

PAUL FOSTER

Community,
Law and Mission
in Matthew's Gospel

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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Mohr Siebeck

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Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This book represents a minor revision of my doctoral thesis, of the same title. The thesis was submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oxford, and was examined on All Saints' Day, 2002. Prof. Jörg Frey, editor of *WUNT 2* was extremely efficient, helpful and supportive, in reading, recommending and commenting on the manuscript within three weeks of receiving it. This level of professionalism has also been exhibited by Dr Henning Ziebritzki, Mr Matthias Spitzner, and the whole editorial team at Mohr Siebeck.

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St Matthew's Day, 21 September 2003

Paul Foster

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Aims

This study seeks to make a contribution to Matthean scholarship by looking at the issues of the social location of the community, the role of the law within that community and its attitude towards the Gentile mission. Since the early nineteen nineties there has been a trend towards viewing the community behind the gospel as primarily a Jewish separatist group with the central belief that Jesus was the Messiah.¹ Some of the strongest advocates of this position have argued that the adherents to Matthew's teaching rejected contact with Gentiles and maintained a separate existence until the group faded away in late antiquity, perhaps under the influence of the spread of Islam. By focusing on the issues of the authority base of the community especially in relation to its attitude towards Torah, as well as the community's attitude to Gentiles as reflected in the text of the gospel, this study attempts to call into question some of these recent reconstructions. Instead, it is argued that at the time of the composition of the gospel the group had been decisively rejected by other parties in formative Judaism, and that the gospel was both a supersessionary document claiming many of the prerogatives of Judaism as its own, but also a pedagogical document encouraging and instructing the community with dominical authority, to continue and enlarge upon an outwardly focused Gentile mission.

There has been much debate in the last fifty years on each of the topics of community, law and mission in Matthew's gospel, yet it is important not to treat them as separate entities, but to see them as interrelated parts of an overarching whole. Obviously, these three areas of study do not form an exhaustive list in Matthean research. Christology,² ecclesiology³ and

¹ For a full discussion of this trend, see the survey of recent research in chapter two.

² For studies on Matthean Christology see Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*, Verseput, 'The role and meaning of the "Son of God" title in Matthew's Gospel', 532-56.

³ The works on Matthean ecclesiology are legion. For a recent treatment of the group from a sociological viewpoint see Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics and Justice in Matthew*. A slightly older, but highly valuable treatment is to be found in Schweizer, *Matthäus und seine Gemeinde*.

eschatology,⁴ to name but three more possibilities, are topics which are also vital in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the theology and ethos of the communities for whom Matthew wrote. It must, however, be stressed that such aspects as these are not totally neglected in the present study. Yet, they are not given equal space as the three main topics under consideration, rather they are treated in an *ad hoc* manner when the major areas require reference to such discussions. In part, this is obviously a constraint of the limited space of this study, but it is not only a purely mechanical limitation. The decision to prescind from a detailed treatment of some of these other topics does allow this work to develop in a more focused manner in relation to its core interests. These three topics already cover a breadth of Matthean material and without a certain amount of selectivity the task at hand could become undifferentiated and lacking in clarity of thought.

More significantly, however, the issues of law and missionary orientation, in relation to Gentiles, offer potentially greater insight into assessing similarities and differences between formative rabbinic movements and the intended audience of the first gospel. In part, the obvious reason for the study of these categories is the fact that both groups had attitudes to Torah and proselytising that are recorded in extant literary sources. By contrast, although Judaism must have had a group structure perhaps based around synagogue meetings, it is not possible to reconstruct with any degree of certainty significant information about such structures in order to make a meaningful comparison between the organisation of the two groups. On the other hand the interest of early rabbinic writings in Torah and halakhic issues does not need to be demonstrated, for even a cursory glance at Mishnaic and Talmudic sources demonstrates the fundamental centrality of correct understanding of the law. Similarly, although the attitude to proselytization is perhaps less well known, the extant Jewish material discusses this issue at some length. As Goodman's study clearly demonstrates, the attitude of the ancient sources is nearly uniformly opposed to a highly organised and active mission to Gentiles.⁵ He does not argue that conversion to Judaism did not take place but rather that there was no strong impetus to engage in missionary activity. An even more extreme conclusion is drawn by Cohen, who unlike Goodman has perhaps polarised the evidence, but nonetheless portrays Judaism in antiquity as never being mission orientated and not interested in

⁴ For a recent treatment of Matthean eschatology see Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*.

