

New Testament A - Michaelmas Term
Yr.1
Essay 2

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In what sense, if at all, would Matthew have approved of the description of the Church as the new Israel?

[Jesus] said to those who followed him: " Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour. (Matthew 8:10-13)

There can be no more poignant, or disturbing, place to begin an exploration of Matthew's passionate concerns about the reluctance of the Jewish people to embrace his Messiah, than the story of the healing of the centurion's servant (8:5-13). In this account, Matthew presents, in embryo, the issues that his gospel account so urgently addresses. Here we read of Jesus' profound dismay and sadness about the inadequacy of the state of faith in Israel, the beginnings of the incorporation of the gentiles into the people of God and their promises, and the fate of the obdurate and unbelieving 'heirs of the kingdom'. The good news in the story is reserved for the centurion, a Roman citizen, who had faith in Jesus' authority to heal - and the outcome is new life.

This story gives a clear indication that, during the course of Jesus' ministry, the balance of power is shifting; that a 'new Israel' is being called into existence, under a new Moses, which is indeed the fulfillment of God's faithful promises to his people through history. But its exact nature and composition, and Matthew's understanding of its significance and distinctiveness from the Jewish nation are issues that deserve careful reflection.

Jesus addresses another important 'truly I tell you' saying to his faithful followers which lends this theme of change additional substance:

"Truly I say to tell you at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me, will also sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brother or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last and the last will be first (19:28-30).

But the question remains as to what exactly is being revealed here. Leading up to the Passion narrative, when Jesus entered the temple to teach, the chief priests and elders - the Jewish leaders - question his authority. In response, Jesus tells them the parable of the two sons, marked with a third 'truly I tell you' signpost¹:

“...the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you (21:31b. See also 21:23ff)

Jesus follows this alarming statement with the parable of the wicked tenants, who kill the landowner's slaves on two occasions after they were sent to collect his produce from his leased vineyard. In frustration he sends his son whom they also kill. Not only are tenants duly (and fatally) dealt with, the vineyard is leased to 'other tenants who will give him the produce of the harvest time' (21:41). But it is what follows that incenses the chief priests and Pharisees as they realize that this attack was directed at them (21:45):

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.” (21:43)

Who are these new tenants who are the recipients of the landowner's favour; these new people of God who are to receive the blessings of his kingdom? If the narrative stopped there, the reader would be left with the Jewish leaders wanting to arrest Jesus, but fearing the crowds and their regard for him as a prophet (21:46). But Jesus does not relent and pushes home his message to them by talking about the unworthiness of the original invitees to a wedding banquet (22:8b) and their replacement by a new and surprising set of guests.

Notwithstanding the disagreements about the date of Matthew's gospel, Garland is in little doubt that the writer connected Israel's rejection of its own Messiah with the subsequent fall of Jerusalem². “He interpreted these events as a concrete sign of God's punishment and rejection of Israel” (1979: 210). But

¹ Moreover, Matthew underscores the gravity of this pronouncement of Jesus by avoiding his customary use of the 'kingdom of heaven' by referring on this occasion to “the kingdom of God”.

² Most modern scholars, according to France (1985), conclude that Matthew was written within the last twenty years of the first century: that its perceived 'anti-Jewish tone' suited the period around 85AD when Christians were effectively excluded from synagogue worship and that there are possible allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD in certain passages e.g. Matthew 22:7 the parable of the wedding banquet, 23:38 “See your house is left to you desolate”, and parts of chapter 24 (Green 2000: 38).

Matthew is faced with the problem of how to account for God's punitive dealings with his own covenant people. The impact upon Matthew of Jesus' crucifixion (and the subsequent persecution of Jewish Christian believers) by the Jews is profound. His is the only gospel which records the Jews acknowledging responsibility for Jesus' death in 27:25:

"These facts served to foster and to reinforce the belief that God had no further recourse but to turn from Israel to another nation (composed of Gentiles and Jews, believers in Jesus) which would produce the fruits of the kingdom in due season" (*ibid.*)

