and their influence affected the rest of the community. Though Matthew had acknowledged his community as containing both the good and the bad, and even admonished them in these terms (13:24-30, 47-50), he still remained open to them all and treated them as “potential followers of Jesus”.\textsuperscript{314} His polemical attack was directed, especially against “those who rejected Jesus definitely, especially the leaders who misled the people away from Jesus”.\textsuperscript{315}

Moreover, as the community had experienced socio-political crises under the Roman Empire for a long time, there were some members who saw Gentiles with negative eyes only and did not want to spread the gospel to them (cf. 10:5). As the Matthean community was being challenged by the gospel message to convert all


\textsuperscript{313} Gundry, \textit{Matthew}, 5.

nations (28:18-20), this was a difficult process for the Matthean community (7:13-29; 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50).316

A major theme in Matthew’s Gospel is the polemic against Jewish religious leaders. Matthew specifically indicates the opponents of Jesus as the scribes and the Pharisees who are closely linked with the synagogues in Galilee, and the chief priests and the elders who are closely related to the temple and Jerusalem (7:29; 9:3, 11, 14, 34; 12:2, 14, 24; 15:12; 16:21; 17:10; 19:3; 22:15, 34, 41; 23:6, 34).317 These Jewish leaders react against Jesus in a negative way. On the one hand, Matthew describes them as those who are offended by the teaching of Jesus (15:12), who charge him with blasphemy (9:3), who think evil of him (only Matthew includes πονηρος in 9:4, cf. Mark 2:8; Luke 5:22), who accuse him of demon possession (9:34; 12:24), and who attack him as eating with sinners (9:11) and breaking the Law (12:2; cf. 15:1-2).318

On the other hand, Matthew describes Jesus calling these Jewish leaders hypocrites (15:7; 22:18; 23:3; 23:13, 15, 23, 27-29; cf. 6:2, 5, 16), a brood of vipers (3:7; 12:34; 23:33), blind men (15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26), and the children of Gehenna (23:15). Matthew has Jesus labelling them as those who teach without putting their teachings into practice (23:3, 27-29), who burden others intolerably (23:4), who like admiration (23:5-7; cf. 6:1-2, 5, 16), who regard their traditions as more important than the will of God (15:2-3; 23:15-26), who lack righteousness (5:20) who even commit murder (23:29-36; cf. 22:6) and who lead the people astray (15:14), preventing their entry into the kingdom of heaven (23:13) and making “them twice as much a child of Gehenna as they are” (23:15).319 Whatever our specific conclusions about Matthew’s

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319 Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 119-120.
redaction and M sources, this distinctive material in Matthew clearly indicates a
dominant concern of the text and the author or community who produced it.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry and career, according to Matthew’s version, these
Jewish leaders reacted against Jesus in a negative way and did not recognise him as a
prophet or the Son of Man. They became jealous over his mighty deeds (27:18), they
tried to trap him (19:3; 22:15-16, 34-35) and plotted to kill him (12:14). Later they
connived to have him crucified on the cross (27:20-25, 41), and they even tried to block
the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection by creating false testimony (28:11-15).

Unlike Mark and Luke, the redaction and selected sources of the Evangelist
emphasise the guilt of these Jewish leaders. In the passion narrative, only Matthew
highlights these Jewish leaders as taking authority from Pilate for killing Jesus, and
presents Pilate and his wife as free from the blood of Jesus (27:19, 24; cf. Mark 15:6-15;
the chief priests and the elders as creating false witness concerning Jesus’ resurrection
(28:11-15). In his dualistic apocalyptic worldview, as Sim states, Matthew designates
them as “the followers of Satan, the evil one”.  

This heightened conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in his Gospel
indicates that Matthew is indirectly reflecting what has happened, and is happening, in
his community.  Matthew considers himself a Jew as well and claims his community
as a Jewish-Christian community that still “keeps the Law, interpreted through the Jesus
tradition”. However, he recommends a more fundamental reorientation of the tradition
than many other contemporary Jewish movements. The description of Jesus as born
from the Holy Spirit (1:18) and descending from Abraham (1:2-17) indicates that Jesus

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320 Sim, The Gospel of Matthew, 120.
322 Saldarini, “The Gospel of Matthew and Jewish-Christian Conflict”, 39-41; and “Boundaries and
Polemics”, 244.
is not only a descendent from Abraham — the definitive ancestor of the Pharisees, perhaps claimed by some members of the Jewish conservatives (3:7-8) — but also a descendent from God (cf. Luke 3:23-38). The careful and explicit Old Testament quotations, the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning legal righteousness (Matt 23), and the expressions comparing Jesus and the scribes (7:29), all indicate that Matthew is defending the identity of his community against his opponents by describing Jesus as superior to the Jewish leaders and proving him to be the one who comes to fulfil the prophecy of the Old Testament (5:17).

