

## “EVEN THE DOGS”: GENTILES IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

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For all its traditional reputation as the Gospel written for Jews, Matthew has surprisingly numerous references to Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> At times these references are harmonious with conventional Jewish stereotypes of the *goyim* as archetypes of unrighteous behavior, as when Jesus warns against long prating meaningless prayers “as the Gentiles do: don’t be like them” (6:7), or against “lording it over others, as the Gentile rulers do: it is not to be so among you” (20:25–26). In such cases Matthew resembles the near-equation of Gentiles with sinners that one typically finds in sectarian Palestinian Jewish literature like Psalms of Solomon, 1 Enoch, or Jubilees. Thus, in a recent monograph purporting to depict the *Sitz im Leben* of the redaction, Sims concludes from such data that the author of Matthew is basically anti-Gentile.<sup>2</sup> At other, equally frequent, intervals, however, Matthew portrays Gentiles in a much more positive light. They are often found manifesting belief, or at least approbation, in regard to Jesus—e.g. the centurion at the foot of the cross (27:54), Pilate’s wife (21:17–24), or, in more detail, the story of another centurion’s faith in 8:5–13. Senior posits that Matthew deliberately places “Gentiles who respond favorably to Jesus and thus become harbingers of Gentile participation in the Christian community in the role of exemplars.”<sup>3</sup>

Noting these contrasting phenomena, this study attempts to explain the apparent divergences in attitude towards Gentiles in Matthew as congruent with and in fact parallel to Matthew’s characteristic literary contrasts between the demanding rigor—the almost harsh severity of expectations for would-be disciples—in the cognitive discourse material and the much warmer, compassionate praxis of Jesus towards the needy and helpless—or, more specifically, towards those who manifest faith in him—found in the narrative materials which follow or interpolate the discourses. This countervailing of severity and mercy, of righteous works and humble faith, of stringent demands and generous benefits, walks on two legs all through Matthew, and must be held together to do justice to the interpretation of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Senior finds that of 18 brief Gentile appearances or references in Matthew, 14 do not appear in Mark and 12 are unique to Matthew (“Between Two Worlds: Gentiles and Jewish Christians in Matthew’s Gospel,” *CBQ* 61 [1999] 14–18).

<sup>2</sup> David C. Sims, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 215–56.

<sup>3</sup> Senior, “Between Two Worlds” 19.

I. THE MULTIPLE NUANCES OF *TA EΘNH*

The full range of valuations which adhere to the polyvalent term ἔθνη must be appreciated, and Matthew's varying use of the term or the concept at different points noted, in order to avoid painting his attitude towards the Gentiles with too broad a brush. The linguistic range of the term τὰ ἔθνη is quite broad. In *koine* Greek, meanings for τὰ ἔθνη range from the political "nations," through the more or less neutral socio-anthropological term "people," or "ethnic groups," to the Jewish-specific "Gentiles" and, at the extreme end of the valuation spectrum, the equally Jewish-specific "pagans." Uses of the latter term may be broken down even further into the merely descriptive ("pagan," meaning outside the purview of biblically revealed religion) and the pejorative ("pagan," with all the contempt and disdain with which a practitioner of monotheistic Torah religion could fill the word, implying, sometimes, those who deliberately reject or ignore the way of righteousness). Matthew appears to show examples of each and all of these uses, with differing significances, as the varied terms supplied at different places in his text by translators into English (as well as French: *nations, peuples, paiens*; and German: *Völker, Nichtjuden, Heiden*) indicate. Whether the translators have caught the right nuance in each case is, of course, up for debate.

A precise hermeneutic of Matthew's literary use of Gentiles must start from a recognition of this wide diversity of valuations implicit in the term, yet also take into account the overall theological attitude towards τὰ ἔθνη that emerges from the book as a whole. The interpreter is obliged to weigh individual appearances of the word in order to better decide which nuanced aspect of the term Matthew is leaning on more heavily in a given case. For example, the translation "pagans" is perfectly valid for 6:7, but might be less apt than "nations" at 24:14 or 28:19. Unfortunately, space does not permit a comprehensive cataloguing of such differentiated translations in this article.

It appears that Matthew deliberately "works the angles." That is, as part of his heuristic method, he uses the term ἔθνη in such varied fashion as to subtly contribute to making the cumulative theological point that God's plan for the salvation of humanity includes the Gentiles. Even if some of his original Jewish readers may invest every instance of the word ἔθνη with the most pejorative connotations, collapsing the whole semantic range of ἔθνη down into synonymity with "pagans," they are forced by the narrative to reconsider.

While it cannot be explored in this paper, one could also posit with Hummel and Bonnard that "sinners" in Matthew, when it appears on the lips of Jewish leaders, may be in implied proverbial apposition with "Gentiles," as it often is in the Jewish literature of the period (e.g. Jubilees).<sup>4</sup> Even Paul, apostle to the Gentiles and advocate of full Gentile participation in the

<sup>4</sup> Reinhart Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* (Munich: Kaiser, 1966) 36; Pierre Bonnard, *L'Évangile Selon Saint Matthieu* (2d ed.; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1982) 429–35.

redemptive plan of God, uses it that way (Gal 2:15; Eph 4:17–19). So we should not be surprised to find that in Matthew the combination “tax gatherers and sinners” alternates, and may be syntagmatically equivalent to, “tax gatherers and Gentiles.” In a sort of syllogistic linguistic logic, if  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , then  $a = c$ .

Thus, we find Jesus accepting and adapting conventional Jewish stereotypes of pagans as the quintessence of unrighteousness in the discourses. As a literary device, the generalization “pagan,” meaning “one who does not know or do the law of God,” is valid for Jesus’ rhetorical purposes. He, like his contemporaries, can generalize to set a backdrop against which to paint his picture of the new behavior and heart attitude that he is preaching as necessary. In addition to the stereotypical “don’t be like the Gentiles” epithets of Jesus already mentioned (6:7 and 20:25–26), we find the Gentiles used as foils, or negative examples, in several other discourse *loci*. At 5:46–47, for example, the censure against loving only those who love you is reinforced by the chiding remark, “Don’t even tax gatherers and Gentiles do the same?” After warning disciples against excessive material concerns at 6:19–31, Jesus concludes, “For all these are the things the Gentiles voraciously seek” (v. 32); you [it is implied] do not have to be anxious about such matters. At 18:17, concluding a series of programmatic efforts to reconcile an erring, unrepentant brother, Jesus pronounces the final stage of judgment: “If he won’t listen even to the assembly of the brethren, let him be to you as a pagan and a tax-gatherer,” that is, as one utterly isolated from the new covenant community.

Insofar as the conventions reflect syllogistic Jewish logic—the unrighteous are those who do not know or do the Law of God, Gentiles do not know and thus cannot do the Law of God, therefore Gentiles are the unrighteous—Matthew is willing to use them, sparingly, to present stereotypical and characteristic behavior to be avoided by the new community.

However, it is precisely this false unilateral identification that Matthew appears to be combating in his varied use of ἔθνη throughout the book. His method is not the direct argument of Paul in Galatians or Romans, but a more subtle strategy of acknowledging proverbial pagan characteristics in discourse material on the lips of Jesus, and then countering the conventional Jewish identification of Gentiles with pagan-sinners by narrating numerous stories of Gentiles who either serve as examples of right(eous) behavior in regard to Jesus or else exemplify faith in Jesus’ merciful character. Matthew deliberately places these Gentile exemplars in the narratives alongside Jesus’ stringent demands for righteousness in the discourses.

He also, from the very beginning of the book, at regular and frequent intervals throughout, and in culminating fashion at 28:18–20, shows that Gentiles have been part of the plan of God all along (cf. the genealogy of the Messiah, which contains at least three Gentile women, four, if the wife of Uriah the Hittite was herself a Hittite<sup>5</sup>), and reaffirms that they are not

<sup>5</sup> Eduard Schweitzer notes that in calling Bathsheba the erstwhile “wife of Uriah” the chronology recalls what is seldom pointed out: that she as well as he was probably an “outlander.” Thus

beyond the purview of the gospel in the largest sense (the good news of the kingdom).

That Matthew chooses the innocuous term “the deportation to Babylon,” rather than “the destruction of Jerusalem,” or “the destruction of the Temple,” at 1:11, 12, 17 may be significant also. In some aspects, the deportation was a saving grace, preserving a remnant of Israel who were told to plant, to build, to make their home in that foreign land, among foreign peoples. The magi who come seeking Jesus in Matthew 2 are informed of the plan of God precisely because Israel had earlier been deported to and had taken up residence in Babylon, where their Scriptures became available to public scrutiny. In a subtle way, by this combination of mentioning Babylon in chapter 1 and Chaldean seekers in chapter 2, Matthew seems to be preparing the way for his message of the universal scope of the gospel, though it will not emerge in total clarity until chapter 28.

