His Blood be Upon Us

Completion and Condemnation in Matthew's Gospel

By

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Table of Contents

Preface

There are two reasons why I decided to write this book. The first is that it provides me with an opportunity to reflect at length on one of the most complex sentences in Matthew's Gospel, the cry of "all the [Jewish] people" that "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). The second was seeing a photograph of a pro-Palestinian demonstration, held during May 2021, when conflict was raging across Israel-Palestine. One of those present at that demonstration held a placard with a drawing of Christ on the cross accompanied by the words "Don't let them do it again." The "them" referred presumably to Israelis or Jews or Israeli Jews. This is the charge of deicide, the killing of God, conflated with the blood libel, the claim Jewish people kill Christians in order to gather Christian blood to use in Jewish rituals, both of which have been levelled at Jewish people by Christians for centuries. The incident at the demonstration indicates that both charges are still present today. But are they justified? Were they ever justified? And how do we respond to both the long history of Christian persecution of Jewish people as well as the rise in contemporary antisemitism? Are there any plausible links between the "blood cry" of Matthew 27:25 and the so-called "blood libel" that began in 1150, and still resurfaces today? What about the issues of power and social standing that lie behind the text of Matthew's Gospel? How do we Christians, members of the world's biggest faith community, read and interpret words written when the first followers of Jesus were a tiny, embattled minority? As I will argue, the polemic of the text is the language of an embattled, scared, small group of followers of Jesus, responding to a perceived threat of attack or even extinction with every weapon they have, including vitriolic language. But how is that language to be taught and interpreted in our current context, where Christians are in the overwhelming majority vis-à-vis Jewish people? Exploring these issues is the task I have set myself in writing this book.

This is not the first time I have written at length about Christian antisemitism. In *Jesus and the Ioudaioi* (Wilson 2020) I explored how the Fourth Gospel portrays the *Ioudaioi*, variously translated as "Jews" or

"Judeans." The opening chapters of that book included a survey of Christian antisemitism down the centuries, and I will not repeat that general overview here. Indeed, I will reverse the trajectory of writing. *Jesus and the Ioudaioi* began with an overview and homed in on the Fourth Gospel. In this present volume, I will begin with Matthew's Gospel and then continue through history, discussing some of the occasions when the blood libel has been used as a pretext for the persecution and killing of Jewish people.

In a sense, the key question this book discusses is who does Matthew think is responsible for the death of Jesus. My answer is that it is Jesus himself, because three times he predicts his own death (16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19) and he acts provocatively and makes deliberate claims that invite his audience to conclude either he is divine or he is blaspheming. Jesus does this knowing that the punishment for blasphemy was death. Jesus also sets himself up as a rebel against the authority of the Roman Emperor and of Rome, and the penalty for such treason is also death. But ultimately, within the interpretative framework of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish messianic hope, and he brings God's plan for the redemption of humanity to its intended goal through his own life, death and resurrection. It is Jesus who chooses death so that others may have life. Any charge of deicide is misplaced if it does not focus on these facts.

Yet this interpretation remains contested; the charge of deicide, and the arguably associated blood libel, have become enduring cultural tropes and excuses for discrimination, hatred and murder. The stark reality is that anti-Judaism and antisemitic hatred of Jewish people has a long and shameful history within Christianity, from the Church Fathers through Martin Luther, right up to the present day. Numerous Jewish scholars whose work I have read in preparation for writing cite their own, contemporary, experience of antisemitism. To give one example, when Levine was seven, she was accused of deicide:

> A friend on the school bus said to me, "You killed our Lord." "I did not," I responded with some indignation. Deicide would be the sort of thing I would have recalled. "Yes, you did," the girl insisted. "Our priest said so." Apparently, she had been taught that "the Jews"

> were responsible for the death of Jesus. Since I was the only one she knew, I must be guilty (2006, 2).

How did an American Christian girl come to the conclusion her friend was a Christ-killer and/or a murderer of God? Because her religious leader taught her this was true. That may not have been the priest's intention, but it was the consequence of his actions. We must be aware of the damage our words can do.

At the conclusion to her discussion of Jesus as "the misunderstood Jew," Levine tells the story of Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov (1745-1807), who told his disciples that he had overheard a conversation between two villagers which taught him what it meant to love his neighbour. The first said, "Tell me, my friend, do you love me?" and the second replied that he loved his fellow deeply. The first responded, "Do you know what causes me pain?" and the second said that he did not. The answer came, "If you do not know what causes me pain, how can you say that you truly love me?" The rebbe's point was that to truly know what causes another pain is to truly love him (Levine 2006, 116-17). As a Christian, if I am to truly love my Jewish sisters and brothers, I must endeavour to understand how the faith I follow has caused them pain. That is my real purpose in writing this book.

There are eight main chapters in this book. The first chapter introduces some of the key academic debates about Matthew's Gospel. This sets the scene for the subsequent chapters that discuss aspects of the Gospel in more detail. Seven topics are covered: the nature of first-century Judaism; the genre of Matthew's Gospel; whether the primary focus of the Gospel is Rome; whether it was written before or after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple; whether the author resided in Antioch or Galilee; an overview of the "Matthew within Judaism" school of thought; and Bauckham's proposal that the Gospels were written for all Christians.