⁵ Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*.

proselytising after 135 C.E.⁶ By its very nature, the Matthean promotion of a mission orientated outlook should signal substantial differences from formative Judaism. Therefore, the investigation of the topic of mission in the first gospel seeks not only to illuminate the question about who were the primary focus of such proselytising activity, but also demonstrates that such activity was in itself markedly different from normative Jewish praxis.

1.2 Intended readership

One of the assumptions of this study is that there did in fact exist during the last quarter of the first century C.E. a group of people living in reasonably close geographical proximity to one another who would have been the intended audience for the first gospel. This is not to assume that Matthew was necessarily writing for a single community or meeting of believers in Jesus. As Stanton has emphasized, the genre of a gospel is markedly different from that of an epistle, and consequently a larger audience than a single group of believers seems likely for such a literary work. Thus the answer he gives to his own question, "Is it likely that Matthew would have composed such an elaborate gospel for a relatively small group?" is a resounding 'no'.⁷ Accepting the hypothesis of multiple communities does not call into question the validity of reading Matthew's gospel as a partially transparent document that reflects specific tensions and concerns that arose within a fairly focused cluster of groups that were the intended first readers of the gospel.

Until relatively recently such an assumption required little or no defence. However, Bauckham's recent work attempts to overturn this widespread consensus, and instead argues that the gospels should be seen as universal in scope and not focused on specific pastoral issues within single communities.⁸ Turning to that issue, it is helpful to make a few remarks about Bauckham's thesis in relation to the other gospels before focusing on Matthew. First, if Bauckham's arguments are convincing they find their strongest support in relation to the gospel of Luke. More than any other of the canonical gospels Luke, in combination with its sequel,

⁶ Cohen, 'Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?', in M. Mor (ed.), *Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation and Accommodation: Past Traditions, Current Issues and Future Prospects*, 14-21.

⁷ Stanton, *Gospel*, 51.

⁸ Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*.

gives the impression of promoting an empire wide vision for Christianity.⁹ Yet, despite this outward looking vision, this does not in itself exclude the possibility that Luke was writing with a fairly well defined group of Christians in mind, rather than hoping to launch his literary work as a resource for the universal church even if such a conception existed at the time of his writing. The gospel of Mark leaves little evidence by which to decide if it was written for a specific liminal community, or whether its message of suffering discipleship was aimed at a wider audience.¹⁰ By contrast, however, John's gospel appears so clearly addressed to a single persecuted introverted community, that it seems to clearly defy Bauckham's overall thesis. The story of the man born blind (Jn 9) and especially the reference to the expulsion from the synagogue as a consequence of confessing Jesus to be the messiah (ἐάν τις αὐτὸν ὁμολογήσῃ Χριστὸν, ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται 9.22) is most naturally understood as reflecting a specific situation.¹¹ Moreover, the other references to being put out of the synagogue (ἀποσυνάγωγος 12.42; 16.2), the ghetto mentality¹² that appears to develop in the latter part of the farewell discourse (chapters 15-16) in comparison to the more open stance in the preceding chapter, and the crisis occasioned by the death of the beloved disciple (21.20-23),¹³ are all important indicators that the fourth gospel addressed a specific group or collection of closely related communities and was not written for the benefit of the universal church.

⁹ In broad terms, Wilson understands the purpose of Luke in this manner. Not only does he reject a single community, instead preferring to speak of, "The communities for whom Luke wrote..." (117), but also, and more significantly, sees universalism built in to Lukan theology. He states, "Insofar as Luke provides a theoretical or theological underpinning for this notion [the particularity of the law as a Jewish possession] it is to be found in the notion that God is 'impartial' (οὐ προσωπολήμπτης Ac. 10.34) and makes 'no distinction' (οὐθὲν διέκρινεν Ac. 15.9) between Jews and Gentiles." (Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 104). See also Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, and Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*.

¹⁰ See the following works for different perspectives on Markan discipleship and the possibility of a community behind the gospel: Weeden, *Mark – Traditions in Conflict*; Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*; Malbon, 'Texts and Contexts: Interpreting the Disciples in Mark'; Shiner, *Follow Me! Disciples in Markan Rhetoric*.

¹¹ Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*.

¹² The phrase is drawn from Ashton, who notes how in this material drawn from a later strand of the compositional history of the gospel one can see a more inwardly looking perspective. He states, "Suffice it to say that chapters 15-16 presuppose a very different situation; the community has become a ghetto, and the commandment of faith in chapter 14 has been replaced by a love commandment that is markedly less universal than the 'love your enemies' of the Sermon on the Mount." (Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 200).