Yet some scholars question whether the surprisingly frequent appearances of Gentiles in Matthew are historical. On this view, the needs of the late first-century *Sitz im Leben* of Matthew’s redactional activity (after the church had moved out from within Judaism, or Judaism had moved away from the messianic movement, depending on how one views the division) would have sought—or contrived—some justification for a Gentile mission within the lifetime of Jesus.

Matthew as redactor, such a theory postulates, would have enhanced his source materials to make it appear that Jesus had had a ministry to and among Gentiles. He would have moved the story of Cornelius, the Italian centurion stationed at Caesarea, for example, back from its place in Acts 10, during the first decades of the church, to a moment within the lifetime of Jesus. Jesus’ other encounters with Gentiles (with the Syro-Phoenician woman, for example) would similarly reflect the *Sitz im Leben* of the early church at Antioch in Syria, a site often associated with Matthew’s redactional activity. And the mixed crowd of multitudes seen in Matthew following Jesus around from the beginning of his ministry, drawn from Syria, the Decapolis, and trans-Jordan, as well as Galilee and Judea (4:25), would reflect the ethnic character of the church near the end of the first century as it would appear to the Jewish purists to whom Matthew, according to such theories, addressed his work.<sup>6</sup>

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the first scion, the very beginning of the Davidic dynasty, Solomon, is only half-Israelite. Presumably the other, more notorious, associations with the name Bathsheba outweigh and push into the background her possible ethnic derivation as a Hittite. The mention of David’s great-grandmother Ruth the Moabitess would not have the same effect, since her part in the lineage was as a surrogate who legitimately passed along the line of Judah (*Matthäus und seine Gemeinde* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1974] 18).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting in this light to notice the parallels with images of the “mixed multitude” who formed the crowd coming out of Egypt in the haggadic material, which is often negative in tone. Philo, for example, in describing the exodus, says, “They were accompanied by a promiscuous, non-descript and menial crowd, a bastard host, so to speak, associated with the true-born.” He then goes on to distinguish three different levels of commitment among them (*Mos. 1.147*, in Scot McKnight, *Light to the Gentiles* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990] 93–94 [his translation]).

What is common to these schemas of interpretation is a historical assumption that there would *not* have actually been very many Gentiles in proximity to Jesus during his lifetime. Others, for less sophisticated reasons, believe the same thing unreflectively; the popular conception of Palestine at the time of Christ is of a land overwhelmingly populated by Hebrews. The infrequent Gentile that one might meet within the territories called Judea or Galilee would be a noteworthy exception in the monochrome crowd of Jews, by this reckoning. In the popular mind, the land was normally devoid of Gentiles, apart from a handful of Roman soldiers here and there when disorder breaks out, or some rare Greeks tourists who tell Philip they want to see Jesus when they come up to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish Passover festivities (John 12:20–21). Some people imagine the land exactly as represented by two-dimensional study maps, that the lines marking off Israel from the rest of the surrounding nations were actually that cut and dried historically. That a modern layperson would have this conception is not all that surprising. But it is less understandable when learned scholars paint Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ numerous encounters with Gentiles as anachronistic, assuming that both a presence of Gentiles in Palestine, and a positive attitude on the part of Jesus towards them, could not be historical, and therefore positing that Matthew retroactively edited late first-century conditions of the church back into Jesus’ time.

But since this caricature persists, we shall introduce at this point an excursus the weight of which may appear disproportionate to the main study of the paper, which is the editorial attitude toward and literary/artistic use of Gentiles in Matthew. But it seems necessary; apart from this excursus on the factuality of numerous Gentiles in the land at the time of Jesus’ ministry, our treatment of the theme of Gentiles in Matthew could be misread as purely “narrative interpretation” or redactional analysis. While either of those methods may be valuable for interpretation, the firm historical basis of what Matthew recounts anchors his literary task. Part of that task is to faithfully narrate Jesus’ behavior towards Gentiles, and thus to suggest to Matthew’s contemporaries the attitude and policies towards Gentiles which obtained already during Jesus’ lifetime. One may thereby deduce a valid trajectory from that earlier (and definitive) time period into the Matthean (i.e. the redactional) present, when the question of Gentile participation in the messianic community would have been even more poignant and pressing.<sup>7</sup> The intention of the following excursus, then, is to demonstrate that apart from any interpretive use that Matthew may have made of his source materials (including his own recollections, if he were an eyewitness of the events), the historical probability of many Gentiles actually residing within

<sup>7</sup> “[S]ubsumption of the so-called time of the church under the time of Jesus in the theology of Matthew is, ultimately, christologically motivated, and has its roots in the pre-Easter—post-Easter continuity of the person of Jesus: the earthly Jesus and the exalted Jesus are one. To elaborate this last point, the very fact that Matthew depicts Jesus throughout his gospel after the fashion in which his church ‘knows’ him is evidence, at least in Matthew’s case, of material correspondence to the formal category of the time of Jesus” (Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] 32).

the geographical parameters of Jesus' ministry is very high. If so, the concomitant likelihood of his having had the kind of friendly contact with them that Matthew presents is also historically not improbable.

## II. EXCURSUS: GENTILES IN PALESTINE

When, from 732 to 722 BC, triumphant Assyrians carried off many of the northern tribal Israelites and seeded Galilee, Syria, and northern Israel with resettled immigrants from other conquered peoples, they also reorganized the northern area of Israel into three districts, separating former Samaria from Galilee. This made it much easier for Hellenism to make inroads into Palestinian culture in subsequent centuries.<sup>8</sup> When Assyrian strength waned and finally collapsed, in 609 BC, the Hebrews who trickled back into the land were unable to unite themselves to resist the subsequent hegemonies imposed on Israel first by Babylon, then Persia, then the Ptolemaic and Seleucid descendents of the Macedonian/Greek armies of Alexander, then Rome.<sup>9</sup>

One by one each of these other races and cultures had its effect. How much contact with Gentiles should a faithful Jew have? Individual Hebrews had to decide what living faithfully unto God a "separate life" meant. There were many variants of answers to the question. Though scholars like Schürer, Moore, and Sanders characterize first-century Palestinian Judaism as nearly monolithic, with such movements as the Essenes considered to be "fringe sects,"<sup>10</sup> most recent scholars recognize that by the NT period it is inaccurate, though obviously not impossible, to speak (as Sanders does) of a monolithic "normative Judaism." Neusner demonstrates that to read a Talmudic consensus from the fourth century AD or later back into the time of Jesus, as if it reflected a "normative Judaism" that supposedly existed at that time, greatly misrepresents the early first-century ethos.<sup>11</sup> Moore's positivism (followed closely in our own day by Sanders) relegates whatever may be distinguished from the "mainstream" leading to Talmud as heretical, sectarian, or "non-conformative." This is reductionistic in the extreme. No one ideology took the central place around which all others aligned themselves concentrically. A more accurate picture based on the historical data would portray first-century Judaism as a roiling pot of seething differences.

<sup>8</sup> Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian 323 BCE to 135 CE* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1980) 24–26.

<sup>9</sup> The one notable exception, of course, is the century of the Maccabean/Hasmonean dynasty, 165–63 BC.

<sup>10</sup> Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 175 BC–AD 135* (rev. and ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Miller, and Martin Goodman; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 3.1; George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: the Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927); E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975) 139–45. Anthony Saldarini makes the same point in his review of Sanders's book on Paul and Palestinian Judaism (*JBL* 98 [1979] 299).

