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Matthew's Christian-Jewish Mission

In writing his Gospel, Matthew set out to illustrate that Jesus, in his life and in his death, fulfilled the prophecies and effectively made Judaism "complete." Matthew wrote his Gospel in the hopes that it would inspire a new kind of Christian-Judaism for future generations, in which the Jewish tradition would serve as a foundation to the truth and teachings of Jesus.

If alive today, Matthew would likely be appalled - though perhaps not surprised - to find the turn that Christianity has taken. Being a Jew who believed that Jesus Christ was the prophesied Messiah, Matthew considered his religion to be Judaism and not only did he *not* find his belief in Christ to be contrary to his being a Jew, he felt that Jesus' coming and resurrection had actually proved the very truth of his religion. But even in his day, Matthew saw that his fellow Christian Jews, a small sect that remained unaccepted by the Jewish elders, were straying from their own religion. Because of their group's alienation from other Jews, and because of the increasing number of Gentile converts, Christianity seemed to be coming into its own, apart from Judaism.

Not wanting to see Christianity break away from its very foundation, Matthew wrote his Gospel with -- at least partially -- the intent of proving that not only was belief in both Jewish doctrine and Jesus as the Messiah compatible, but that they were inseparable. Because Jewish prophets foresaw the Messiah's coming, and Jesus fulfilled that prophecy, the one defined the other. Without Judaism, there is no Messiah. And without the Messiah, Jewish prophecy continues to be unfulfilled.

More so than the other Gospels, Matthew emphasizes the importance of Jewish teaching and Torah Law. This only makes sense, as he most certainly was a Jew himself. By making deliberate and carefully chosen alterations to his sources, the Gospel of Mark and Q, Matthew plays up the relationship between the belief in Jesus as Messiah with the truth of Judaism.

Oddly, Matthew had historically been viewed as almost anti-Jewish, largely because of his emphasis on Jesus being the Messiah and His frequent and vehement criticisms of the Pharisees. But in recent years there has been much scholarly reexamination of the text and a subsequent flood of papers and research. It was prompted, perhaps, because the "traditional interpretation of Matthew's Gospel has often fueled a negative and prejudicial view of Judaism," thus making a "need for careful and responsible reading of Matthew's Gospel on this score" (Senior).

Such a reexamination must start by looking at the society in which the writer is living and the circumstances that he is dealing with in his everyday life. In his "Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew," David C. Sim describes Matthew's social environment and church as being in a peculiar position. In addition to experiencing non-acceptance from the established Jewish church, Matthew's group also

suffered persecution at the hands of Gentiles because of the tensions following the Jewish War. And while it was to be expected that they would not fit in completely with either of these groups, Matthew's church had further complications in that it did not seem to fit with the other "Christian" groups. With so many of them rejecting Torah Law for the most part, Matthew's church was unwilling to be associated with them and yet unable to receive acceptance from the Jews, who "in the chaotic period following the war, led to a consolidating movement on the part of the Pharisaic leaders" that led them to strive "for greater unity among themselves" and to attack "the legitimacy of deviant groups within the community" (Davies). Matthew and his 'Jewish-Christian' sect seemed to be one such "deviant" group.

Largely as a counterattack, no doubt, Matthew's Jesus criticizes the Pharisees at length. But though he berates the Jewish leaders for having become so focused on legalism, Matthew's Jesus still insists "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). Matthew has the unenviable task of trying to stay within his religion but forge ahead in a new theological direction. It's as if he is hanging on for dear life to his heritage and the foundation of his belief in Judaism, but at the same time trying to rein Christianity (which is already branching out and coming into its own) into the old religion. Constantly trying to maintain this balance, Matthew gives us a Jesus who must constantly qualify himself.

For instance, in Matthew 12, when Jesus and the disciples are attacked by the Pharisees for having picked and eaten heads of grain in a field on Sabbath, Jesus does not merely state that he feels they are imposing too strict rules on Sabbath observance. He does make the famous statement that "Man is the Lord of the Sabbath" (certainly a very controversial statement to any Jew, at least at that time), but before this he actually defends himself by citing precedence. "Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions ... entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread ... ?" (Matt. 12:3-4). Matthew's Jesus does shake things up and he does introduce new and controversial ideas, but he is careful to either keep everything within the parameters of Torah Law or to, in this case, validate the offense by comparing him to a wise man of old.

These comparisons are a technique Matthew uses often, drawing stories and characters from the Hebrew Bible frequently in order to connect Jesus to the kings, prophets, and wise men of Jewish history. At the very beginning of the book, he adds in a lineage that is not present in Mark, which links Jesus directly to King David (Matt. 1:1-16). By making Jesus a descendent of David, Matthew solidifies his place as an important Jewish figure in a more tangible way that will make it easier for some Jews to accept him as a savior to the Jewish nation. Matthew further establishes Jesus' link to this heroic past by equating him with the most significant character of the Hebrew Bible. Consistently, throughout the narrative, Matthew draws parallels of Jesus to Moses, proclaiming him as a sort of "new Moses."