¹³ For a discussion of the role of the beloved disciple in the fourth gospel see Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?*

Turning to Matthew's gospel, first it needs to be noted that, like John, there are a number of texts that are most naturally understood as reflecting a specific situation or community outlook. Among these probably the most significant are the following. First, there is the description of a conspiratorial arrangement by the Jews to falsify the facts of the resurrection (28.11-15). That the author intended this to be understood as reflecting part of the contemporary situation can be seen from the reference *καὶ διεφθίμωθη ὁ λόγος οὗτος παρὰ Ἰουδαίοις μέχρι τῆς σήμερον [ἡμέρας]* which not only demonstrates that this pericope is included because of its contemporary significance for readers, but also suggests that it is addressed to an audience where a number of Jews were still using this argument against those who are likely to read the first gospel. Second, the question of the temple tax (Matt 17.24-27) is most plausibly understood as providing a set of nascent believers with instruction to continue paying the *fiscus Iudaicus* in spite of the fact that their primary allegiance is no longer to their Jewish heritage.¹⁴ Likewise, Carter sees this Matthean redactional pericope as addressing specific political concerns about the legitimacy of paying the post-70 Roman tax for the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus required of Jews, including Matthew's (largely) Christian-Jewish community.¹⁵ Third, although well documented, the references either to 'their' or 'your synagogues' (Matt 4.23; 9.35; 10.17; 12.9; 13.54; 23.34) should not be underestimated as showing the boundary division between one community as opposed to the more dominant emergent Judaism. Coupled with these three important examples of information that seems to reflect quite a narrowly focused readership one could mention the teaching on church order (Matt 18.1-10), the instruction of the rabbis (Matt 23.1-7), the equality of status among Matthew's addressees (23.8-12) and a host of smaller redactional changes that all are more plausibly understood as the evangelist's endeavour to make the traditions he has received more relevant to a specific situation.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a treatment of the history of the *fiscus Iudaicus* and its role in the formation of Judaism as a religious entity rather than an ethnic designation see Goodman, 'Nerva, the *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Jewish Identity', 40-44.

¹⁵ Carter argues that, "The central issue is the significance of paying the tax. It is argued that its payment, as paradoxical as it may seem, does not recognize Roman sovereignty but acknowledges God's reign. God displays sovereignty in providing the tax in the fish's mouth. Paying the tax con-tests and subverts Rome's claims and anticipates the establishment of God's reign in its fullness." Carter, 'Paying the Tax to Rome as Subversive Praxis: Matthew 17.24-27', 3-31.

¹⁶ Here Sim is most helpful in his evaluation of Bauckham's argument. He notes, "Bauckham provides no hard evidence that the gospels were open-ended texts intended for an unspecified readership. He merely assumes that this was the case because the gospels, unlike the Pauline epistles, provide no definitive indication of their intended

While Bauckham's thesis has the value of causing one to reassess the basis for assuming that the gospels address specific group situations, the arguments he puts forward do not seem to undermine such a position. Stanton may well be correct in relation to Matthew that the evangelist was not writing for a single group of believers, but for a cluster of communities. What is important here, however, is not the number of communities, but whether the author had specific knowledge of these groups and tailored the message of his gospel to address specific concerns within these groups. The answer to this question can only come through reflection on the contents of the gospel and an assessment of whether redactional changes and the inclusion of other material is undertaken for literary purposes, or to specifically address the concerns of nascent communities about which the evangelist had personal knowledge. Certain texts, including those listed above, lend support to maintaining the assumption that Matthew's gospel falls into the second category since a significant number of the editorial asides and additional material strongly suggests specific communal concerns and situations.

1.3 Methodology

A number of approaches may be used in reading and interpreting the gospels. These are of course not mutually exclusive options, but rather can often reinforce each other in the endeavour of trying to understand the evangelists' central themes and concerns. Methods such as redaction criticism, social scientific approaches and literary criticism have all offered fresh and valid insights into the New Testament texts. Yet there has been a tendency at times for certain practitioners of these methodologies either to over-exaggerate the applicability of these approaches, or to use them to fill in data where the evidence is simply lacking.

1.3.1 Redaction criticism

Although the actual term *Redaktionsgeschichte* is correctly traced back to Marxsen in the late nineteen fifties,¹⁷ the method was being practiced a decade earlier by Bornkamm in his work on Matthew, but without the

readers. This explanation, however, is by no means the only one on offer. It is equally possible, perhaps more probable, that the lack of identification of the readers points to the proximity between the author and the Christian community for whom he was writing." Sim, 'The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham', 17.