Both the intra- and the extra-biblical history of the people of Israel in the four centuries before Jesus and throughout the first century after his birth is a history of their wrestling with questions of how much they could or should assimilate to other cultures and races. Despite the popular caricature of Judaism as stiffly isolated from contact with other cultures, evidence abounds that many aspects deriving from the west (i.e. Hellenism) as well as from the east (e.g. astrology) were entrenched in first-century Judaism.<sup>12</sup>

Back at the beginning of the fourth century BC, when the Phoenicians helped Egypt break loose from Persian rule, the Egyptians rewarded the Phoenician king Strato the First (375–361) lavishly, and the Athenians, who stood to profit by the coastlands’ rebellion from Persia, also expressed their appreciation to Strato. Flush with victory and with cash, Strato built a lighthouse tower south of Mount Carmel on the Palestinian coast, 25 miles northwest of Samaria, and established a port for shallow draft seagoing vessels to encourage trade with Greece.<sup>13</sup> A door was opened on “Israelite” territory for Hellenistic exploration and investment and even colonization. It was not, therefore, only with the advent of the world conqueror Alexander the Great that Hellenism began to infiltrate Palestine, as it is popularly conceived. Archeological evidences discovered since 1940 demonstrate Greek inhabitants in Palestine as early as the seventh century BC, with increasing frequency as one approaches the fourth century BC.<sup>14</sup> Though Alt opposed the idea of a “Gentile Galilee” and argued frequently that a predominantly Jewish population has continuously lived in the land, resisted foreign domination, and held cultic allegiance to Jerusalem, the evidence for a considerable pagan population in Palestine continuously from the time of the Assyrian conquest onwards, and for Jewish assimilation of Hellenism in many forms, is overwhelming.<sup>15</sup>

Hengel thoroughly catalogues Macedonian military colonies and the many fortifications planted throughout Palestine by both the Seleucids and the Ptolemies.<sup>16</sup> He also provides descriptions of trade and transit lines criss-crossing Israel everywhere,<sup>17</sup> and detailed listings of many outlander scholars, particularly the Stoa, in Palestinian schools.<sup>18</sup> The formidable array of data he marshals leads Hengel to the somewhat startling assertion that, from the middle of the third century BC, “all Judaism must really be designated ‘Hellenistic Judaism’ in the strict sense.”<sup>19</sup>

Such a sweeping generalization is probably an exaggerated picture of the real situation (recall the Roman soldier in Jerusalem who, in AD 58, was

<sup>12</sup> Neusner, *Early Rabbinic Judaism* 140.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule* (SJLA; ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 7.6.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (trans. S. Appelbaum; New York: Athenium, 1970) 40–41.

<sup>15</sup> Freyne, *Galilee* 55, n. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 14–37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 43–47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 86–88.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

surprised that Paul spoke Greek, Acts 21:38). But it is understandable as a reaction to the refusal of Christian scholars for so many years to perceive the pervasive nature of Hellenistic influence in Judaism. Cohen remarks that though the pagan population of Palestine was substantial, almost no one takes them into account in writing history of the area.<sup>20</sup> Tcherikover describes in some detail no less than 30 Hellenic cities within Palestine that were organized specifically as *polis*, complete with *boule* (a city council of advisors or administrators) and with *ekklesia* (the assembly of citizens).<sup>21</sup> He shows that the cultural influence of thirty Hellenistic towns within the very limited radius of the tiny country we call Israel was pervasive.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the lacunae in our knowledge of Palestine in the mid-third century BC have been filled since 1940 by the discovery of the 1200 Zenon papyri dating from 259 BC. Detailing Ptolemaic commerce back and forth from Syria to Egypt, particularly among those who consider themselves Greeks, about 40 of the papyri are concerned with business in Palestine.<sup>23</sup> They demonstrate continuous commercial contact with Greeks from within Palestine<sup>24</sup> and also refer to trade between the populace inland from the sea and the outside world, through the harbor at Strato's Tower.<sup>25</sup> Located close to one of the most fertile agricultural areas of Palestine, Strato's Tower (later Caesarea) prospered, offering a nearby port for the agricultural products of the Sharon Plain. Comings and goings from outside of Israel and within increased.

When Herod the Great received Strato's Tower from Octavian (now Augustus Caesar) about 30 years before the birth of Jesus, he proceeded to transform the sleepy town into a magnificent harbor, deliberately opening a gateway for Greco-Roman culture to come in like a flood. He aligned himself unreservedly with Octavian's Roman vision of one Mediterranean community. Levine speaks of Herod's "difficulty to reign over a mixed population" and explains the majestic building project at Caesarea as his pandering to the substantial pagan population of Palestine under his jurisdiction with whom he wanted to ingratiate himself.<sup>26</sup>

This analysis is bolstered by posing the question of where the funds could have come from to build something on the scale of Caesarea, if Herod did not have a wealthy and willing pagan population to tax and to cajole into contributing to building it. The scope of the project had not been fully grasped until recent scuba-diving archeological investigation revealed how magnificent the 500-foot concrete breakwaters really were that he designed

<sup>20</sup> Ironically, the notable exceptions are Israeli Ph.D. theses; e.g. Yankelevitch! Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Political and Social History of the Jews in Greco-Roman Antiquity: the State of the Question," in *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. Robert Kraft and George Nickelsburg; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 33–51.

<sup>21</sup> Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization* 90–116.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 115–16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 60–61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 111–13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 92–109.

<sup>26</sup> Lee I. Levine, *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 12–14.

to increase the depth of the harbor.<sup>27</sup> Josephus’s descriptions of 50-foot long, 9-foot high, and 10-foot wide blocks of concrete or stone being let down and placed in 37 meters of deep water (*J.W.* 1.411–13) were considered incredible exaggerations until recently. Accomplished in a day when no cranes or machines to mix concrete were available, and divers using one lungfull of air at a time were used to do the labor, Herod’s project was awesome. The scope of Herod’s capital at Caesarea defies the imagination. Even granting Augustus’s contributions,<sup>28</sup> there must have been a large and influential pagan population under Herod’s aegis for the immensely expensive Caesarea to have come into existence. While the Jewish population may have begrudgingly suffered excessive taxes in order to see Herod’s temple in Jerusalem go up year by year, there is no way they would have afforded (or tolerated) the additional tax burden it cost to finance Caesarea, with its temples to Roma and Caesar, its gymnasium, the entirely Hellenistic layout of the city and all its architecture, the opulence displayed there to impress Roman dignitaries coming through to visit Herod at his residence (which was there, rather than in Jerusalem, most of the time).<sup>29</sup>

Subsequent events in the first century AD reflect the results of that influx of Roman soldiers and Hellenistic influence. “Jewish-pagan tensions in the cities of Palestine and Syria contributed greatly to the outbreak of the war in 66 CE. Many areas of Palestine had heavy concentrations of pagans.”<sup>30</sup> One indication of the size of the Gentile population of Israel is Josephus’s claim that in the initial conflicts under Florus which led to the open revolt in AD 66, 20,000 Jews were killed by local Gentiles (*J.W.* 14.4.288). Even granting Josephus’s penchant for rounding off large numbers, one is left with the obvious question: who killed them? Everything we know of the years AD 58–73 would indicate that the Jews were anything but passive at that time. It would have taken a sizable Gentile population in the region of Caesarea to overcome anything close to 20,000 Jews. Levine reports that 3000 local pagan soldiers at a time were enlisted throughout the period of the Roman prefecture to supplement the Roman regular units stationed in Israel.<sup>31</sup> When the war broke out, Vespasian kept 12,000 pagan soldiers at Caesarea and another 6000 rotated through after combat duty in the fields of Palestine. Grant claims that Vespasian had about 55,000 troops under him as he marched down from Antioch to Jerusalem.<sup>32</sup>

Freyne, while admitting the hostility of much of Jewish Galilee for the Graeco-Roman cities in the first century AD, finds the antagonism to lie in rural-urban or rich-poor fracture lines, rather than Gentile-Jew antipathies.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Holm and Robert Hohlfelder, *King Herod’s Dream: Caesarea on the Sea* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988) 90–105.

<sup>28</sup> Repayment, no doubt, for Herod’s timely help with provisions for Augustus’s troops and funds when, still known as Octavian, he had come through the area a decade prior, in pursuit of Anthony, Herod’s own erstwhile ally.

<sup>29</sup> We are not even introducing into the equation here the expense of Herod’s other extravagant building projects at Jericho, Massada, and Sebastos (Samaria).

<sup>30</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* 50–51.

<sup>31</sup> Levine, *Caesarea* 20.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Grant, *Augustus to Constantine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 52.

But behind all such analyses is the *assumption* of a substantial Gentile populace. While Riesner is of the opinion that “Jews comprised the vast majority of the Galilean population,” *pace* what he terms “the modern scientific myth” that it was half-pagan,<sup>34</sup> Kee questions whether anyone living in the Lower Galilee “could have escaped the dominant cultural—that is Greco-Roman—atmosphere of the region?”<sup>35</sup> He invokes the influence of Sepphoris, one of the four major centers for Roman administration in Galilee, as an example. Meyers describes that city, which Josephus hailed as “the ornament of all Galilee,” in lavish detail.<sup>36</sup> Herod Antipas devoted much attention between AD 6 and AD 19 to building the showcase Hellenistic city at Sepphoris, with its 5000-seat theater, its pagan temples, administrative buildings, etc. Antipas was motivated, perhaps, by the desire to emulate or even surpass his senior, Herod the Great, and his various notable building projects. Josephus describes the city as having succeeded at that dubious quest. Recent archeological work at Sepphoris has rejuvenated Josephus’s reputation.<sup>37</sup> Often accused of exaggerating the opulence of the Herods’ marble cities, Josephus has once again been vindicated. Sepphoris was a building project on a major scale and served as the center of all Galilee, until Antipas turned his sights to Tiberias in AD 19.