But to then argue that this new community of believers is the 'new Israel', and simply replaces the Jewish nation, requires more prudent consideration. It would require the reader of the gospel to be convinced that Matthew has provided sufficient evidence of the demonstrable rejection of the good news of the promised Messiah by the Jewish leaders, that they stand condemned by God.³ Matthew makes the insinuation in chapter 23 that God's anger "had come upon Israel to the uttermost; and it could no longer lay claim to special status as God's people, not because God had failed, but because Israel had failed"⁴. Certainly it seems feasible to argue that the Jewish leaders, singled out for specific and repeated criticism by Jesus, had somehow failed their people. Matthew's use of the 'lost sheep' analogy gives a huge insight into his preoccupation to expose how hopelessly wrong the Pharisees and other powerful shapers of Jewish thinking had got it. The hostile tone which runs right through the gospel and which is sharper and more sustained than in the other gospels⁵ demonstrates how angry and incensed he is that their portrayal of faith in Yahweh was such a travesty, sham and charade. In chapter 12:6 Jesus uses Hosea (6:6) to indicate to the Pharisees that something great was going on and they simply could not, or refused to, see it. His anger rumbles on at 'this evil generation' which places 'stumbling blocks' in the way of people believing (12:45 and 18:6).

³ Which seems to be Kingsbury's (1977) position - cf. Matthew 22:8 'those invited were no longer considered worthy...' referred to earlier.

⁴ Garland (1979: 211)

⁵ Stanton (1992:126,127)

But this is not an unspecified anti-Jewishness, as some commentators have argued. This is material that pointedly denounces the Jewish leaders as 'blind guides' and 'hypocrites', and threatens that the kingdom of God will be taken away from the Jews and given to others who will make better use of it (21:43). It envisages non-Jews brought in from east and west to the banquet in place of the discarded historical people of God (8:11; 22:1-10).⁶ Despite the gospel narrative invoking a serious sense of judgment: that things seem to have gone far enough, and the temple in particular is to be destroyed, it is perhaps going too far to suggest that what Matthew is advocating is a complete disregard of the Jews in favour of incorporating the more responsive gentiles.⁷ Unlike the other gospel accounts, Matthew seems to relish seeking out connections between God's action in the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus. The invective he reserves for the Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish law certainly may reflect Matthew's closeness to the target of Jesus' (and his own) criticism, but it is evident that his central, all-consuming message is that Jesus, the long awaited Messiah is indeed the fulfillment of Old Testament promise⁸. It is his repeated assertion that 'all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet...' i.e. that the whole of the Old Testament in anticipating his coming is really *all about* Jesus' mission, that defines and distinguishes his gospel account.⁹ Moreover, Matthew is careful to include Jesus' heartbreaking grief at Israel's hard-heartedness.¹⁰

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See the house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:37-39)

⁶ although entrance to this feast, free and unexpected though it might be to the 'grafted in' gentiles, is not without conditions (France 1989: 231) - and Paul warned the newly ingrafted branches of the olive tree against assuming that their place was any more guaranteed than that of their predecessors (Rom.11: 20-22).

⁷ Carson *et al* (2000).

⁸ Wenham and Walton (2000: 222).

⁹ See for example Matthew 1:22; 2:15; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 17; 21:4; 23; 27:9.

¹⁰ that Jackman (1994) aptly describes as the saddest words in the whole gospel.

Matthew sees the story of the Old Testament, including the exodus, as the foreshadowing of Jesus whom he sees as the completion of the story.¹¹ Although the tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders is palpable and his reaction to them, particularly in relation to their obstinate dismissiveness about his authority, volatile and passionate, there is no reason to conclude that they are now forever 'beyond the pale'. The ubiquity of these confrontations throughout the narrative account goes some way towards explaining Matthew's great pains to present the theological case for Jesus (rather than the Christian community) as the true Israel.

The 'montage'¹² or conflation of encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 23 seems to have been constructed to illustrate how the Jewish leaders had failed in vital matters, most notably in their interpretation of the Law. In doing so they stood in direct contravention of God's will. But, according to Garland, Matthew's intention is not so much to vilify the Jews as to provide a warning to the church:

"The church itself is a mixture of weeds and wheat, good and rotten fish, good and evil wedding guests, faithful and evil servants; and it has its share of false prophets and hypocrites" (1977: 214).