¹⁷ Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums*.

formal label 'redaction criticism'.¹⁸ The strength of this approach was the way in which it looked in detail at the theological concerns of the evangelists.¹⁹ However, it was predicated upon a number of assumptions that were rarely stated. These include the belief that the correct solution to the synoptic problem has been found, that the changes the evangelists made to their sources reflect specific theological concerns which are represented in a consistent manner throughout the gospels, and that this retelling of the Jesus story is aimed at a specific community with certain pastoral or pedagogical needs.²⁰ Yet each of these assumptions has not gone unchallenged since the rise of redaction criticism.

First, the two source theory, positing Mark and Q as the primary sources for the other synoptic gospels, while remaining the consensus position in New Testament scholarship and being the position adopted in this study, has been re-examined in great detail with alternative solutions to the synoptic problem being proposed in its place.²¹ Among the most popular alternatives are: (i) the Griesbach hypothesis, championed by Farmer and his followers, which calls into question the priority of Mark and the existence of Q;²² (ii) Farrer's theory which while supporting the idea of Markan priority argues that Q did not exist but that Luke drew directly on Matthew's gospel²³ (this 'solution' to the synoptic problem has recently been vigorously defended by Mark Goodacre);²⁴ (iii) the similar theory of Matthean posteriority that reverses the dependence in the Farrer

¹⁸ Bornkamm's first published work in this area appeared in 1948 with his influential essay, 'Die Sturmstillung in Matthäusevangelium'.

¹⁹ The oft repeated charge that prior to the rise of redaction criticism the evangelists were simply seen as scissor and paste theologians, or people that threaded the beads of tradition onto the thin string of their own narrative, has always been a gross oversimplification and fails to take seriously the aims of earlier form and source critics. Their primary motivation was to look at an earlier stage of the use of the material prior to it being incorporated into the gospels. In this sense, their focus simply did not fall upon the evangelists as theologians in their own right.

²⁰ For an extended discussion of these issues particularly in relation to Matthew see Stanton, *Gospel*, 23-53.

²¹ Specifically for a defence of the existence and plausibility of reconstructing the Q source see two of my own articles: P. Foster, 'In Defence of the Study of Q'; and 'Is it Possible to Dispense with Q?'

²² This position came to prominence in the twentieth century with the appearance of Farmer's book, *The Synoptic Problem*. Numerous works have been published in support of Farmer's arguments including, Bellinzoni, *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal*, and more recently Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem*. For a critical response see Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Theory*.

²³ See in particular, Farrer, 'On Dispensing with Q'; Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm*; 'Is Q a Juggernaut?'; and Goodacre, *The Case Against Q*; Shellard, *New Light on Luke*.

²⁴ Goodacre, *The Case Against Q*; and *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze*.

theory stating it was Matthew who was dependent on Luke;²⁵ and (iv) multiple source theories²⁶ Yet none of these alternative theories in themselves would undermine the conception of redaction criticism, for it would simply mean that instead of looking at Matthew's modifications to Mark, the process would be inverted. What would be overturned are the findings of redaction critics who have used this approach based on the two-source theory.

The second assumption is perhaps the most important, for it undergirds the very practice of redaction criticism. It argues that the modification of source material reflects clear and consistent theological motivations on the part of the evangelists.²⁷ The first point to make in response to this is that 'the use of Christian tradition as it stands, without editorial shaping, may be just as much an indication of the evangelist's theological outlook.'²⁸ In other words, the very fact that an evangelist has incorporated source material without modification is plausibly an indication that he found the theological outlook of the predecessor's work congenial, and agreed with the views it expressed. While this point needs to be made, and ensures that the complete text of the gospel is considered when it is being examined for clues relating to the purpose of the evangelist in writing, it must be recognized that editorial alterations provide important examples of how traditions have been modified to bring them into closer accord with the beliefs of the author.²⁹ The second part of this assumption is that the evangelists present a clear theology that reflects a consistent portrayal of their own beliefs. However, such a degree of consistency should perhaps not be expected from the evangelists. Recent studies have called into question the consistency of Paul, who perhaps was the one New Testament figure who attempted to present his theological understandings in a

²⁵ The fullest argument for this case may be found in Huggins 'Matthean Posteriority', but see also Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 169-207.

²⁶ Vaganay, *Le problème synoptique: une hypothèse de travail*; Boismard, *Synopse des quatre évangiles en français*, Tome 2: Commentaire; 'The Multiple Stage Hypothesis'.

²⁷ For a discussion of this point of view see Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?*

²⁸ Smalley, 'Redaction Criticism', 188.