At the moment when this construction started, a recently-unemployed carpenter/stonemason named Joseph was living a thirty-minute walk away from all this lucrative work. Nazareth, the small town where Joseph brought his family to live when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judah, is only 2.4 miles from Sepphoris. Jesus would have begun his apprenticeship under Joseph as a 10–12-year old boy and worked where his father did. That the construction project at Sepphoris went on until Jesus of Nazareth was about 26 years old offers a rather intriguing hypothetical picture of the unknown period of Jesus’ life before he began his public ministry:

Jesus was himself known as “the carpenter” in his adult life (Mark 6:3), an indication that he made his living at it regularly until he began his itinerant ministry. The tiny village of Nazareth would not have kept him steadily employed. But thirty minutes up the road was the biggest construction project in Palestine since Herod the Great had built Caesarea. Anyone who has ever lived in a small rural town, where the arrival of a nearby source of income is big news, will find it natural to suppose that Jesus would have walked the two miles to work in Sepphoris each day. If so, he likely spent 10 hours a day there having daily commerce with Gentiles as a matter of course throughout his adolescence and early adulthood. He could have even grown up speaking Greek, and maybe even some Latin, along with his maternal Aramaic.

<sup>33</sup> Sean Freyne, “Urban-Rural Relations in First-Century Galilee,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. Lee I. Levine; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 75–91.

<sup>34</sup> Rainer Riesner, “Galilee,” *DJG* 252.

<sup>35</sup> Howard Clark Kee, “Early Christianity in the Galilee,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* 15.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Meyers, “Roman Sepphoris in Light of New Archeological Evidence and Recent Research,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* 321–38.

<sup>37</sup> Described in detail by James Strange (“Six Campaigns at Sepphoris: The University of South Florida Excavations, 1983–89,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* 339–55).

If this seems far-fetched, compare it with alternative scenarios. The possibility that Joseph, and then Jesus, supported Mary and the household of at least six children by steadily finding work for twenty years exclusively in the sleepy hamlet of Nazareth demands a high level of credulity. The other scenario sketched above seems far more likely.

If Jesus did work at Sepphoris—or even if he only went there to buy nails or a new saw blade from time to time—it would be natural and normal for him to be at ease with Gentiles. His immediate response to the Roman centurion’s request at Matthew 8:7, “I will come [to your home] and heal him,” is not typical of a Jewish rabbi’s attitude—but it may reflect the easy natural habit of a lifetime, as may such scenes as 9:10–11, where tax-gatherers and “sinners” come freely to join Jesus and his disciples at the table.<sup>38</sup>

In light of all this, Josephus’s report that “Jesus . . . drew over to him many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles” ought not to surprise us (*Ant.* 18.3.3). To read of this attraction to his inclusive ministry described as during, and not after, his earthly life is not an anachronism. Josephus continues, “. . . and the tribe of Christians, so named, are not extinct to this day.” Scholars have always posited the likelihood that some parts of this paragraph may be a Christian editorial interpolation prior to Eusebius’s citation of it.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, in all versions of Josephus, the Jews and Gentiles are reported to have followed Jesus during his earthly life and to constitute, together, the Christian race or tribe which “continued,” as Josephus perceived it, until his own day.

In the rest of the NT, the Christian messianic movement is depicted as emerging at first exclusively within Judaism, and then spilling over its edges to include Gentiles—not merely as God-fearers sitting on the periphery, as they were permitted to do in synagogue Judaism, but as full members on equal footing with their Jewish brethren (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14–22). This development was seen by both Jewish and Gentile Christians as the culmination of the plan of God revealed through the Hebrew Scriptures, but was considered by non-believing Jews as the arch-heresy which betrayed traditional Judaism.

Concerning the implications for Gospels interpretation, Kee rightly concludes,

Given the evidence from archeological and literary sources for the common and inescapable interchange between Jews and residents of Hellenistic background and culture in the Galilee and adjoining regions, there is no reason to dismiss out of hand these gospel accounts of Jesus’ initiative in reaching people from Hellenistic centers adjacent to the Galilee as later additions to the

<sup>38</sup> Does “sinners” in Matthew, as in other Jewish literature such as 1 Enoch or Jubilees equal a Jewish code word for “Gentiles”? There is no particular linguistic or sociological association between tax-gatherers and, say, prostitutes, or drunkards, whereas the collaboration necessary and assumed between those who collect taxes for Herod or the Romans and the ethnic parties for whom they collect them leads to a natural grouping. “Tax-gatherers and Gentiles, sinners,” go together as easily as “scribes and Pharisees,” or “chief priests and elders of the people,” two of Matthew’s other favorite pairings.

<sup>39</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 37–39.

Jesus tradition, written after the Church had begun to undertake a conscious mission to gentiles.<sup>40</sup>

If, then, the presence and influence of Gentiles in the society in which the historical Jesus moved was in fact pervasive, there is no need to suppose that those incidents in Matthew's Gospel involving Gentiles were later interpolations transposed back into the setting of Jesus' lifetime from the *Sitz im Leben* of the time of the redaction. Their plausibility as actual events from the lifetime of Jesus is easily and amply sustained. Our primary interest here, however, is not with the historicity of the events, but with the use Matthew makes of them, particularly in his narrative accounts.

### III. GENTILES IN THE BIRTH NARRATIVE

We have already noted that Matthew does not shrink from repeating Jesus' conventional uses of the term ἔθνος (or the substantive adjective ἔθνο-υκός) in discourse material, where they serve as negative examples. But Jesus' behavior towards Gentiles recorded in Matthew, and Matthew's own literary positioning of them in the book, stand in stark contrast to those didactic references to them as foils. Outside the discourses, Gentiles often are depicted as paradigms of righteousness and faith.

1. *Babylon*. The very first characters to appear, after the birth of Jesus, are Gentiles.<sup>41</sup> They come, moreover, from the land of the deportation, about which the author has made several ringing references in the preceding genealogy, emphasizing "Babylon" as a significant milestone in God's preparation of his people for the coming of the Messiah.<sup>42</sup> Matthew's bringing the Gentile magi on the scene as the first protagonists from outside the Messiah's nuclear family is by itself significant. But their attitudes, speech, and actions are even more so, combining to give a very strong positive impression of these Gentile seekers. Their words, the first spoken by human beings in the book, are not merely incidental but full of literary and theological importance, introducing the main character of the book: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" They also illustrate the right posture before him: "for we have come to worship him" (2:2). They are seeking Jesus, they name him king of the Jews, and they purpose to prostrate themselves before him to acknowledge his sovereignty. In highlighting their attitude manifested in both word and action, Matthew sets them before the reader

<sup>40</sup> Kee, "Early Christians" 18–19.

<sup>41</sup> It is, of course, possible, though unlikely, that the magi were Babylonian Jews. Their ignorance of the pertinent Micah texts, however, and dependence on the Jerusalem hierarchy for direction to the right site for the Messiah, as well as Matthew's choice of words in 2:12, that they returned "to their own country," all contribute to the traditional understanding of the magi as ethnic Chaldeans.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew actually articulates the expression "the deportation to Babylon" four times in the genealogy of chapter 1 (vv. 11, 12, 17), elevating it to the same status with Abraham and David in v. 17 as a temporal marker for the fourteen generations between each significant stage leading to the Messiah.

as models for proper response to the revelation that the kingdom of God has begun in Jesus.

It is not without device that Matthew chooses Gentiles to perform this introductory and exemplary task, to model how one ought to approach the Messiah of Israel. In the sequel (2:10–12), they do in fact, as they had intended, prostrate themselves before him, with all that that represents. They present him with signs of royalty, and they refuse to cooperate with ruling forces of official Judaism in Jerusalem who want to persecute the Messiah and all who are generally associated with him (2:16–18). Readers in Matthew’s original *Sitz im Leben* would naturally perceive parallels with their own situations in this story and understand implications for their own conduct. These Gentile seekers’ words and actions are thus recorded not only for their historical, but also for their heuristic, value. They suggest programmatic and paradigmatic ways to apply the message of the book in the reader’s day.