Chapter two explores what Matthew means by "fulfilment" in general and Jesus "fulfilling" the law in particular. After some orientation, the chapter begins with a note of caution from Levine and Brettler, two Jewish scholars of the New Testament. There follow the views of two groups: scholars of the "Matthew within Judaism" school, and six evangelical commentators,

four scholarly and two popular. The "Matthew within Judaism" school is included for at least two reasons: it is a prominent group within the academic study of Matthew's Gospel and their concerns speak to the focus of this book, namely wrestling with Matthew's simultaneously pro- and anti-Jewish stance. Evangelical commentaries are discussed because they take the Gospel seriously, wanting to retain it as a normative sacred text whilst recognising the problems with many specific verses. A mix of scholarly and popular commentaries are utilised to explore how the problems are tackled at different levels.

Chapter three discusses the nature of first-century polemic, in seven parts. First, the nature of polemic is explored. Second, the polemic of the Hebrew Scriptures and third, in the New Testament is discussed. Fourth, Overmann's selection of other non-canonical polemical texts is introduced. Fifth, Kampen's proposal of reading Matthew as a sectarian document is analysed. Sixth, the option of simply regarding Matthew as polemic is rejected, through recognition that the Gospel is a normative sacred text for billions of people, and seventh a more robust and nuanced response is explored.

The purpose of the discussion of polemic is to outline the context for the discussion of Matthew 23 in chapter four. Matthew 23 contains a sustained polemic against the Pharisees, spoken by Jesus, and as such is an important part of the wider discussion. How are Christians to respond to Jesus' harsh language in this chapter? Having situated the Pharisees historically, the chapter discusses four interpretative approaches to the text; the inter-faith focused approach of Hilton and Marshall; the discussion of the Pharisees by Yarbro-Collins and others; the views of some members of the Matthew within Judaism school; and the six evangelical views introduced in chapter three. The main conclusion is that for the Matthew within Judaism school, the polemic is interpreted as the beleaguered Matthean community defending itself by any means possible. For the evangelical Christian scholars any modern application of the polemic should be internally focused, that is, directed against oneself and one's fellow Christians.

Chapter five focuses on a single verse, the "blood cry" of Matthew 27:25, one of the most challenging verses of the New Testament, that is at the root

of the charge of deicide which has impacted Jewish people terribly down the centuries. The chapter has six parts: some cautionary words from Amy-Jill Levine; the narrative-critical approach of Heil; Sider-Hamilton's discussion of innocent blood; Konradt's exploration of the role of crowds; the Matthew within Judaism school; and the six evangelical perspectives. The main issue discussed is how this text is explained and interpreted by contemporary scholars, concluding the most common approach is to limit the scope to the crowd and their immediate children. These scholars lament the impact of interpretation that gave greater scope to the reference; but is this enough? It is all very well to recognise the charge of deicide is founded on an inaccurate interpretation of Matthew 27:25, but do preachers and teachers speak out against this falsehood?

Chapter six explores whether there is a connection between the blood cry and subsequent blood libels against Jewish people. The chapter proposes that anti-Jewish readings of Matthew's Gospel, especially 27:25, provided the foundations on which subsequent Christian antisemitism was built. In essence, the proposal is that if it was believed the Jews killed Jesus, then Christians expected Jews to try and kill them also. This appears to be the perspective of Thomas of Monmouth, the monk at Norwich Cathedral who first popularised and spread the blood libel. After discussing the Norwich case, there follows a brief history of blood libels down the ages, including exploration of incidents in Damascus, Kiev and Massena, New York, in more detail, noting the culpability of Christians in spreading these lies. The conclusion notes the blood libel is still spread today, even in Jerusalem.

Chapter seven explores ways Christians can preach from Matthew's Gospel with Jewish people in mind. Five proposals are introduced: the importance of acknowledging supersessionism; ways of removing anti-Judaism from the pulpit; the evangelical blogger Ian Paul's proposals on "how to not be antisemitic"; Harrington's suggestions in relation to Matthew's Gospel; and Jewish scholar of the New Testament Amy-Jill Levine's "alphabet of suggestions" for good Jewish-Christian relations. The purpose of the chapter is to provide opportunity for reflection on how to remain a faithful Christian teacher and preacher without being antisemitic.

Chapter eight consists of four sample sermons that demonstrate how the concerns raised in this book can be incorporated into public teaching. The texts discussed are Matthew 5:17-20; 16; 23 and 27:25. These sermons are simply examples, my own limited attempts at preaching with Jewish people in mind. They are aids to reflection, and are in no way definitive.

The postscript revisits the question of who killed Jesus, drawing together the threads of the whole discussion. I am particularly grateful to Dr Uri Gordon, and to other Jewish and Christian friends and colleagues for their insights, advice and guidance given to earlier drafts of this book. Much that is good in this book is down to them. Any errors, of omission or commission, remain entirely my own.

Chapter 1
When, Where, and Why was Matthew's Gospel Written?

One of the preoccupations of scholars of the New Testament is determining the occasion and provenance of the texts under scrutiny. That is to say, working out when, where and why they were written. There are no certainties in this quest, only probabilities, and there is a danger of circular arguments. One example of this process is where a certain feature of the text is identified as indicating a particular date of composition, and then on the basis of that feature, the date of composition is concluded. In Matthew's Gospel, the most often-cited verse in this regard is 22:7, which is taken as indicating the text *must* have been written after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. In the midst of the parable of the wedding banquet, the king, whose invitation has been scorned, sends his troops who "destroyed those murderers and burnt their city." As shall become clear below, the majority view amongst scholars is that this is a direct reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and so must have been written after those events occurred.