Like Moses, Jesus has brought the Law to the people and he is also going to deliver them. However, an important differentiation between the two is also present. Moses *literally* brings the Law (i.e. The Ten Commandments) down from Mount Sinai and to the Jewish people, and he literally delivers the Jewish people out of Egypt. Jesus is realizing these same things in a different way. First by bringing the Law (once again) to the Jews through his teachings, and then by delivering them -- this time not to life, but

to *eternal* life -- through his death. With this parallel, he is able to convey his two main points which are the importance of the law of Moses to man as a guide for daily living and the equal though differently important message of Jesus that is to help guide us into a better life beyond this one. Matthew is in effect telling us that by Moses the people were freed, and by Jesus they were freed *for eternity*.

Dale C. Allison, Jr. supports the idea of Jesus as a Moses figure in his book *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*, asserting that Matthew uses special words and even particular grammatical patterns found in Moses' books, including a narrative structure that is reflective of Exodus. Of course, as Allison points out, most great figures in Jewish history were compared to Moses at some point and in some way, but Matthew seems to do it at great length. In addition to the above examples, Allison cites the narratives of Jesus' birth and infancy, his temptation by Satan, his transfiguration and the appointment of his successor as places in the Gospel where the similarities between the two emerge. An example of a place where he feels a direct parallel to Moses is the infancy story, where Jesus narrowly escapes death from a madman ruler named Herod (Matt. 2:12-16), just as Moses also barely escaped imminent death himself when Pharaoh ordered all Hebrew children to be killed (Ex. 1:22 - 2:3).

Detractors have pointed out that many of Matthew's references to Moses have in fact come from Mark and Q, but details and changes to these texts made by Matthew are indicative of his intentions. While the Sermon on the Mount is clearly from Q (as it is a set of sayings, most of which also appear in Luke), Luke's version is the Sermon on the *Plain*. It's a small change that Matthew has made, but a telling one that he has made it on a *mountain*, in order to parallel the aforementioned story of Moses bringing the Commandments down from the mountain (Ex. 34:29).

Matthew's loyalties are most apparent in the places where he shows a directly positive view on Torah obedience. In the aforementioned verses in chapter 5, Jesus is adamant that the law is not to be discarded (Matt. 5:17-20), and in 23:2-3 he even appears to be endorsing the teachings of the Pharisees when he says "therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them" (Donaldson). Despite his frequent charges that the Pharisees are hypocrites (Matt. 3:7, 23:29, to name a couple), Jesus does still acknowledge that their actual teachings are not at fault. It is they themselves at fault, for not following the law which they know to be true.

There are many such instances where he goes out of his way to do this, sometimes making the necessary changes, additions, and omissions to Mark and Q in order to further establish Judaism as the foundation upon which Christ's message is built. But, as Terence Donaldson notes in his paper on Matt. 22:40, "It is well known that the Gospel of Matthew as a whole is characterized by the curious juxtaposition of statements which, on the one hand, radically subordinate the letter of the Torah to the authoritative teaching of Jesus, and on the other, would not have been out of place in a rabbinic bet midras." So in between these professions that Torah teaching continues to stand supreme, we have Jesus' very unorthodox approach to the law. He takes radical positions on issues such as purity (Matt. 15:1-20) and divorce (Matt. 19:3-9), continuing with his policy of causing the Pharisees fits (Donaldson).

The Matthean church's attitude toward Gentiles is further evidence that they identified with - and had a great interest in protecting their relationship with - Judaism.

Having been persecuted by Gentiles in the wake of the Jewish War, David Sim contends that Matthew preferred his church to avoid the Gentiles and their world. According to Sim, even the converts were considered suspect by Matthew, since they paid no heed to the Law, which he and his church continued to follow. Sim cites verses such as Matt. 6:7-8 and 6:31-32 where they are portrayed in a particularly negative light, as people who are superficially pious and concerned with material goods.

All of that is not to say that there is not evidence to the contrary. After all, nearly the opposite position on Matthew's ultimate intention was held by scholars for years. And there is indeed plenty to back up the idea that Matthew's community actually supported the Gentile mission. Several stories portray individual Gentiles in a positive light (the Roman Centurion in the Passion narrative, for instance), proving that Matthew did not expressly dislike them. But even his acceptance of them did not mean he approved of their behavior on religious grounds. Just as he hoped his Gospel would help lead fellow Jews to belief in Jesus Christ, Matthew surely also saw the potential that in addition to accepting Jesus as the Messiah, Gentiles could also "learn the beauty of the Law, observe the codes of purity, be faithful to observance of the Sabbath, and, if necessary, sever invalid marriage ties for the sake of the kingdom" (Senior).

Yet this all amounts to the other side of a very complicated relationship. As stated before, Matthew's church was a strange fringe group that unfortunately felt very strongly about two opposing forces. Matthew himself could already see the way the tides were turning, and in an effort to keep the burgeoning Christianity from separating itself from Judaism (as far as Matthew is concerned, the two are inseparable), he wrote his Gospel. Here, Jesus, as the Messiah, as the "New Moses," brings and interprets the law anew (the chief commandment now is "love"), and though he challenges the established Jewish authority, he remains a *Jewish* Jesus. Torah Law is the foundation for Christianity, and cannot be set aside. So Matthew illustrates a new kind of Judaism that is, for him and his church, an enlightened one, where the prophecies of old have been fulfilled through Jesus Christ the Savior.

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