The devotion of the Gentile magi is set in stark relief by comparison with the attitude of the Jerusalem hierarchy, as portrayed in 2:3–8. First, the response of Jerusalem’s populace to the news that Messiah has come is linked, not with the joyful Gentile magi, but rather with Herod (καὶ πᾶσα Ἱεροσόλυμα μετ’ αὐτοῦ, 2:3). It is not a flattering association. The historical record of Herod’s vile character is so well-established that Matthew can use him, without embellishment, as a cynical parody of Jewish monarchical aspirations. In his effort to find the threat to his own power suggested by the Chaldeans’ inquiries, Herod “gathers together (συναγαγὼν) all the high priests and scribes of the people” (πάντας τοὺς ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ γραμματεῖς τοῦ λαοῦ, 2:4). This formula, of intrinsic Matthean significance, is used here for the first time, and afterwards found at important intervals throughout the book.<sup>43</sup> The alert reader will not miss the irony of Matthew’s deliberate choice of the participle συναγαγὼν in 2:4, which has the effect of immediately evoking its noun form in the mind of the reader, who, already this early in the book, begins to associate the ominous conspiratorial atmosphere of 2:3–8 with the *synagogue* word group, albeit unconsciously.

Matthew places the two images side by side to contrast them: the representatives of official Judaism are συναγαγὼν around Herod the Temple-builder (2:3–6), while the Gentile worshippers gather around Jesus the Messiah (2:11). In contrast to the Gentile magi, who have come from a great distance to find Jesus and have exercised great faith in following slim indications, these Jewish leaders of the people, with all the cumulative evidence at their disposal, do not make the very minimal effort of traveling the five miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see the new-born “king.”

The opening narrative of the book contributes to a similar impression about traditional Judaism. The reader is privy to Joseph’s personal inner world as he wrestles with whether to adhere to traditional interpretations of Jewish laws concerning his pregnant fiancée. The internal religious conflict

<sup>43</sup> “Chief priests and scribes” are mentioned together at 16:21, 20:18, 21:15, and 27:41. A dozen other references allude to “the chief priests and elders” or “chief priests and Pharisees.”

is resolved when he hears the gospel about Jesus the Savior who will fulfill the Word of God announced through the prophets and decides to obey that message rather than Jewish traditions (1:20–23).

Both the story of Joseph's ambivalence and resolution with regard to Mary's pregnant condition and the Chaldean seekers narrative that follows it present ruptures with Judaism as represented by, respectively, traditional interpretation of Torah and the religious hierarchy centered at Jerusalem. The sequence of the two stories is heuristic. Already, at the beginning of his book, Matthew challenges narrow views of both what it means to be faithful to God and who may do so and presents "loyalty to Jesus the Messiah" as the preponderant value, displacing loyalty to Jewish traditionalism.

2. *Egypt*. In the very next scene it is Egypt, a land replete with negative associations for Jews, that provides protection, security, and succor for the infant Messiah (2:13–15). In stark contrast, Judea, the Jewish epicenter, remains a sinister and dangerous place where he cannot be nurtured in safety, even after the death of Herod (2:16–22). So, the infant is transported to and raised in the more racially mixed atmosphere of Galilee (2:14–23). That Egypt, and then Galilee, are favorably contrasted with Jerusalem and Judea would appear to be another Matthean irony, making a pair with his bringing the first worshippers of the Messiah from the land of the deportation.

Thus the birth narrative is bracketed by the *goyim* nations of Babylon and Egypt with positive associations, while the religious hierarchy at Jerusalem, constituting a threat to the newborn Messiah, is tagged with negative associations. All of this makes an enormous literary impact. As the first presentation in the book about Messiah's reception in the socio-political religious world, it sets the tone for what is to follow.

#### IV. GENTILES IN THE CROWDS OF JESUS' FOLLOWERS

When chapter 3 introduces the adult ministry of Jesus, Matthew makes a special point of Jesus' relocating in Capernaum in order to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy about "Galilee of the Gentiles (Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν), . . . the people who were sitting in darkness have seen a great light" (4:14–16).<sup>44</sup> Sabourin emphasizes the significance of Capernaum as a crossroads of that part of the world, imputing to Jesus missionary motives in deciding to make his home there. Capernaum was the Roman military post along the Damascus-Galilee-Transjordan-Judea highway, and Sabourin sees Jesus' going there as a deliberate policy move, in order to "fulfill prophecy . . . that Jesus would bring messianic salvation both to the Jews and to all the nations."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> M. J. LaGrange makes a case for the etymology of Galilee as indicating that by definition, at least in some remote time, the area was understood to be the "land of the *goyim*" (*L'Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* [Paris: Lecoffre, 1948] 69).

<sup>45</sup> L. Sabourin, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (2 vols.; Bandra: St Paul's, 1982) 1.305–6.

Sabourin argues that Jesus’ mission was towards the Gentiles right from the beginning of his ministry, cross-referencing Luke 2:23 and Acts 26:22–23.

The introduction at 4:15 places Jesus in the particular crossroads social context of “Zebulun and Naphtali, the way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.” It is in that place that Jesus announces his program, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (v. 17). He picks some disciples, then goes all about Galilee “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (v. 23). This focus on Capernaum and Galilee Sabourin interprets as showing that “Jesus’ life and ministry in Galilee proleptically announced the future development of the mission (cf. 28:19): the church of all nations.”<sup>46</sup>

As Jesus heals people, the news about his healing powers penetrates up into “all Syria” (4:24), with the result that “they brought to him all who were sick, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics, and he healed them.”<sup>47</sup> Just who “they” are, who brought these misfortunates, is left undefined. But since it is the closest referent in this syntax, “residents of Syria” suggests itself as the most natural antecedent for the subject of the verb, though it is seldom if ever understood that way in most interpretations. Certainly Matthew’s mentioning that Jesus’ reputation extended up into “all Syria,” just before he follows with “as a result they brought to him all who were sick, etc. . . . and he healed them,” implies at the very least that people from Syria were among those served by Jesus’ ministry, if they did not constitute the majority of the referent of v. 24.<sup>48</sup>

In v. 25 the next circle of those to whom Jesus ministered is added: ὄχλοι πολλοί (“great multitudes”) are said to come “from Galilee and the ten Greek cities and Jerusalem and Judea and beyond the Jordan,” a description that again is very inclusive. Following hard on the heels of the detailed descriptions of v. 24, it seems more natural to define the crowds not by race but by what they had in common: they were “needy.” To assume that nearly all the demonized, epileptics, handicapped, and otherwise afflicted individuals brought to Jesus for healing were of the Jewish race is neither necessary nor reasonable, especially given the geographical parameters deliberately

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 307.

<sup>47</sup> The differences from the language of this pericope at the parallels in Luke 4:14, 40 are significant. Luke, who normally shows major interest in Gentiles, does not refer (as does Matthew) to Syria, Trans-Jordan, and the Decapolis. Nor does he enumerate (as does Matthew) the varying details of the medical cases: Luke contents himself with a general, non-descriptive allusion to “all who were sick.” Given Luke’s interests, and his generally more precise language when describing medical cases, one would have expected the reverse. Consequently, Matthew’s detailed list of the kinds of misfits and sick and handicapped and needy folk who come to Christ is all the more striking. There is clearly a message of inclusivity in Matt 4:24–25.

<sup>48</sup> The frequently given explanation that “Syria” here means the whole Roman province of that name, so that it is just another inclusive word for Israel, is undermined by the particularity of the syntagm ἀπῆλθεν εἰς ὅλην τὴν Συρίαν. Both the prefix ἀπ- and the preposition εἰς indicate a news that went out from the territory that was home to Jesus and penetrated a different place. Matthew employs a similar syntax when he says later (again with reference to Syria) that Jesus himself “left that place” (ἔξελθὼν ἐκεῖθεν) and went εἰς τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος (15:21).

spelled out in v. 25. Yet commentators continue to ignore or even to deny the several apparent references to homelands of Gentiles in vv. 24–25.<sup>49</sup> We have already seen above in the historical excursus some indication of the number of non-Jews in the area. If someone hears that there is a compassionate healer down by Lake Tiberias, and he or she has a son, daughter, mother-in-law, etc., possessed of any one of the afflictions described in 4:24, that person is going to bring the needy loved one—no matter what the race—to where he or she can get help.<sup>50</sup>

The crowds who follow Jesus around throughout Matthew, the ὄχλοι πολλοί, are defined in 4:25 as from Galilee (Syria has already been mentioned in v. 24), the Hellenic cities of the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and “beyond the Jordan.” The very next words in the text are Ἴδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους (“So, seeing the crowds,” 5:1). Without missing a beat, Matthew’s narrative continues by plunging right into the Sermon on the Mount, with precisely these same great multitudes from mixed backgrounds comprising those in attendance. The δέ in second place in 5:1, after the circumstantial participle ἰδὼν, links 4:25 with 5:1, indicating together that there is no break in the narration. Stephanus’s division of chapters here is misplaced and has had an unfortunate effect on the interpretation of Matthew. Verse 4:23 would have been a better beginning for the pericope. The multi-racial crowds (ὄχλοι πολλοί) of 4:25 are the ὄχλοι of 5:1 who make up the audience for the Sermon on the Mount of chapters 5–7. There is no break in the syntax between the two verses.

