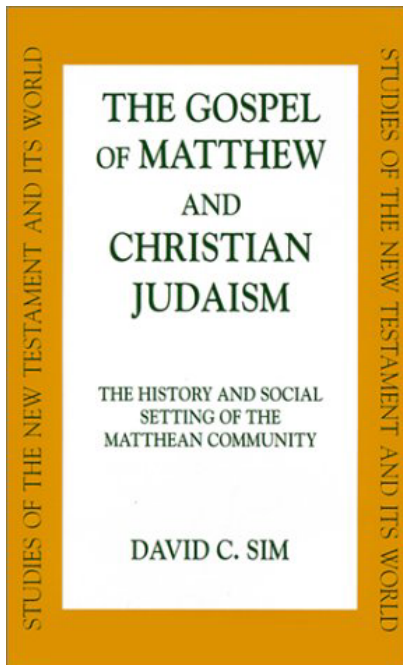


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Sim, David

The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community

Studies of the New Testament and Its World

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Having written my own study on essentially the same subject (Arlo J. Nau, *The Impact of Context on Content in Matthew* [Lima, Ohio: Fairway, 1999]), I naturally found this volume by Prof. Sim of intense interest, with some bias, of course, to be expected. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, however, I find myself in almost envious appreciation of, and in broad agreement with, this book—except for its basic thesis! The difference, even there, is apparently only one of emphasis and degree: Is the provenance of the First Gospel Jewish Christian or Christian Jewish, the substantive noun demarcating the differentiating boundaries? But how significant is that distinction?

Sim's book is exceptionally well researched, clearly outlined, and unmistakably single-minded in its thematic pursuit. Following the popular lead of J. A. Overman (*Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990]) and A. J. Saldarini (*Matthew's Jewish Christian Community* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]), Sim argues persistently for a Christian Jewish orientation for the First Gospel, based on its Petrine "law-observant" (Sermon on the Mount) emphasis versus the "law-free" perspective of Pauline Gentile Christianity. The introduction sets the stage.

In chapter 1, “The Date and Location of the Matthean Community,” Sim momentarily parts from Overman and Saldarini, who posit the locus for the Gospel’s composition somewhere in Palestine, possibly Sepphoris or Tiberias. He opts instead for Syrian Antioch, a position with which I wholeheartedly concur as the better supported by available evidence. The proposed date, too, is appropriately later, 85–95. C.E.

Chapter 2, “The History of the Christian Movement in Antioch prior to Matthew,” contrasts with a scholar’s critical eye the competing accounts of the Antiochene Christian experience primarily based on Acts and Galatians and reconstructs a more probable new scenario: the Antioch mission was begun by “Hellenist” Jewish Christians with some opening to Gentile proselytes. The Jerusalem mother church sent a trusted Barnabas to control any excessive tendencies. But Barnabas betrayed that trust and sided with the Hellenists, even accompanying Paul on his law-free mission through Asia Minor. The result was the apostolic council in Jerusalem, which could not have been as amicable as Luke portrays it in Acts 15. James, the Lord’s brother, a devout Christian Jew and now the undisputed leader of the Jerusalem congregation, then sent subservient Peter to Antioch. There Barnabas succumbed while Paul was defeated, leaving the Christian community there to become a thoroughly consistent Petrine law-observant Christian Jewish congregation through the time of the Roman-Jewish War, 66–70 C.E., and the subsequent resurgence of “formative” Judaism.

Chapter 3, “The Matthean Community and Formative Judaism,” continues the history. “Formative” Judaism is defined as denoting that transitional period and condition existing between traditional pre-Roman War Judaism focused on temple worship and the ultimately successful rabbinic Judaism as it is still known today. It was a time of theological flux and discovery centering on the Torah. The First Gospel with its law-observant stance especially in the Sermon on the Mount represents one formative voice in the intervening dialogue. The going was not always smooth. As a self-conscious Christian sectarian group within Judaism, it often ran afoul of the “scribes and Pharisees,” that is, the recognized leaders of the formative Jewish quest. At times, it is true, the Christian Jewish mission met with some resistance and even persecution, as reflected in Matt 23. Still, they were tolerated. Since orthopraxis was normative, such tenets of orthodoxy as the messianic status of Jesus or even his minimal redefinition of the Torah as found in the Sermon on the Mount were not considered disqualifying.