It is in attempting to differentiate between 'church' (denoting the new covenant people) and synagogue (old covenant people) that the difficulties arise for the argument that the church now constitutes the new Israel. Frankemölle¹³ sees the term *ekklesia* or church as steeped in covenant theology. He argues that when Jesus talks about his church (16:8) Matthew draws his inspiration from Deuteronomy and Chronicles which speak of Israel as 'Yahweh's *ekklesia*' or assembly: the "church" is the faithful remnant who, through fidelity to the covenant, truly belongs to God. For Matthew, too, the church (assembly of God's people) means those who accept Jesus the Messiah as the new expression of the covenant. But not all would accept this singular emphasis on covenant as the major motif of Matthew's ecclesiology:

¹¹Schools lecture 25.10.02 David Wenham 'Matthew and the birth of Jesus' (The synoptic gospels and Matthew - series)

¹² Garland (1979: 213)

If, in fact, the church so definitely replaced Israel, it would seem logical for Matthew to name the Church as the 'new Israel'. But in fact Matthew does not go that far." (Senior 1983: 70)

The argument that Matthew would have left little to chance, given his otherwise meticulous attention to detail, is a persuasive one. But if the hypothesis that the church *is* the new Israel is unsupported, how are we to understand Matthew's anger towards the Jewish establishment, and Jesus' judgment on their obduracy? To redefine the question slightly, did Matthew and his readers see the newly established church as a distinct entity over against Judaism? Or was Matthew writing for Christian communities who saw themselves as still part of diverse Judaism, in spite of the strains that their allegiance to Jesus as Messiah inevitably brought?¹⁴

Examining Matthew against the background of relations between Christianity and Judaism has led some scholars to argue that the gospel came into being in an essentially Jewish community, where the building up of church life in independence of Judaism was in progress.¹⁵ But such observations do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Matthew and the Jewish Christians has parted company decisively with Judaism *per se*. Rather, that this was an opposition (for Matthew) between Christians and Pharisaism i.e. *within* Judaism. In Matthew's view, although Israel's rejection of the Messiah brings God's judgment, this does not exclude a mission by the Church to Israel. Nevertheless there are passages in Matthew (e.g. 10:23 and 23:24) which refer to persecution and which therefore clearly indicate that tension between the two communities has reached dangerous levels. Matthew's explicit association of the scribes and the Pharisees with 'synagogues' (e.g. 23:6,34) is a way of drawing a clear distinction between the synagogue, which for Matthew has become an 'alien

¹³ cited in Senior (1983)

¹⁴ Stanton (1992; 113)

¹⁵ Kilpatrick, cited by Stanton links this with the insertion of the *birkath ha-minim* into the eighteen benedictions of the synagogue liturgy; the additional clauses composed by Samuel at Jamnia in about A.D. 85. As a result, Christian Jews were excluded from the synagogues of the Pharisaic party (Stanton 1992: 119)

institution¹⁶, and the new community of true faith in the promised Messiah, which has accepted gentiles and developed its own patterns of worship.

What Matthew does is to highlight the personal bond between Jesus and the community of faithful followers - be they Jew or gentile. Moreover, he does present Israel's rejection of Jesus as a failure with historic consequences resulting in the inclusion of gentiles (e.g. 21:43). Belonging to the Church does involve faith in Christ (the wedding robe - 22:11) and obedience to the will of Yahweh as taught by and revealed in Jesus, the Messiah. Yet a passage like 23:39: "For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" demonstrates that Matthew does not write off all Jews for all time:

All Jesus' first followers remain Jewish, and missionary work must continue to include them and even give them priority (29:19, 10:23)¹⁷. Still, God's people are now being constituted as all those who follow Jesus in discipleship, not merely one chosen ethnic group. Blomberg (1997: 132).

While Matthew might have understood the reason for people's desire to recast the Church as the 'new Israel', he is sure to have used the history of Yahweh's dealings with the nation of Israel to point out the dangers of assuming that titles or traditional attachments ultimately assure God's favour (cf. the warning to the people in Jeremiah 7:12-14 not to place confidence in merely possessing sacred places of worship as an assurance of God's protection).¹⁸ This is not a mistake he would have wanted the new Christian community to repeat - and there were already problems emerging within it.

¹⁶ Stanton (1992: 129)

¹⁷ Tidball (1993) observes that on entering a city Paul's mission strategy was to make contact with people by using the existing social networks to which he related. So, originally, he made his way to the synagogue (Acts 13:5,14; 14:1; 17:2; 18:4; 19:8) or, in its absence, the place of prayer (Acts 16:13) to meet other Jews

¹⁸ Robinson (1938:52)

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