This pattern of Jesus’ ministry established in 4:23–5:1 will be either repeated or tacitly understood throughout the rest of the book. Matthew shows Jesus’ policy to be to preach and teach and reach out to Israel first. “His emphasis on the Jews . . . did not exclude Gentile participation in the kingdom during his ministry. However, Gentile participation was nonetheless an exception and not the rule.”<sup>51</sup> He never, before his death and resurrection, takes the initiative to establish a Gentile ministry. But already the pattern is set: as the good news about him gets out, people outside the Hebrew community come to him for help. When they do, he ministers to them, including them in the purview of his mercy and lordship.

In harmony with the testimony of Josephus concerning the mixed nature of Jesus’ followers, Watson avers that “The crowd . . . was composed of both

<sup>49</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale Allison are of the opinion that we are “probably not” to think of Decapolis, Trans-Jordan, or even Syria in vv. 24–25 as references specifically to Gentile homelands (*The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988] 1.416–20). “Matthew may presuppose a Gentile presence among the crowds, but he does not emphasize this” (1.419, n. 12). For Donald Hagner, the geographic/demographic terms of vv. 24–25 (Syria, Decapolis, Transjordan, etc.) are simply a poetic way of saying, “the whole of Israel”; there is no reference to Gentiles anywhere in his treatment (*Matthew 1–13* [WBC33a; Dallas: Word, 1993] 81).

<sup>50</sup> During a decade of missionary work in west Africa, I observed similar scenes to this one over and over; wherever someone appears to have a gift of healing, crowds of needy people gang around that healer. It does not matter whether they share the same religious orientation of the healer or not; they just come because they want what he or she has to offer.

<sup>51</sup> Scot McKnight, “Gentiles,” *DJG* 261.

Gentile and Jewish backgrounds.”<sup>52</sup> When Bonnard asks whether from 15:29 to the end of the book Jesus is among the Jews or, as Lohmeyer holds, “still among the pagans,” the underlying assumption of both scholars is that he has been among the latter, at least up to that point in the narration of Matthew.<sup>53</sup>

There may be more than incidental significance to Jesus’ repeated expression in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said . . . .” All Jewish folk in attendance would have read, likely even memorized, the texts in question. This is not the place to reiterate Hengel’s and Tcherikover’s proofs of Palestinian Jewry’s literacy rates. But it was a rare first-century Jew who could not read. When talking to the Jewish religious elite or to his Jewish disciples, Jesus habitually uses “it is written,” or “have you never read?” or “Isaiah (or David, etc.) says.” So perhaps his use of the broader “you have heard it said” formula is meant to be more inclusive, to draw in those who are peripheral, who have only heard scraps of the Jewish ethos but are attracted to it. While the numerous pagans who came to live in Palestine continued their own religious customs, they could not help but notice the monotheistic practices and the wholesome ethos of their Jewish neighbors. Many were attracted to the Hebrew religion and were assimilated (with varying degrees of enthusiasm!) by local synagogues.<sup>54</sup> Jesus’ “You have heard that it was said” in the Sermon on the Mount would make sense as addressed to include such persons on the periphery of Judaism, for whom much of the Torah was only known by hearsay, in the purview of his message.<sup>55</sup>

#### V. TENSION BETWEEN JESUS’ WORDS AND HIS ACTIONS

Now, if the hearers of the Sermon on the Mount very likely included Gentiles in the motley multitudes, a certain tension is formed by the negative conventional stereotypes of Gentiles, mentioned earlier, that are to be found in this discourse. Was Jesus grossly insensitive or deliberately rude? Matthew’s literary habits provide some hints as to what this might mean.

Nearly every student of Matthew notices his penchant for hyperbole and the striking boldness of his ringing rhetorical cadence. Though few can agree on exactly where to draw the line in individual cases between literal and figurative, most interpreters assume the necessity of taking Matthew with a grain of salt at some point or another in the interpretive enterprise. No one has seriously argued that Jesus really was commanding the tearing out of eyeballs or chopping off of hands, for example, though all affirm the seriousness of what he did intend by such statements.

<sup>52</sup> D. F. Watson, “People, Crowd,” *DJG* 606.

<sup>53</sup> Bonnard, *Matthieu* 234.

<sup>54</sup> McKnight, *Light to the Gentiles* 26 et passim.

<sup>55</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury argues in a similar vein that Matthew has reworked the terms for “the last day” or “the day of judgment,” specifically to render the esoteric Hebrew expression “that day” understandable to Gentile hearers/readers (*Structure, Christology, Kingdom* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974] 27–31).

Many have argued that the only correct way to understand Matthew's strong denunciations and narrow proscriptions is within a conventional literary form that had been known for centuries to be, for rhetorical purposes, exaggeratedly bombastic and harsh towards its adversaries and towards those whom it deemed to be in the wrong. This literary convention is frequently used, for example, to explain the apparently strident anti-Jewish tone of Matthew as actually less categorical than it sounds at first encounter.

(Perhaps) none of this harsh language is to be construed as racial hostility (as has often been argued); rather, the denunciations contained in this literature were a tolerable religious rhetoric designed to shock and revive. What strikes us as harsh or what may very well be avoided by us may not have been harsh to, or avoided by, first century Jews and Christians.<sup>56</sup>

Such evaluations of Matthew explain its language of apparent hostility to Jews or Judaism as only, or mostly, "a tolerable religious rhetoric." But if Jewish literature from the time of the Pentateuch, the prophets, the Essenes, into Jesus' day and after, often sounded harsh against those with whom it disagreed, and yet was not really as categorical in its denunciations and rejections as it sounds to a modern reader,<sup>57</sup> then the same analysis might be turned around and applied to rhetorical language in Matthew concerning Gentiles.

If we can explain, for example, Jesus' unqualified denunciation of "this [entire] generation" of Jews in Matt 23:36 as an exaggerated literary strategem for rhetorical effect,<sup>58</sup> then we must also entertain the possibility that his references to Gentiles as outside the purview of Jesus' mission, or as paradigms of unrighteousness, may also be rhetorical devices. Though interpreters may disagree on particular statements as to whether Jesus (or Matthew) intended this or that one literally or figuratively, at least some of what Matthew records appears to be too severe to be Jesus' literal intended meaning.

One compelling reason to seek a more profound level of meaning is because Matthew himself occasionally supplies an alternative to slavish literalism, by showing that Jesus sometimes acted differently—specifically, more generously—than what his speech would lead one to expect.<sup>59</sup> For example, after telling the disciples not to go to Gentile cities in 10:5, Jesus announces in the very next pericope that things will go better for the cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom in the judgment day than for the Hebrew cities in which he had done most of his mighty works (11:21–24). Some read the mission discourse in chapter 10 in such a way that "[i]n spite of the restriction

<sup>56</sup> Scot McKnight, "A Loyal Critic: Matthew's Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective," in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 56.

<sup>57</sup> This characterization of ancient Jewish literature is repeatedly averred by various contributors to the anthology cited in the previous note (*Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*). See particularly Craig Evans, "Introduction" 1–17.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. his other references to ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆ at 11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 24:34.

<sup>59</sup> As may be observed in the analysis that follows, the so-called "deep structure" of Matthew's narrative reveals a different pattern from that of many of the individual sayings taken at surface value.

to Israel expressed in vv. 5b–6, the missionary discourse . . . contains also instructions that suppose a much wider horizon.”<sup>60</sup>

More pertinent and proximate to our subject here is what happens in chapters 8 and 9, directly after Jesus concludes his very austere résumé of kingdom demands in chapters 5–7. Coming down from that mountain, after listening to that list of requirements, any would-be disciple of Jesus must have been scratching his head and re-evaluating. Can this be for me? Can I live up to these standards? Or am I utterly beyond the pale of what this teacher is offering? The hearer of this message accepts the stringent rhetoric at face value: only the perfect, those whose righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, can hope to receive benefits from this King. The requirements he verbalizes are too demanding for most people to fulfill.