Chapter 4, “The Matthean Community and Pauline Christianity,” provides a wide-ranging discussion of the antipathy existing in the early church between Pauline, law-free, Gentile Christians and Petrine (Matthean), law-observant Christian Jews. While the Pastoral Epistles especially reflect one side of the quarrel, the long-recognized Christian Jewish literature such as the Epistle of James, the *Recognitions*, the *Ascents of James*, and

the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, demonstrate the other. To me as a reviewer, this section was one of the most instructive portions of the entire book. Sim's line of argument when it comes to the actual evidence found in the First Gospel itself, however, is more oblique. Examples include: (1) the First Evangelist's careful redaction of the Pauline Gospel of Mark (3:10–35 and 6:1–4 versus Matt 13:53–58), where the family of Jesus, including the erstwhile bishop of Jerusalem, James, is exonerated from the charge of thinking Jesus insane; (2) the exclusive elevation of Peter in Matt 16:17–19; and especially (3) the endorsement of the entire Torah in Matt 5:17–19. Such evidence, Sim concludes, constitutes a total negation of Paul and the brand of law-free Gentile Christianity he stood for.

The relationship of “The Matthean Community and the Gentile World” occupies chapter 5. The conclusion is predictable from what has already been established. Except for perhaps a few proselytes there would have been little contact with and no substantive connection between the two societies. The relatively few and peripheral Gentiles identified in the First Gospel, such as the magi, the four women mentioned in the genealogy, and the centurion beneath the cross, must be understood from that perspective. As for all other sinners the Evangelist remonstrates in 18:17: “Let them be to you as a Gentile [ὁ ἑθνικός] and a tax collector.” The missionary commission, then, to make disciples of all nations in Matt 28:20 must similarly be thought of only as an eschatological option for someone else.

There still remains the question in chapter 6 of how we are to understand the manifestly Pauline Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, living and presiding over the Antiochene Christian community only two decades after the composition of our Christian Jewish First Gospel. Sim recognizes that, after the demise of the Jerusalem mother church in connection with the Roman War, law-free Gentile Paulinism must have enjoyed a revival and in time simply came to outnumber the Matthean Christian Jewish contingent. Lingering vestiges of conflict, however, can still be heard in the several anti-Jewish disclaimers dotting the corpus of the Ignatian correspondence.

Finally, in chapter 7, comes a discussion of “The Fate of the Matthean Community.” There are historical and literary echoes of its continued, though marginalized, existence for another half millennium until, like its Christian Jewish cousins, the Nazarenes, Elkasites, and Ebionites, it faded before the Arab/Muslim onslaught of the seventh and eighth centuries C.E.

In conclusion, how are we to evaluate this most quoted and highly esteemed First Gospel? Sim states that it must be recognized essentially as a piece of non-Christian literature that has been illegitimately adopted and reinterpreted by later Pauline Gentile Christianity. In

his own words, “As we approach the new millennium, we should be prepared to listen to Matthew’s Christian Jewish voice and to take seriously his alternative Christian Jewish version of the gospel” (302).

I must confess that as a student of this same Gospel I wholeheartedly agree with Prof. Sim that the First Gospel has been denied its own integrity and authenticity for almost two thousand years at the determined hands of Paulinist, law-free, especially Protestant revisionists. It absolutely does need to be reinterpreted and understood once again in the light of its own original, contemporary setting. Sim’s book presents a strong and valid challenge to that effect. For that I thank and congratulate him. I must demur, however, from some of his seemingly idiosyncratic conclusions. While it is not my role as reviewer to attempt a refutation of his thesis, several pertinent, representative questions demand further explication.

1. If the Matthean community was so exclusively Jewish, even in Diaspora, why was this Gospel composed in such idiomatic (Gentilic) Greek, unlike its derivative *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, which is believed to have been more naturally and appropriately written in Aramaic somewhat later in nearby Beroea, Syria?
2. Is the single law-free versus law-observant distinction sufficient to differentiate between what is essentially Christian and Jewish? While Matthew is admittedly more law-conscious than any other canonical Gospel, it also shares some other significant commonalities with them and Paulinist Christianity: Jesus as the Messiah/Christ; universalism; the sacraments; and even several notable modifications of the Torah.
3. If the Matthean community is so profoundly Jewish and law oriented, why is there no mention of circumcision as the quintessential Jewish rite in the First Gospel?
4. If we are to take Peter’s elevation in 16:17–19 so literally, how dare we ignore the seemingly arbitrary redactional negatives later ascribed to this “first” apostle, especially his dismissal from the post-Easter scene (cf. Mark 16:7 and Matt 28:7)? Even rival Paul was more considerate (1 Cor 15:5; see also Arlo J. Nau, *Peter in Matthew: Discipleship, Diplomacy, and Dispraise* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992]).
5. If the Christian Jewish Matthean community necessarily rejected the idea of a Gentile mission, what circumstance could have moved it to consider such a possibility even in the end times (Matt 28:19)?
6. If the Gospel of Matthew is fundamentally a Jewish piece, derived from a defunct sectarian Jewish group, why should Christians today take anything more than a cursory interest in it?

(By the way, the erroneous substitution of Jeremiah for Zechariah, the son of Barachiah [Matt 23:35], on page 160 should have been caught by the editors.)