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Overman, J. Andrew.
Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew

New Testament in Context

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Readers of his 1990 work, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Fortress), will be glad now to see Overman apply his hypothesis in a pericope- by-pericope commentary on the text of the Gospel. In a way, this is an ideal circumstance for a commentary series that is devoted to the NT "in context." As Overman points out in his introduction, while there are several senses of the word "context," such as narrative or contemporary, the main context that bears on his commentary is the social context, i.e., the context in which the Gospel was written. Overman argues rightly that the evangelist spoke directly to the situation and needs of his community. Most importantly, however, the faith of this community represents for Overman a type of second-temple Judaism.

Given the late date Overman assigns to the Gospel (between 81-117 CE), it seems remarkable for him to say that "'Christianity' as a term and even more as an identifiable entity distinct from Judaism had not emerged by the time of the writing of Matthew's Gospel" (pp. 9-10). He goes on to say that Matthew is a Jewish, not a Christian, document and that the members of Matthew's church thought of themselves not as a form of Christianity, but as a kind of "Matthean Judaism." The tensions in the Gospel are thus to be regarded as tensions not between Christians and Jews but "between different Judaisms." Matthew represents a strictly intramural Jewish squabble.

According to Overman, the Gospel reflects a great struggle for leadership within the Jewish community. This struggle was between the scribes and Pharisees, on the one hand, and Matthean Judaism, on the other. It is no accident that Matthew restricts Jesus to Galilee and that it was in Galilee that rabbinic Judaism took shape. This leads Overman to posit Galilee as the place where Matthew's community was located. Matthew's opponents, in the form of rabbinic Judaism, ultimately were to win the struggle in the second and third centuries.

For Overman, Matthew and Matthew's community represent what he calls a "Jesus-centered Judaism." In his view, accordingly, it follows that "for most of Christian history, Matthew's original setting, situation, and even message have been obscured. The crises and questions that provoked the Gospel in the first place--the struggles and tensions within and among competing Judaisms in Palestine in the late first century--have been lost on most interpreters" (pp. 25-26). When in the second century, according to Overman, a new religion separate from Judaism emerged for the first time, the Gospel of Matthew became something it never was intended to be: a Christian book.

The commentary itself attempts to demonstrate the truth of Overman's perspective. Much of the time his interpretation seems plausible and convincing. On occasion, however, the reader may have the feeling that Overman is driving his hypothesis too hard and forcing texts to agree with it. The challenging texts are those that, by the degree of newness they manifest, imply more discontinuity with Judaism, in all of its variety, than Overman wants to allow. What Judaism affirms the degree of fulfillment of the scriptures--in the arrival of God's kingdom and the Messiah--that Matthew does? What Judaism has a conception of the Messiah as strange, as high, and as pervasive as that of Matthew? What Judaism calls disciples to follow not the law but a human being, and judges the ultimate fate of a person in terms of his or her relation to him? What Judaism centers its worship upon a person, celebrates the death and resurrection of that person, and calls for baptism in his name? What Judaism speaks of a new *ekklesia* that involves the taking away of the kingdom from Israel, that inaugurates a Gentile mission with such strength? There are, to be sure, interesting parallels in the Qumran community to some of these points, but they do not reflect exactly what one encounters in Matthew. This brief review does not allow examination of how Overman deals with the passages reflecting such Matthean realities, but his reading of these texts works only if one accepts the truth of his beginning hypothesis.

Now without question there is much that is good and correct in Overman's commentary. Indeed, he can build the strong case he does precisely because of the thoroughly Jewish character of the Gospel. There is much to learn here about the social setting and tensions within Matthew's community. Matthew does not think of the faith of his community as a new religion, but as the fulfillment of Judaism. Matthew's Jesus upholds the Torah in good Jewish fashion. Thus Overman's commentary does frequently throw helpful light on the Matthean text.

A good question, then, is whether what we have here is merely a semantic issue, a matter of terminology and not more. What difference is there, and how significant is it, between describing Matthew's perspective as a Jewish Christianity and a (Christian) sect of Judaism? To my mind, the difference is significant. The noun describes the center of gravity, the basic orientation, the adjective its character. The real question is whether Matthew and his community would have thought of themselves as a sect of, or within, Judaism, or whether they knew that the newness of what had happened in their midst

involved major shifts of the kind that could not be contained within the framework of Judaism, despite the fact that they knew that their faith was the fulfillment of Judaism, and hence in a way, the true Judaism. As many have pointed out, the signs in Matthew of a break with the synagogue are plentiful.

As does A. J. Saldarini in his recent book, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), Overman underestimates the degree of newness in Matthew. Unlike Matthew's ideal scribe, who in understanding the Kingdom of God brings out of his treasure box things new and old (13:52), Overman can see only the old and not the new. Much, indeed, can be understood through the continuity that exists with the old. Not all, however, for even the old is understood afresh through the new realities brought by Jesus.