In what follows, I begin with a few points of orientation about first-century Judaism. Second, Donald Hagner's discussion of the nature of Matthew's Gospel is introduced. Third, Warren Carter's arguments in favour of a Roman-focus is evaluated. Fourth, the date, place of composition and focus of the text of Matthew is discussed, taking in the views of John Nolland, Aaron Gale, Craig Keener, Anthony J Saldarini, John Kampen and J Andrew Overman. Finally, some words of caution about the "Matthew within Judaism" school and an examination of Bauckham's "Gospel for all Christians" argument draw the threads together. The aim of this chapter is to familiarise the reader with some relevant academic debates within the study of Matthew's Gospel.

First-century Judaism

There have been many attempts at reconstructing the Judaism (or Judaisms) of the first-century CE. Two recent notable projects by Protestant Christian writers are the work of Dunn (2003, 2006) and Wright (1993, 1997, 2003). Dunn argues that although there is evidence of diversity, most people followed what he terms "common Judaism," which means Judaism as defined by the "Four Pillars" of Second Temple Judaism. Dunn explains these as monotheism; the election of Israel; covenant focused on Torah; and land focused on temple. Second Temple Jewish monotheism was absolute, denying the divine any partners or rivals. Israel was an elect nation, chosen by God to receive divine self-revelation. The Torah was given to Israel as part of God's covenant with Israel, and obedience to the Law of Moses was Israel's response to God's choice of Israel to be his people. The temple was the centre of Israel's economic, religious and political life, with the High Priest having as much a political as a religious function and the economic impact of temple festivals having as great a significance as their religious impact (see Dunn 2003, 286-92; 2006, 24-48 for more on these "four pillars").

Neusner explains that "Jesus came into a world of irrepressible conflict. That conflict was between two pieties, two universal conceptions of what the world required." That is to say, there was a clash between the Roman and Jewish understandings of the world. Roman government demanded a *pax Romana*, Roman rule, Roman imposed peace, with its blessings of civil order and material prosperity. As part of this commitment, they could never leave Palestine, which was the corner of a major trade route between Egypt and Asia Minor. But for Jewish people, who believed "history depended on what happened in the Land of Israel," and in particular what took place in Jerusalem, Israel needed to be free of Roman rule and focused on serving the Lord God (1984, 32-33). In a subsequent book, Chilton and Neusner (1995) are at pains to establish clear connections between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, whilst also pointing to their differences.

In her discussion of the birth of Christianity and the origins of Christian anti-Judaism, Fredriksen notes that Pagans who joined Judaism did so "on an individual, voluntary, ad hoc, and improvised basis" (2002, 14). She

explains that Jews did not actively reach out in mission because they were worried about making themselves unpopular. Fredriksen elaborates:

> Extremely tolerant of those outside the fold, Jews were rancorously, almost exuberantly, intolerant of variety within the fold. Battling with each other over the correct way to be Jewish was (one could say, is) a timeless Jewish activity, and at no time more so than in the late Second Temple period, precisely the lifetime of Jesus and Paul (2002, 15).

The debate within Second Temple Judaism was not over whether to fulfil the law, but how to do so. The controversies that Jesus gets embroiled in are therefore part-and-parcel of a wider, intra-Jewish debate about Torah obedience. The particular issue for Christians who are reading the New Testament today is therefore how to explain that the New Testament is full of intra-Jewish polemic but at the same time recognise that polemic can be read as a condemnation of Judaism itself (Fredriksen 2002, 14-18). Whilst it is factually accurate to observe that debates within first-century Judaism were polemical, this is insufficient in dealing with the history of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism that have their origins in the texts of the New Testament in general, and Matthew's Gospel in particular. A more robust approach must be taken. But before making suggestions as to what that approach might look like, it is important to first get the context clear.

Who was arguing?

Whilst today we talk in terms of Christians and Jews, those terms are much more slippery when used in the context of Second Temple Judaism. As Kampen explains:

> It is not clear that we can speak of something called "Judaism" in the first century CE in the same way that we speak of a Judaism or Christianity today, in which we compare systems of belief with some attention to resultant practices. I do not, however, think that the attempts prevalent in the 1990s to talk about "Judaisms" adequately resolved the problem for the analysis of Jewish history, since they

> simply assumed that there are multiple systems of belief. At the heart of the matter, as discussed in this volume, the debate is over practices and affiliation rather than belief and theology: Whose temple do you enter? Whose assemblies do you frequent? What practices do they have that you observe, and what is the rationale behind them? (2019, 3).

The question is thus primarily about loyalty and belonging. Behaviour defines membership of both in-group and out-group. With whom was Matthew arguing and how did those engaged in the debate understand themselves and those they were engaging with? How were these differences elucidated by the way in which people behaved, by which religious rites and practices they observed, and which they abstained from?

In his book *Borderlines,* Boyarin argues that the borders "between Christianity and Judaism are as constructed and imposed, as artificial and political as any of the borders on earth" (2004, 1). He uses a geo-political analogy to illustrate his point that there was no single incident that led to a definitive parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism, but a partitioning of what was a territory without border lines, as with Indian and Pakistan or Israel and Palestine. Boyarin continues:

> The border space between the juridical and abstract entities Judaism and Christianity, throughout late antiquity and even beyond, was a crossing point for people and religious practices (2004, 1).