Mathew seeks to point out that the rival Jewish leadership and their followers are misleading the Jewish community. As Saldarini argues, Matthew alleges the Jewish leaders misunderstood and rejected the will of God. They will therefore be “replaced by a new group of leaders within the Jewish community”. Saldarini rightly points out that the replacement of the violent tenants with the ἐθνοὶ (especially 21:43, 45) in the parable of the unfaithful tenants of the vineyard (21:33-46), reflects the appointment of fruitful leaders like Mathew and his community to replace the rival Jewish leaders who have misled the people of God.

In sum, though Matthew’s polemical attacks on his Jewish opponents are vituperative indeed, he is not rejecting the Jewish Law and customs. Instead, Matthew is defending himself as one who interprets the Law carefully and mercifully, and presents Jesus as the authoritative teacher of the Law, who fulfils the Law (5:17-20).

323 Matthew describes Jesus as descending from Abraham (1:18-25), while of course a blood-line descent is negated by describing Jesus as born from a virgin whom Joseph had no sexual relations with before she gave birth (1:25). The naming of Jesus by Joseph (1:25) suggests he adopts him legally as his son, however.
324 Matthew’s Jesus agrees with the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees, but not their practice (23:1-3).
327 Here, I agree with Saldarini in arguing that ἐθνοὶ in verses 43 and 45 refers to Matthew and his group rather than a nation. Saldarini “Boundaries and Polemics”, 247.
Matthew was a Jew who wanted his fellow Jews to be reconstructed as ‘a Jesus-centred Israel’ and to reject the resurgence of their traditional leaders.329

A further group focussed on in the Gospel is the false prophets or the lawless ones whose teaching came to infiltrate the Matthean community. Kingsbury defines ‘lawlessness’ in Matthew as “not doing the will of God, which is epitomised as loving God with heart, soul, and mind and loving one’s neighbour as oneself (22:37-39)” .330 He relates ‘hypocrisy’ to ‘lawlessness’ and classifies the Jewish leaders as the false prophets.331 I would argue that Kingsbury has misclassified the Jewish leaders as the false teachers. In the Gospel of Matthew, though Jesus called the Jewish leaders hypocrites, he never called them the ‘lawless ones’ (chapter 23).332 This antinomian group, as I will discuss in chapter three, does not consist of Jewish leaders but is rather a Christian group from Syria-Palestine in the time of the Evangelist.333

As argued previously, these false prophets come from the itinerant Christian missionaries, including refugees from Jerusalem (7:15b). Because of the persecution of the Jewish-Christian leaders in Jerusalem, some were martyred, some fled to other places334 and some continued as itinerant missionaries (10:23). These itinerant missionaries included some whom Matthew labels as false prophets. These false prophets...

331 Kingsbury, “The Developing Conflict”, 60-64.
332 The one apparent exception to this is the case of Matthew 23:28. The NRSV and NKJV translate ἁνεμοίας here as ‘lawlessness’ whereas most versions translate ἁνεμοίας as sin or wickedness (NIV) or iniquity (RSV, KJV) which is preferable. Since ἁνεμοίας is here opposing ‘righteousness’, it should be translated as ‘unrighteousness’. This is consistent with the sequence of the previous verse “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men bones and everything unclean” (23:27, NIV). Thus according to Matthew, the scribes and the Pharisees are outwardly righteous but inwardly unrighteous — full of sin and iniquities — yet not like the lawlessness of ‘antinomian group’.
334 Cf. pages 75 and 85 above.
prophets appear to have been pleasing the persecuting authorities, betraying their fellows to avoid persecution and teaching and practising antinomianism (cf. 10:21; 24:10, 24).335

As Downer observes, there were some itinerant prophets who proclaimed the gospel among the Jews and Gentiles, and who appear to visit the Matthean community from time to time (7:15). These itinerant prophets included false prophets or false missionaries, whose way of teaching and worship attracted members of the Matthean community and posed a threat to it.336 The editorial handiwork of Matthew concerning the easy way of the wide gate (7:13b; cf. Luke 13:23-24), the warnings about the false prophets and their nature (7:15), the appeal of many who claim to perform many mighty deeds in the Lord’s name (7:22; cf. Luke 6:43; 13:26-27) and the warnings about eschatological judgment (25:1-13; cf. Mark 13:35-37; Luke 12:35-36; 13:25) are indications of the issues concerning itinerant prophets from outside.