But then chapters 8 and 9 show us a different picture. One after another, nearly a dozen characters who normally would be considered outside the realm of kingdom/covenant benefits approach Jesus in faith. To the reader’s surprise, Jesus responds to them warmly, granting their requests and ministering kingdom mercies to people ostensibly outside consideration: the unclean by reason of disease, a Gentile occupying soldier, social pariahs and sinners, the demon-oppressed. In the act of healing he reaches out and actually touches: a leper (8:3), a sick woman (8:15), a dead person (9:25), and two blind men (9:29). He in turn is touched in faith by a woman with a hemorrhage that automatically rendered her perpetually “unclean” (9:20), and he sits down to enjoy table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (9:10). Since our focus here is Jesus’ attitude towards Gentiles, we will limit our treatment of the many personages in these two chapters to the Gentile centurion in 8:5–13.

1. *The Roman centurion.* As a commanding officer of the hated Roman army of occupation, this outlander represents the far end of the spectrum of those to whom the Jewish Messiah ministers. Unlike the rest of the pitiful and wretched suppliants in whose company he is found in chapters 8 and 9, this Gentile is by his own words “a man of authority.”

The pericope follows almost immediately upon the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew’s placing it there, along with the leper who leads off the series, makes vivid the contrast between Jesus’ verbalized requirements and his actual ministrations of mercy. Who can be a part of this kingdom? Watch and see: the first person to throw himself at Jesus’ feet as he comes down the mountain is a scabrous leper; the next person to approach him with a humble request is a foreigner, a soldier of fortune. Jesus rebuffs neither, but instead, by granting their requests, includes them (and all the other social pariahs of chapters 8 and 9) in the community of those who have faith in him and are therefore “blessed.”<sup>61</sup>

The differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s respective presentations of the Roman soldier’s story are striking. In Luke 7:1–10 Jewish elders (πρεσβυτέροι τῶν Ἰουδαίων) come to Jesus on the centurion’s behalf, interceding

<sup>60</sup> Sabourin, *Matthew* 518.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Matt 5:3–13.

with Jesus and giving him good kosher reasons why Jesus should do this for him. They summarize the case with the argument that “He is worthy for you to grant this to him (ἄξιός ἐστιν ᾧ παρέξῃ τοῦτο), for [a] he loves our nation, and [b] it is he who built us a synagogue” (Luke 7:4–5). Matthew omits the rationale, and just presents the man coming directly to Jesus himself, alone. There are no interceding Jewish friends, no justifying reasons—connected with his love for Israel—that are presented why Jesus should do this for him. Yet Jesus’ first response is an immediate affirmation: “I will come and heal him.” This response is met with humility and faith on part of the Gentile soldier. His own words, “Lord, I am not worthy” (Κύριε, οὐκ εἰμὶ. ἱκανός, 8:8), contrast with those of the Jewish elders, “He is worthy” (ἄξιός ἐστιν), in Luke 7:4.<sup>62</sup> The soldier furthermore expresses his belief that Jesus may speak authoritatively from where he stands and the healing will be effected without his having to displace himself.

Both Luke and Matthew record Jesus’ surprise and praise of the man’s faith, and starkly contrast it with the lack thereof anywhere in Israel: Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, παρ’ οὐδενὶ τοσαύτην πίστιν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ εὔρον (“Truly I say to you, nowhere in Israel have I found such a faith,” Matt 8:10).<sup>63</sup> Matthew then adds, “I tell you, many from East and West shall come and recline at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the utter darkness” (vv. 11–12), a saying that Luke reports in a completely different context. Matthew’s citation of this strong formula at this point in the narration, followed immediately by the actual extension of Jesus’ healing power to the Roman’s household, underlines the significance of the inclusion of a Gentile soldier within the purview of the Messiah’s kingdom.

As in many other places in Matthew’s Gospel, it is faith that is the pivotal factor here.<sup>64</sup> The general impression made upon the reader by the “works” language throughout Matthew is so strong that his complementary emphasis on faith is often neglected, even ignored. But the two themes must be considered together. We shall return to this matter below.

After the incident with the centurion, Jesus is beset by many other opportunistic and needy people in chapters 8 and 9. As we have seen above, Jesus responds by extending kingdom benefits to those normally considered outside its purview. Matthew brings to a close this long series of surprising “exceptions to the rule” with the summary remark that Jesus was moved with compassion at the sight of the needy multitudes (Ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους ἐσπλαγχνίσθη περὶ αὐτῶν, 9:36). Not only does this expression comprehensively resume what has just been presented in the previous chapters, it also leads into the next discourse.<sup>65</sup> In this one that follows directly after 9:36 he

<sup>62</sup> Compare also this self-deprecating expression with the Canaanite woman’s humble acceptance of the label “dog” by the Jewish healer with whom she is talking (15:27; on which, see further below).

<sup>63</sup> The difference is slight between Matthew and Luke. Matthew has παρ’ οὐδενὶ ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ (“nowhere in Israel”), while Luke has οὐδὲ ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ (“not even in Israel,” 7:9).

<sup>64</sup> E.g. 8:26; 9:13, 18, 22, 28; 14:31; 17:17, 20; 21:21

<sup>65</sup> Note the wording ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους, identical with 5:1, which led off that discourse also.

appoints missionaries to carry on and multiply his mission. We have already noted above that the strictures of this discourse, too, are qualified or modified subsequently by Jesus so that, again, what appears in the discourse to be nationalistic and limited, in articulated principle actually opens out in praxis.

2. *The Canaanite woman.* We have noted the great irony that while Matthew is known as the Gospel writer who presents radical, demanding ideology from Jesus, he also presents the disavowal of exclusive customs in Jesus’ actual practice. Sometimes the reversal appears in the very pericope in which the severe exigency occurs. One example is the story of Jesus’ response to the plaintive appeals of the Syro-Phoenician (Canaanite) woman in 15:22–28. At first he apparently ignores her, waving off his disciples who are intervening, with the explanation that to help her is out of the question. His words, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (v. 24), seem cold and harsh.<sup>66</sup> His subsequent refusal sounds insulting. When she throws herself at his feet and pleads with him for help, he responds by uttering the seemingly dismissive rejoinder that it would be wrong—almost unethical—to do so (ὄυκ ἔστιν καλόν): “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26).

Readers throughout the centuries have been disturbed, even appalled, by these words. But the Canaanite woman apparently is not. She tacitly agrees with the conventional nationalistic principles the Jewish Messiah has been articulating (“Yes, Lord”), and yet parries with the riposte, “but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master’s table” (v. 27). Acknowledging—in fact, praising—her belief, Jesus grants her request. She, with more perspicacity than many readers of the story, has seen through the mask of Jewish exclusivism in his conventional speech and knows what he can—and, she correctly believes, will—do for her. She has faith that, even acknowledging some kind of Jewish priority in the ordered social system of the people of God, mercy and help are to be hoped for from this Master, not on the basis of her status, but of his.

While Mark reports the words, “Let the children be fed *first*, and then . . .,” at the beginning of Jesus’ answer to her (Mark 7:27), Matthew omits this preliminary condition, eliminating the sequence of successive stages of first Jewish, then Gentile, steps of Jesus’ ministry implied in Mark’s account. LaGrange understands Matthew as redactor to be deliberately

<sup>66</sup> Sabourin interprets both Jesus’ statement to the woman in 15:24 and the general prohibition in 10:5b against going to the Gentiles as a species of hyperbolic statement. “The seemingly absolute statement could in reality be a forceful expression of the priority of Israel as mission field” (*Matthew* 1.72). In both contexts either Jesus himself or his disciples commissioned by him are sent “to the lost sheep of Israel.” This commission is modified by μᾶλλον at 10:6 (literally “rather” or “better”), and by οὐκ . . . εἰ μὴ at 15:24 (literally “not . . . if not,” i.e. “except” or “only”), a parallel that may support Sabourin’s hypothesis of identification of intent between the two statements. Since we find in the accompanying context of 15:21–28 that Jesus’ real policy towards Gentiles is inclusive even while he is mouthing ostensibly exclusive Jewish conventionalisms, perhaps both statements are intended other than literally.

omitting Mark's Ἄφες πρῶτον χορτασθῆναι τὰ τέκνα to show that anyone, regardless of what race or period of salvation history to which one belongs, may in faith call upon the goodness and mercy of Jesus, the Messiah of God, and humbly hope that he will grant succor.<sup>67</sup>

Matthew also differs from Mark in what falls to the floor for the dogs. While Mark has τῶν ψιγίων τῶν παιδίων (“the crumbs of the children,” 7:28), Matthew refers to τῶν ψιγίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν (“the crumbs falling from their master’s table”). This has a double effect. By referring to the benefits as coming directly from their master, Matthew avoids the degrading “trickle down” principle that in Mark seems to place Gentiles under the Jewish children in hierarchical priority. At the same time it eliminates any misunderstanding of competitiveness between the “infants” and the “dogs.” Matthew makes this whole venture an affair directly between the dogs and the master, which changes the atmosphere considerably. Rather than leftovers cast aside after the Jewish heirs are sated, as it might appear in Mark, what the Gentile woman receives in the Matthean version is a boon ministered directly by ὁ κύριος himself. She receives, now, in the narrative present. In Matthew’s theology of the story, she is not made to wait until the Jews, through their eventual unbelief and rejection of Messiah, will have let fall a few crumbs from the table, a few leftovers, for everyone else.