Boyarin argues that those trying to create the borders created the notion of heresiology and so reinforced the very division they were policing (2004, 2-3). Although Matthew does not use the word heresy, it is clear that, if we follow Boyarin's view that orthodoxy and heresy are not things, but notions that are defined against each other, then at least one function of Matthew's Gospel is to distinguish between what he regards as orthodox, that is, an accurate interpretation of how God is at work in the world, and what is not.

The challenges come in discerning the interplay between the neat division between in-group and out-group Matthew tries to provide, and the messy reality of what people actually believed and did. That is to say, first-century

Christianity and Judaism should not be thought of as monolithic entities, but rather as amorphous groupings that had clear enough cores, but whose external borders were fuzzy rather than concrete. As he develops his argument, Boyarin uses the analogy of colour, suggesting that we contrast Christianity and Judaism in the first century with categories such as red or tall, rather than more fixed groupings such as bird or fish. That is to say, an item could be more or less red, more or less tall, but something is either a bird or it is not. In the same way, someone could be more or less Christian, but this is a graded, rather than an absolute, distinction (2004, 25).

Boyarin's focus is primarily the period after the New Testament was written, but his observations are just as salient for this period. He explains that "the difference between Christianity and Judaism is not so much a difference between two religions as a difference between a religion and an entity that refuses to be one" (2004, 8). Boyarin adds that the term "Judaism" in reference to a religion only really comes into being in the nineteenth century. Boyarin concludes:

> In the end, it is not the case that Christianity and Judaism are two separate or different religions, but that they are two different kinds of things altogether. From the point of view of the Church's category formation, Judaism and Christianity (and Hinduism later on) are examples of the category *religions*, one a bad example and the other a very good one, indeed the only prototype. But from the point of view of the Rabbis' categorization, Christianity is a religion and Judaism is not. Judaism remains a religion for the Church because, I will suggest, it is a necessary moment in the construction of Christian orthodoxy and thus Christian religion, whereas occasional and partial Jewish appropriations of the name and status of religion are strategic, mimetic and contingent" (2004, 13).

Boyarin's contention is that the Church defined Judaism as a religion purely for internal purposes of self-definition; that is to say, one way in which Christians defined the borders of their religion in the first few centuries was to be categorical about who was excluded. This desire, to

define "Christian" as "not-Jewish," is a dangerous move, especially when Christians have most, if not all, of the power.

The point to particularly bear in mind throughout this study is that we bring our own unconscious biases to the analysis of the text. Christians should be wary of presuming to know what Judaism is, what Jewish people believe, and how Matthew's Gospel is heard by Jewish people. We presume we know more about those who are not like us than is, in fact, the case. A particularly serious example of this is the tendency to presume the New Testament's portrayal of Jewish people must be accepted entirely at face value. Moreover, we must be careful in presuming to know what different words mean, or the intention behind use of polemic or confrontational language. Alternative meanings must be considered, and the function of language considered carefully. As Boyarin points out, a more nuanced, self-reflexive approach is needed.

What sort of text is Matthew's Gospel?

Recognition of genre is important when reading a text; to give a simple example, a letter from a solicitor will use different language from a letter from a spouse. Most genres have stylistic conventions; if we know the genre, the task of interpreting the text becomes simpler. This is a true for New Testament texts as it is for any other writing.

Hagner identifies seven possible genres for the Gospel of Matthew. It might be classed as a gospel, that is, as an account of the life of Jesus. But it might also be described as a midrash, "setting forth an edifying, theological interpretation of Jesus in, or under the form of, historical narrative." Third, it might be a lectionary to supplement the Jewish festival year. Fourth, a catechetical manual, perhaps for a so-called Matthean school of Christian instruction. Fifth, was Matthew's Gospel written to provide corrective guidance to a community under pressure? Or sixth, is it primarily missionary propaganda, particularly with the purpose of persuading Jews that Jesus is the Messiah? Finally, it might be a polemic against the rabbis, particularly in the context of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE (1993, lvii-lix).

There is no particular reason to settle on only one of these alternatives; Matthew's Gospel may well fulfil many, if not all, of these functions. The point is simply to note that the text functions in a variety of ways. When we read the Gospel, or extracts from the Gospel, a helpful place to begin is to decide what type of text we are reading, what was Matthew's intention in writing it, and where is his focus.

Is Matthew focused primarily on Rome?

If we have some ideas as to what type of text Matthew's Gospel is, the next question is, where is his focus when writing? Warren Carter is a New Testament scholar who reads the texts primarily through the lens of the Roman Empire. Thus he argues:

> Matthew's plot is an act of imperial negotiation. Unfolding in six stages, its central dynamic comprises conflict between Jesus and the Rome-allied (Jerusalem based) leaders. It ends with God raising Jesus, crucified by an imperial elite (2007, 424).