Unlike his description of the rival Jewish leaders, Matthew does not describe this group as opposing Jesus in negative ways. Matthew warns his community, however, by describing the teaching of Jesus to his disciples to be aware of the dangers of false prophets (7:15). In the accusations against the rival Jewish leaders, the Matthean narrative suggests that though Jesus makes polemical attacks on the Jewish leaders, he nevertheless encourages the crowds to follow their teaching (but not their actions, 23:3). In the references to the false prophets, however, Matthew neither encourages his community to follow their teaching nor their actions. Instead he just affirms that they will be known by what they do (7:20).

Matthew heightens the negative characteristics of these false prophets by describing them as those who love money (6:24; cf. 10:9-10); who bear bad fruit (7:16, 19-20), who avoid persecution (10:32-33, 39); who please the persecuting authorities

335 Gundry, Matthew, 5-6, 479.
336 See page 120 above.
(24:10; 27:3-10); who do not live to the standard of Jesus’ teaching (24:12); who use the name of Jesus in performing many mighty deeds and deceiving even God’s chosen people (7:21-22; 24:24); and who do not do the will of God (7:21). Though this group is not described as having physical conflict with Jesus, their antinomian teaching and their lax way of living reflect the threat they are becoming for the Matthean community (7:16).

In sum, the Matthean community existed between the Jewish and Gentile worlds, and encountered the challenges of living between these two worlds. On the one hand, it was unsettled within by a small number of Jewish conservatives. On the other hand, it encountered the problem of Gentile inclusion because of some extreme members. It had also been challenged by the teaching of the itinerant false prophets. So within the community, the Matthean community was wrestling for its faith identity. These issues are the theological and pastoral issues that arise from the Matthean community and its context. In order to respond and correct these problems, Matthew highlighted the polemic between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders as well as the danger some false prophets posed to his community and admonished them to maintain their religious identity of radical discipleship. Therefore, Matthew on the one hand defined himself and his community as Jewish Christians to the opponents, and on the other hand, he delegitimated the authority of those who opposed him and his community. Matthew also admonished his community to be steadfast in order to overcome the pressure of Roman imperialism.

337 Gundry, Matthew, 6. Here I do not agree with Gundry’s suggestion that these false prophets were scribes from the Pharisaic sect.
338 Aune, Prophecy, 223.
All the above evidence supports the view that the Matthean community faced issues of persecution, minority status, physical danger, oppressive minority rule, false teaching, potential apostasy and a crisis of identity. So as I have discussed in chapter one, the context of the Matthean community appears very similar to that of the Christian community in Myanmar. In the next section I will begin to explore some fruitful parallels between the Matthean community and the Christian community in Myanmar. These parallels will be developed further later on.

E. Some Fruitful Parallels between the Matthean Community and the Christian Community in Myanmar

In this analysis of the socio-political context of the members of the Matthean community, I have argued that they faced a range of issues that led to theological as well as pastoral problems in the decades following the Jewish war. These issues arose because of the pressure from social and political crises under the Roman Empire and because it was a mixed community comprising believers from different religious backgrounds. This was especially a problem when the community encountered diverse pressures from outside at the same time that conflict was occurring among believers within the community. It is difficult when the pressures of attractive teaching from outside come to challenge a community when it is struggling, requiring leaders to encourage the community to maintain their faith identity in order to overcome these challenges. The socio-historical, literary and redaction-critical analyses I have undertaken of the context of the Matthean community focus my two-ways reading lens
for the interpretation of Myanmar, and show that there are at least four fruitful parallels — or sites of dialogue — between the Matthean community and the Christian community in Myanmar, as follows.

I have argued that the Matthean community existed in the city of Antioch, and as Antioch was the headquarters for the Roman military in the area, it was there where the Roman army played a crucial role in the defence against their enemies from the east and the south. The first fruitful parallel that arises is that just as the Matthean community had experienced socio-political pressures under the power of the Roman Empire, so the Christian community in Myanmar experiences similar crises under the rule of a military power representing the ethnic majority. In places like Antioch and Myanmar where the military play a crucial role and where power is the weapon of the elite, this “power involves a sub-section of human actions that are violent and oppressive”. 340 After people have been under the pressure of these leaders for a long time, they will seek ways to escape from their suffering. This is difficult when power is in the hands of non-believers and when the faith community is suffering at the hands of non-believers. When the faith community sees the differences between the wealth and prosperity of these non-believers and the suffering of the faith community, or when the burden is laid more heavily on the faith community than on non-believers, members of the faith community become weary and long for peace, justice and salvation. Some of them give up their faith to escape from their suffering. These things, reflected in the way the Jesus story is told in the Matthean community, are happening in the Christian community in Myanmar today.