This bears directly on one’s interpretation of the temporal sequence, if any, of a *Heilsgeschichte* schema in Matthew. Some scholars have seen Matthew’s programmatic Jewish exclusion during Jesus’ earthly ministry as tempered by allusions to an eventual inclusion of Gentiles in the messianic community later. But it appears that Matthew does more than that. While Jesus says here in the Canaanite woman story, and at several intervals throughout the book, that both his mission and that of his commissioned disciples are to the lost sheep of Israel, incidents like this one and like the request granted the Roman centurion in chapter 8 nevertheless indicate that for those Gentiles who are bold enough to approach the Jewish Messiah in belief—at any time in his ministry—there is good reason to hope to be included in the kingdom being inaugurated by this Messiah.

The Canaanite woman’s unabashed adoption of Jesus’ droll, deliberately provocative terms, her bold acceptance of these terms as those under which she must come to him—her “Yes, but even the dogs” (καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια)—wins the day, the boon, and Jesus’ unbegrudging encomium.

Jesus’ words of praise for this Gentile woman’s daring faith, ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις· γενηθήτω σοι ὡς θέλεις (“O woman, great is your faith; let it be unto you as you wish,” 15:28), are not found in Mark’s account. Significantly, the same lauding of faith occurs with the centurion story in Matt 8:10, 13. That Gentiles show this kind of faith is particularly contrasted with the lack thereof in unbelieving Israel in 8:10, as it is also when previous generations of believing Gentiles (Ninevites and the Queen of Ethiopia) are contrasted in 12:41–42 with “this generation” of unbelieving Jews. The im-

<sup>67</sup> LaGrange, *Matthieu* 309–10.

pression Matthew leaves in both the story of the Roman soldier and that of the Canaanite women is of faith at work in those outside the normal purview of the covenant, procuring “shalom” for Gentiles.

#### VI. A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

How then may the tension between the strict exclusivism expressed in the principles articulated by Jesus and the liberal extensions practiced by him be resolved? Perhaps Matthew understood Jesus’ strategy and behavior something like this: Jesus must remain faithful to his primary purpose until he has “fulfilled all righteousness,” as he expressed one aspect of it to John the Baptist (Matt 3:15). He cannot be distracted from fulfilling that purpose by the potentially more fruitful responsiveness of Gentile God-fearers (as the nascent church almost immediately experienced to be the case). He cannot let that admittedly more attractive enterprise become his, or his disciples’, agenda—yet.

But there is no inherent reason why those who believe, whether Jew or Gentile, cannot already during Jesus’ itinerant ministry in Israel partake of benefits that are yet to be won by the perfect obedience of Israel’s Messiah. Already in 8:17 (“by his stripes we are healed”), Matthew sees Jesus’ itinerant healing ministry as fulfilling the Isaianic prophecy that Messiah would provide for healing in the vicarious atonement, though the actual propitiation would not be offered until several years subsequent to the healing events recounted in chapter 8. So it is consistent with the portrait of Jesus painted elsewhere in the book that, even before he completes his Torah-related soteriological duties, he should extend his mercy and lordship to any who have faith in him. This includes “even the dogs”—Gentiles—who will certainly have been included within the compass of the kingdom by the time Matthew writes his book several decades later, after Jesus, having completed his earthly mission, had entrusted his final commission to his followers to disciple *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη* (Matt 28:19). Some of these Gentile believers are portrayed, as we have seen, not merely as “lucky” exceptions to the Messiah’s program but rather as paradigms of the faith that is called for in all of Jesus’ disciples.<sup>68</sup>

But Gentiles are not subversive heroes in Matthew, who somehow earn and deserve what Israel does not. Sandmel’s mild complaint that “there is a recurrent pro-Gentile bias in Matthew” seems astute at first, but is really, in the final analysis, an exaggeration.<sup>69</sup> In Matthew, Gentiles do not replace Israel as the people of God, but join them.

Matthew’s theological perspective is not to lower the Jewish nation to the lowest rung but rather to elevate all people to the level of potential people of God. The leveling process is complete and radical (Matthew denationalizes

<sup>68</sup> Other Gentiles (e.g. Pilate, his wife, the centurion at the cross, etc.) bear witness to Jesus’ righteousness without necessarily embracing him in personal faith.

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 362.

Judaism), and the process does not result in a new hierarchy. For Matthew, Jews (by race) are simply people, like Gentiles, who need to seek God's salvation in Jesus Messiah.<sup>70</sup>

The theology of Matthew, in other words, is not far removed from that of Paul in Romans 11:17–21, where the apostle to the Gentiles describes their state as analogous to a branch that has been grafted into a living plant and become part of that integrity.

## VII. CONCLUSION

That several dozen references to Gentiles (or "peoples," "pagans," "nations," etc.) appear in a book so evidently Jewish as Matthew's Gospel should not surprise anyone familiar with the literature of that period. What does surprise the careful reader is the juxtaposition of conventional negative stereotypes of the Gentiles alongside such positive portraits as we have briefly noted here. We have seen that the conventional language and imagery is often found in the discourses, while the unconventional usages are found in narrative materials. Why this should be programmatic in Matthew is not immediately obvious.

But when these observations are collated together with Matthew's overall method and message, a pattern is easier to discern. Analyses of Matthew's structure have often been predicated upon Bacon's observation that the five major discourse blocks are formed in relation to narrative sequences.<sup>71</sup> Though interpreters rarely remark upon *how* they relate to each other, the key to these εἰσὴν puzzles (and perhaps to some other enigmas in Matthew's Gospel as well) may possibly be found in understanding the relationship of the discourses to the narratives.

One pattern that repeats itself throughout Matthew's Gospel is that the speech of Jesus is considerably more exacting and demanding than his more merciful actions. In public discourse Jesus lays out in clear, ringing tones the severe demands of kingdom discipleship in all their rigor, giving the lie to adversaries who would accuse the Nazarene messianic sect of moral laxity, of easy lawless living, of what contemporary critics sometimes call "cheap grace." To such accusations Matthew addresses, for example, Jesus' "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you," a sort of ethical *qal wa' homer*, in discourse. If the old covenant made with Israel had stringent requirements, this is so even more with Jesus' demands.

But then, as the earnest disciple realizes that the demands of the kingdom so exceed his own righteousness as to preclude him from earned participation in the new covenant community, Matthew follows the discourses directly with narratives showing Jesus to be merciful and generous to those who appear least likely to be his beneficiaries. The Jewish Messiah extends the benefits of the kingdom to those whom one normally thinks to be utterly outside its purview, even Gentiles, if only they have faith in him.

<sup>70</sup> McKnight, "Loyal Critic" 75.

<sup>71</sup> B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Holt, 1930).

The accounts of those who throughout Matthew’s Gospel gather gladly around Jesus—lepers, physically and otherwise-handicapped persons, demonized and stigmatized persons, tax collectors, Gentiles, and sinners—are not just historical but heuristic. They are Matthew’s assurances to the reader that it is precisely those who know their unworthiness and still come to Jesus whose faith will be rewarded, because their faith is in Jesus himself, not in their own righteousness or ethnic privilege.

This by no means contradicts, nullifies, or lessens the requirements that Jesus articulates in the discourse material. The demands of discipleship are real. But, one may logically infer from Matthew, if believing Gentiles are welcome in this kingdom, the natural sons of Abraham may certainly hope to be admitted—if they have faith in Jesus the Messiah and obey his commands.