In Carter's reading, the Jewish authorities are proxies for Rome, and thus Jesus' mission is primarily to repair the damage that Rome has done to Israel. A typical example is Carter's interpretation of the payment of the temple tax. Carter notes that Jesus instructs Peter to pay the half-shekel temple tax with a coin found in the mouth of a fish (17:24-27). Before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, this tax was paid to the Temple authorities. But after the Temple was no more, the Emperor Vespasian co-opted the payments, using it to fund rebuilding and maintenance costs of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. This reminded the Jews not only of Rome's military might, but also of the supposed superiority of Jupiter against the God of Israel. In Carter's interpretation, Matthew's account of the incident is written after 70 CE, and thus Jesus "reframes an action intended to humiliate by attributing to it a different significance that dignifies the dominated and attests to God's sovereignty, not Rome's" (2007, 430). Equally, in Carter's reading of the Passion Narrative, it is Pilate who manipulates the Jerusalem based religious leaders into begging him to crucify Jesus. Matthew, Carter contends, exposes this strategy of the

doomed Roman empire ranged against Jesus the agent of God's empire (2007, 432-33).

Although Carter defends his argument well, it is out of step with the current majority view on the purpose of Matthew. Most scholars focus primarily on the idea of Matthew within Judaism, rather than Matthew focused against Rome. Despite not being widely taken up, Carter's view is an important corrective to the presumption that Matthew is solely focused on an intra-Jewish debate. Although I do think Matthew does want to argue with his fellow Jews about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, that does not mean he had no concern for gentiles or the Roman empire. The language of the "kingdom of the heavens" that is so common in Matthew is aimed at multiple audiences.

Was Matthew written before the destruction of the Temple?

Rome was the occupying military power in the Palestine of Jesus' day, and when Matthew was written. But there is a debate as to precisely when in that occupation Matthew wrote. In what follows, I set out two arguments for a relatively early date of composition. John Nolland argues that Matthew was written prior to the Jewish war that led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. This means he is confident that the traditions which lie behind the Gospel text, if not the Gospel text itself, were produced at a time when there were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and ministry who were themselves still alive (2005, 12-13).

The main reason for his scepticism is that the text of Matthew's Gospel does not, in his view, contain anything that anchors it specifically in the 80s or 90s CE, nor do the supposed hints of knowledge of destruction of the temple (22:7; 23:36, 38 and 24:2) indicate anything that means we must believe them to have been written after that event occurred. In Nolland's understanding, New Testament critical scholarship only identifies as "genuine" those alleged prophecies which are not fulfilled, and any apparent prophecy that has been fulfilled is argued by those who hold this view to actually have been composed after the event. Nolland rejects this scepticism. He acknowledges the prophecy in 22:7 might have been

"touched up" after the fall of Jerusalem, but is clear that it is an "un-called for imposition" to presume the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple could not have been predicted before the events occurred (2005, 14).

Nolland himself is sceptical about identification of the precise situation faced by the Matthean community. He argues that there were many rifts within first-century Judaism, and that the mutual hostility which characterised these divisions means we cannot be sure precisely what the hostility towards the Pharisees in chapter twenty-three indicates about the situation faced by Matthew and his fellow followers of Jesus. It is possible that the Matthean Christians had their own synagogues, but that might equally be true of other Jewish groups. There is, Nolland points out, no clear plan or record of the split between Christianity and Judaism, and as such we cannot know where precisely to place Matthew within that larger frame (2005, 15-16). He concludes:

> More broadly, the lack of precision in Mt. 24 and the limitation of a precise fit between the materials in Mt. 24 and first-century events between the time of Jesus and the outcome of the Jewish war make it likely that Matthew reports prophecy before the event, and not prophecy after the event, as so often maintained (2005, 16).

For Nolland, then, Matthew is an early composition, with not much to say about the situation faced by Matthew, and his fellow followers of Jesus.

Quarles (2021) argues in favour of a pre-70 date for Matthew primarily on the basis of the "oath formulae" of Matthew 23:16-22. This passage consists of a polemical condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees (described here as "blind guides") for permitting people to swear on the basis of different aspects of the temple (the gold held in the sanctuary, the gift on the altar). Quarles notes that these particular types of oaths are rare to non-existent after the destruction of the temple, which makes good sense, as who would make an oath on the basis of something that no longer exists? Quarles then extrapolates from this evidence to suggest that for the polemic of Matthew 23:16-22 to have the desired rhetorical impact on those with whom the Matthean Jesus-followers were debating, the temple must still be standing

and the oaths must still have some validity. That is to say, if an oath sworn on the temple loses its force once the temple is destroyed, why reference the fact that your opponent permits such oaths if they no longer, in fact, do so? Since these oaths were only sworn while the temple was still standing, that therefore implies that Matthew's Gospel was written the temple existed, that is, before 70 CE.

As with Carter's argument above, this case for an early date has not convinced the majority of scholars, who are more persuaded by a post-70 date for the composition of the text. Personally, I think Nolland and Quarles make some worthwhile points, and so I am open to the possibility that the final form, or a near final form, of the Gospel was written before the destruction of the temple. I do recognise that presumption of a later date is useful for mirror reading the context of the so-called "Matthean community" from the text of the Gospel. But this process is entirely speculative, and so although it is a useful interpretative strategy, it must not be held too tightly. The same can also be said of the debate as to the place of composition, where the two main contenders are Syrian Antioch and Galilee.

Antioch or Galilee?