²⁹ A specific example of this process may be seen in the christological affirmation in Matt 16.16. The extended Petrine confession, *Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος*, appears to reflect a more exalted understanding of Jesus than that contained in the Markan source (Mk 8.29). Perhaps some will see a tendency towards circularity here. Matthew is seen as being dependent on Mark, hence its extended christological is designated as being more developed, this is sometimes seen as supporting the notion that Mark must be prior to Matthew. The issue of the relevance of christological statements to the synoptic problem is investigated by Head, *Christology and the Synoptic Tradition*.

coherent manner.³⁰ If an author who was self-consciously using the epistolary genre to communicate his beliefs to others could fail in this endeavour, it seems unfair to expect consistency and comprehensiveness from the evangelists, since they were primarily using narrative to tell the Jesus story, albeit that their telling of that story was intertwined with theological reflection. In this vein Stanton sounds a sober caution, “there is a real danger that the redaction critic’s zeal to establish Matthew’s theological emphases will gloss over some inconsistencies...The evangelist was rather less consistent than some of his modern students.”³¹ This salutary warning is in no way a denial of the unique concerns that the evangelist is communicating, but rather it recognizes that Matthew was not primarily writing a theological treatise, instead he was more concerned with didactical and pastoral issues.

The final assumption of redaction criticism, that of a specific situation being addressed by the evangelist, has been discussed at some length in the previous section. It was argued that despite recent efforts to see the gospels as being written with a universal audience in mind,³² the very data contained in Matthew’s gospel presses the reader to see that the evangelist at times reflected on the particular concerns of his audience, and that this group of people probably lived in relatively close geographical proximity.

While some recent studies have called each of these three assumptions of redaction criticism into question, and thus helpfully caused practitioners of this methodology to sharpen up their own thinking, none of these assumptions are seen as being fatally flawed. Specifically that: (i) the two source theory still appears the most plausible and efficient way to account for the literary relationships between the synoptic gospels; (ii) by producing holistic gospel accounts the evangelists were presenting their own theological outlooks; and, (iii) a number of key texts in the gospels suggest specific group situations are being addressed. In fact, taking into account the points made above, a careful use of redaction criticism still offers much that is of value in the study of the gospels and, moreover, will be used as an important tool in this monograph for studying Matthew’s theological and pastoral concerns.

³⁰ For a discussion of this issue and the debate that has surrounded the issue of coherence in Paul’s thought see Dunn, ‘The Formal and Theological Coherence of Romans.’

³¹ Stanton, *Gospel*, 41.

³² Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for all Christians*.

1.3.2 Social Scientific criticism

Throughout the period of critical study of the New Testament scholars have not been unaware of the importance of social setting in determining the meaning of ancient texts. However, the goal of various social scientific approaches is wider than just integrating relevant cultural data into an overall interpretation of the text. Rather, as Elliott defines the purpose of this methodology, it highlights the interaction between social setting and the formation of the text.

Social-scientific criticism, in its turn, studies the text both as a reflection of and a response to the social and cultural settings in which the text was produced. Its aim is the determination of the meaning(s) explicit and implicit in the text, meanings made possible and shaped by the social and cultural systems by both authors and intended audiences.³³

Although there has been a proliferation of social scientific approaches, which makes it difficult to speak in general terms about the method, Elliott is surely correct to emphasize that at its base lies the conviction that text and context are more closely intertwined than had been previously been recognised.

This recognition of the interconnectivity of text and context has made a large impact on Matthean studies, yet Matthew was not the first gospel that has been scrutinized through the lens of the social scientific method. In his influential study, Esler applied sociological approaches to the narrative composition of Luke-Acts.³⁴ Adopting the insights of sociologists into contemporary sectarian movements Esler developed a typology and model which traced the development of the early Jesus movement from its location as a Jewish reform movement to a Christian sect.³⁵ This ground breaking work has been applied to the writings of the other evangelists. In relation to Matthean studies, a steady stream of material has continued to appear which assesses the beliefs and adherences of the community from the perspective of social scientific enquiry. Apart from numerous individual studies, the collection of essays edited by David Balch in the volume *Social History of the Matthean Community*³⁶ illustrates both the application of various forms of this methodology and their widespread use by a range of scholars who come to different conclusions on a number of issues. One of the issues that will be raised in this study will be the tendency in some reconstruction to privilege sociological theory over the more immediate exegetical evidence available for producing an

³³ Elliott, *Social Scientific Criticism of the New Testament*, 8.

³⁴ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*.

³⁵ See especially chapter 3, 'Sectarian Strategies', 46-70.

³⁶ Balch (ed.), *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*.

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