The second area for fruitful dialogue lies in the mentality of some members of the Matthean community as seen in the Gospel’s polemics, and the addressing of the

resulting pastoral problems as I have discussed above. In my socio-historical and post-colonial reading of the context of the Matthean community, these fragmented mentalities and faith identities to some extent result from the discursive effects of Roman imperialism, imperial ideologies and attitudes. Similar phenomena to this have happened in Myanmar as the legacy of its colonisation by both British and Japanese forces.

Unlike the context of the Matthean community, which was still under the ongoing influence of Roman imperialism, British colonialism and Japanese fascism continued in the context of Myanmar only until 1947. Yet the fragmenting effects of the British colonial policy of ‘Divide and Rule’ and the impact of Japanese fascism have resulted in widespread mistrust and disempowered the increasingly diverse subcultures and people groups within and around Myanmar. This is clearly apparent as the ethnic majority Burmans are Buddhists and the ethnic minority groups are Christians. Moreover, the power is in the hands of the ethnic majority Burmans, whose military might was founded on the legacy of Japanese fascism. On the other hand, nearly all of insurgent groups pressing on a federal system of autonomous states are Christians belonging to different ethnic minority groups. The location of Matthew’s minority Christian community in the midst of the after effects of war and continuing imperial domination, resonates with the situation of the Christian minorities in Myanmar.

The third fruitful parallel is that just as the Matthean community wrestled with the issues arising between a small number of Jewish conservatives who wanted to maintain the observance of the Law and the rest of community, some Christian communities in Myanmar also wrestle with the issues arising from a small number of those who are from Buddhist background or from primal religions who still preserve

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their old superstitious way of thinking in a way that impacts on the rest of the Christian community. These issues are made more difficult when Christian false prophets from outside — often from other Christian denominations or para-church groups — come into the community and persuade some members of the Christian community to forsake aspects of their faith and traditions. This happens most frequently in remote areas where much needed support from outside comes together with the teaching imposed by other Christian denominations or para-church groups. Indeed, each denomination or para-church group has its own identity and doctrinal teaching. From the insider view of existing conservative believers, however, those who are from other Christian denominations are seen as ‘false prophets’. This is clear when these believers receive different teachings from outside, and some believers become confused as to which way they should follow. Tensions sometimes break out between those who are influenced by these teachings and the rest of the community, tensions that challenge the faith identity of some Christian communities in Myanmar. Similar issues seem to have arisen in the Matthean community (7:15; cf. 18:15-35).

A fourth fruitful parallel for further exploration is that just as the Matthean community was developing a universal outlook to proclaim the Good News to all nations, the Christian community in Myanmar also has a mission mandate to proclaim the Good News to the whole country and beyond. Since members of the Matthean community suffered persecution from the Gentiles after a long period — and especially if some family members were persecuted or killed — a negative response to the community stepping out to proclaim the Good News to all nations would not be surprising. Again these things are happening in the Christian community in Myanmar and seem to reflect similar issues in the texts of the Matthean community (cf. 10:5-6).
In sum, in ways analogous to the Matthean community, the Christian community in Myanmar suffers the pressure of socio-political crises as well as wrestling with its faith identity because of believers from different backgrounds and because of Christian false prophets. Thus as the community is opening up to a wider context to proclaim the Good News to all nations, it is a big challenge to be strong as well as steadfast. This research aims to clarify how the kingdom teachings of Jesus in Matthew speak to the Christian community in Myanmar in the midst of their crises. A closer examination of the kingdom teaching of Matthew thus seems to be particularly relevant to the Christian community in Myanmar for these reasons. This preliminary outline of some fruitful parallels between the two communities sets the parameters for dialogue between the two contexts that underlie the exegetical explorations of the next two chapters below.

F. Summary and Reflection: Gospel Community and Empire

The socio-historical analyses of the Matthean community in this chapter have shown that the author of Matthew was a Jewish Christian of the second generation and his community was located in Antioch on the Orontes. I have described the Matthean community not as a sect of Judaism that had recently broken away from Judaism, as some scholars have argued, but as a Jewish form of Christian community, already independently established from before the Jewish War and made up of a majority of ethnic Jews. As the Matthean community was located in Antioch, it had suffered under the pressure of Roman imperialism. The community, on the one hand, wrestled with a small number of Jewish conservatives (perhaps refugees from Judea) whose old way of thinking came to challenge the rest of the community. On the other hand, it had encountered itinerant false prophets from outside whose teaching came to challenge the
faith identity of the Matthean community. As the community was opening up to a wider mission to proclaim the Good News to all nations, it encountered these interruptions within the community. ‘Matthew’, perhaps as the leader of the community and in order to respond to and correct his community, derived the kingdom teaching of Jesus from Mark and Q with his own additions to address his particular context. These kingdom teachings will be discussed and analysed with a greater focus on narrative and redaction-critical methods in the next chapter.