Aaron Gale argues that the Matthean community were followers of Jesus who also observed the stipulations of Torah, and were based in Sepphoris in Galilee. He argues that Judaism in Palestine after 70 CE was in turmoil – no wealth, no temple, forced exile. One of the two cornerstones of the faith (the temple) had been destroyed, and so the leaders of Judaism, the rabbis, gathered in Yavneh to reformulate Judaism focused on the other cornerstone, the Torah. In Gale's reconstruction, Palestinian Judaism maintained a coherent form during this process of reformulation, in both the Jerusalem region and in Galilee. Gale's focus is on what happened in Galilee, where he argues there was a revival of Jewish practice and thought. But it wasn't all plain sailing. There were complaints about those who were not observing Torah, which Gale suggests is a reference to Jewish Christians.

Gale's argument is that the scribes who wrote Matthew's Gospel were in conflict with those who were attempting to reshape Judaism centred primarily on the Torah. Both groups were active in Galilee towards the end of the first century CE, and both were competing for leadership of the Jewish community in the region. This is why Jesus talks about fulfilling the law in Matthew 5:17-48; 23. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud teach that it is prohibited to add or subtract anything from the Torah. "Simply put, Matthew and formative Judaism were fighting over the Torah" (2005, 31).

Gale gives four reasons for regarding Matthew's Gospel as a thoroughly Jewish text. First, all the titles used are Jewish (apart from "apostles" in 10:2). Second, only Jewish speakers refer to Jesus as "teacher," while Gentiles call him "Christ" or "Son of God." Third, Jesus is in discussion with Jewish religious leaders, for example the scribes and Pharisees of 12:38. Fourth, Jesus himself makes extensive use of the Hebrew scriptures. The picture Gale constructs is of a group of Torah-observant Jews, who have also become convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised messiah, gathered in a major urban centre in Galilee, such as Sepphoris. This group is in regular dialogue – and dispute – with other groups of Jews, especially those who are reconstructing Judaism to be primarily Torah focused after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Gale discusses the scholarly contention that the community which produced Matthew's Gospel was based in Antioch, and dismisses the hypothesis on at least four grounds. First, he argues that even in the Galilee, Jews did speak Greek, and so the language of the Gospel does not preclude a Galilean origin. Second, Gale proposes that Antioch was probably too big to serve as a base for the Matthean community to be the only Christian presence; in his view, Sepphoris was a more suitable size. Third, whilst it is true that Matthew 4:15 refers to "Galilee of the Gentiles," this phrase is unique in both Matthew and Isaiah, whom Matthew is quoting. Far from indicating that the region was predominantly Gentile, it indicates Matthew's reinterpretation of Isaiah's messianic hope that all nations would come under the influence of the God of Israel. Fourth, and finally, Matthew's Gospel focuses on Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Gale argues that Matthew was

written in Sepphoris, the most important city in the region at that time (2005, 1-63).

As he develops his hypothetical reconstruction of the Matthean community, Gale argues that it was wealthy, citing evidence of flourishing Galilean commerce, involving agriculture, fishing and potentially the book trade. Moreover, Matthew refers more to wealth than the other Gospels. The debtor in Matthew 18:23 owes ten thousand talents (in contrast with Luke 7:41's mention of five hundred denarii); Jesus approves of the Temple tax, mentioning coins unique to Matthew (the two-drachma coin, 17:24 and the shekel, 17:27); and curses the Pharisees for their oaths sworn on the gold of the sanctuary (23:16-17). Finally, the parable in which slaves are tested by being given wealth has a far more valuable denomination (talents) than in Luke (who uses pounds) as can be seen by contrasting Luke 19:11-27 with Matthew 25:14-30 (Gale 2005, 64-76).

Kampen supports Gale's argument, explaining that

> The gospel of Matthew demands a provenance that was Jewish and included representatives of some of the sectarian groups found in the Jewish communities at the end of the first century or their successors. That Jewish community was located in an urban environment, most likely somewhere in Galilee in the Roman province of Syria, since that is the area which would have had the most proximity to the kinds of sectarian groups mentioned in Matthew and present in Judea in the first century, particularly as they are described in Josephus. The use of the Greek language also points to an urban environment and to a significant role for that Jewish community within it. The author presumed not only an immediate circle of devotees but a wider circle of Jewish readers and hearers (2019, 20).

In Kampen's view, although other locations are possible, Galilee is the most persuasive possibility.

Whilst Gale and Kampen favour Galilee as the place of composition of Matthew's Gospel, others are unsure. Craig Keener recognises that we can reconstruct some of the basic details of the context that Matthew is writing in response to, but that any detailed proposals are necessarily speculative. He is comfortable with Antioch as location for the Matthean Community. He recognises the evidence is meagre and suggests it was

> an urban center in Syro-Palestine that spoke Greek, included a sizable Jewish community residentially separated from Gentiles, probably remained bitter against the Romans for the recent massacres of 66-70, and remained in touch with rising currents in Judea (1999, 42).

Thus, Keener adopts the more established view of composition in Antioch in the 70s or 80s of the first century.

In his discussion of the situation addressed by Matthew's Gospel, Keener welcomes the corrective influence of Bauckham's "Gospel for all Christians" proposal that rejects the detailed reconstruction of specific communities targeted by a particular Gospel. But at the same time, Keener argues that Matthew does have particular emphases and allusions that suggest a largely Jewish audience. He suggests that modern concepts of a "target audience" or "market niche" might provide a useful framework for understanding that when we refer to a "community" this does not mean a single house church or movement within a city, but rather a broad focus (1999, 45). Keener suggests that Matthew particularly targets the successors of the scribes and the Pharisees, that is the "founders of the rabbinic movement at Jamnia and whatever Jewish leaders throughout Syro-Palestine may have been aligned with or influenced by them" (1999, 46). Keener explains that Matthew, like Jesus, agreed with some of the Pharisees' teaching but disapproved of their behaviour. Keener adds that there is no need to reference the *birkat-ha-minim*, the "curse against heretics" that tradition held was promulgated by the rabbis at Yavneh in the 70s CE. Support for this understanding has faded in recent years, and Keener is typical in preferring to imagine a general tone of opposition and distrust,

rather than an organised opposition grouping, as the likely backdrop against which Matthew wrote (1999, 46-47).

Keener is agnostic as to whether the Matthean Christians had severed all contact with the synagogue, but is clear that they held themselves apart as a distinct grouping (1999, 48). He explains

> I find in the Gospel an author and audience intensely committed to their heritage in Judaism while struggling with those they believe to be its illegitimate spokespersons (1999, 49).

It is important to remember that leaving the synagogue in the first-century is not like switching church allegiance in the twenty-first. Being expelled from or choosing to leave the synagogue meant leaving your whole social world and family, cutting oneself off from all relationships of social and economic dependence.

In his conclusion to the introduction of his commentary, Keener explains that the evidence from both Matthew and John supports the idea that Jesus was a popular figure in the first-century, even after his death, and that his followers were still respected in Galilee. But there was an emerging threat: the successors to the Pharisees were emerging as a rival dominant force, with a different understanding of the nature of authentic Judaism. Although this group was not yet powerful, it had sufficient traction with the intelligentsia and influencers of the day that Jewish Christians began to feel threatened by them. Thus, as the debate developed between the numerous but relatively powerless Jewish Christians and the smaller group of Pharisaic elites, Matthew wrote his text to equip his readers with ready responses to the Jewish legal scholars with whom they disagreed, as well as to encourage them to devote their energies to the mission to the gentiles, as a precursor to the expected repentance of all Israel. In this situation, facing persecution, false prophets, apostasy and the need for more workers, Matthew writes to encourage the church to faithfully follow Jesus (1999, 70).

Although Keener's reconstruction is attractive, I am not completely convinced by it. As we will see below, it is difficult to provide clear

evidence of continuity from first-century Pharisees to subsequent rabbinic Judaism. We simply do not know anything concrete about Matthew's own situation either. It is likely he faced opposition; it is certain that Jesus did, as Jesus' crucifixion is one of the few certainties in this whole debate. Much of the rest is down to a balance of probabilities.

It is impossible to be sure when or where Matthew's Gospel was written. As noted above, I can see the strengths of the case for a pre-70 date of composition, but also note the majority view of a later date, and the interpretative strategies that are built on that presumption. Regarding place of composition, I find Gale and Kampen's view marginally more persuasive than Keener's. This is partly because of where and how the Gospel ends (in Galilee, with the disciples sent out from there) and partly because recognition of a potentially earlier date makes Galilee all the more plausible. But in the end, there is no certainty and whichever options are chosen does not impact the argument of this book that much. A more pressing concern is the relationship between Matthew and the Jewish community, to which I now turn.

Matthew within Judaism

There is a trend within recent scholarship of Matthew to locate the text primarily within Judaism. As will be seen below, this is not entirely unproblematic, but is nevertheless a useful thought experiment. Anthony Saldarini is one scholar who takes this approach. Saldarini explains his position as follows: that Matthew and his community

> are Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. The Matthean group is a fragile minority still thinking of themselves as Jews and still identified with the Jewish community by others. Despite its sharp conflicts with the leaders of the Jewish community and its experience of standard disciplinary measures, or better, because of these negative relationships, the Matthean group is still Jewish (1994, 1).

He adds that such experiences of rejection do not necessarily drive a minority group away; in this case, as in others, being labelled as deviant actually encourages adherence to the main group. Saldarini also rejects classification as "Christian" as anachronistic, and a category error, and rejects an approach that only listens to the voice of the majority, dominant group. Saldarini argues that what groups say about themselves and others often reflects what they wish was true, rather than what is actually true. Thus, Matthew's group have recently withdrawn from or been expelled by the majority Jewish community, but they still have close symbolic and actual ties with the main group. Matthew hopes that one day his view will become the majority one within the Jewish community (1994, 1-2).

For Saldarini, Matthew's Gospel speaks to two worlds, both the developing Christian theology that flourished in the second century, and also the Jewish debate as to how to live and practise faith in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple. He argues that the Gospel is "an integral and coherent whole reflecting a Christian-Jewish group which keeps the whole law, interpreted through the Jesus tradition" (1994, 7). The purpose of the Gospel is to promote Matthew's understanding of Judaism over against any other views. But this is not an exclusionary approach, as

> members of the Jewish community who reject Jesus, especially the leaders, are excoriated in the prophetic mode as unfaithful members of Israel, but members nonetheless. Israel is the concrete community of Jews from which Matthew has been banned, but to which he still thinks he belongs (1994, 7).

This means Matthew must be located within first-century Judaism rather than as external or in opposition towards it. Saldarini argues that first-century Judaism was highly diverse, not centralised or monolithic as is sometimes presumed. The first followers of Jesus were Jewish and operated within Judaism. The process of separation was gradual and took generations; it was only starting to take place at the time Matthew was written. Christians and Jews continued to compete for followers and position within wider society for several hundred years, into the fourth century. Saldarini notes, for example, that John Chrysostom perceived

Judaism to be a threat in fourth-century Antioch. Far from seeing the development of Christianity as uniform and smooth, Saldarini argues it was uneven and complex, and that there is evidence of these differences even in the pages of the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark, which he argues was written in the 70s of the first-century has a subtly different perspective on many questions vis-à-vis the Gospel of Matthew, never mind the views of other, non-canonical texts. Saldarini concludes that both rabbinic Judaism and the Jesus movement began as reformist groups within Judaism. The former flourished across the Roman Empire and Mesopotamia, reforming existing Jewish communities, whilst the latter came to focus primarily on gentiles, and so became an independent religion. Despite a growth in anti-Jewish attitudes, good relations also persisted. For Saldarini it is unnecessary to posit a sharp division between "Jews" and "Christians" at the time Matthew's Gospel was written (1994, 11-26).

Overman's views are similar to those of Saldarini. In Overman's reading of the setting and context in which Matthew's Gospel was written, Matthew and his fellow disciples of Jesus were in dispute with the Pharisees and the scribes over what constituted authentic Judaism in the wake of the destruction of the temple. Overman believes that this debate lurks just below the surface of the text of the First Gospel. Thus, the scribes and the Pharisees represent those who challenge the Matthean Community over their interpretation of the law, they are the yardstick by which Matthew defines pious and just behaviour and they plot against Jesus. In Overman's reconstruction, the Pharisees and the Matthean community both have gatherings (in *synagoge* and *ecclesia* respectively), both had authoritative teachers and devoted disciples, and both were seeking to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the temple (1996, 12-16). Overman concludes that the scribes and Pharisees "were the legendary bad boys in Matthew's world. Matthew's church viewed these people not just as rivals, but as threats to their safety and way of life." Perhaps, Overman suggests, some had even started leaving the Matthean church in favour of the Pharisees, and is this exodus the Gospel is written to stop (1996, 20).

The main contention of the "Matthew within Judaism" school is just that; Matthew's Gospel much be read as part of an intra-Jewish argument. This is useful in developing a response to the polemic found in the text, but it is not without problems of its own.

Some words of caution

Whilst there has been a strong push in some recent scholarship to reconstruct a hypothetical Matthean community and mirror read that community's experience from the text of the Gospel, this is an imaginative exercise that can potentially go too far.

Amy-Jill Levine comments that it is incorrect to argue that the "entire Jewish world" was in alliance against Jesus and his followers. In her view, it is more accurate to compare the Jewish leadership with other elites, whether the Roman rulers, or Jesus' disciples who become too certain of their own importance or even "those who attempt to control the church through domination rather than those who guide through service" (1988, 99).

We must be aware of the danger of reading our prejudices and biases into the text. Having said that, it is clear that Matthew is a problematic text. As France puts it, "Perhaps the central problem in the study of Matthew's gospel is how to make sense of the apparently inconsistent attitude towards Judaism which the gospel displays" (1989, 95).

France notes there are all kinds of pointers towards a Jewish-focus of Matthew's gospel, including transliterated Aramaic words (*raka*, 5:22, *mammon*, 6:24, *korban*, 27:6); reference to details of Jewish customs (such as handwashing at meals, 15:2, phylacteries and tassels, 23:5, burial customs, 23:27); not to mention "an almost obsessive interest in and subtlety in the use of the Old Testament." But it is not just these details, as the "whole tone" of Matthew is set to present Jesus in terms a Jewish person would understand, "however radical and objectionable he might have found some aspects of its teaching" (1989, 97). Matthew is invested in Judaism, but has

his own take on what that means, and what the "correct" way of being Jewish consists of.

In his discussion of whether Matthew's church was "inside" or "outside" of Judaism, France notes that real life is rarely as clear cut or straightforward as some scholarly scenarios might suggest. He finds the entire debate unsatisfactory and argues that for a Jewish person who chose to follow Jesus, there was an inevitable tension of being simultaneously "inside," in the sense of self-identifying as Jewish, but also "outside," in the sense of offering "a fierce repudiation of official non-Christian Judaism" (1989, 101).

France's recognition of the mess of real life is a helpful corrective to an overly neat and tidy theoretical academic proposal. Perhaps the best response to the question of the relationship between Matthew and Judaism is to argue that Matthew's community was in a liminal space, and this produced tension and fear, some of which manifests itself in the text of the Gospel. But can we be certain that it was written for a single community?

Matthew for all Christians?

There is an established trend within New Testament studies of reconstructing specific communities as the primary target audiences of each of the four Gospels. The challenge of this approach is that it is speculative, hypothetical and in danger of circular arguments. Not all scholars agree that the Gospels should be understood in this way, and I close this chapter with an overview of the counter-arguments.

Richard Bauckham's primary focus is to recover the idea that the Gospels are eyewitness testimony rather than veiled accounts of the communities for which they were allegedly written (2017, 4). He adds that the Gospels "were written within living memory of the events they recount" (2017, 7). Bauckham's main point is that the notion of a "Matthean Community" (or for that matter a "community" associated with any of the four gospels) is in fact a modern invention that has little substantive impact on the formation of the canonical texts. In Bauckham's reconstruction, the model