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MATTHEW'S SITZ *IM LEBEN* AND THE EMPHASIS ON THE *TORAH*

ABSTRACT

The role of the Torah is the subject of a full scale discussion in the first Gospel. This article investigates the socio-historical setting that produced this text with such an emphasis on Torah observance. To address these issues, the Matthean text is read to discover issues that were prevalent in the community where the text was produced and read. This is followed by an investigation into developments in the broader Jewish society in the second half of the first century C.E. It becomes clear that the Jewish society was fragmented, and this led to an urge to consolidate. During these developments the Torah was used by newly formed communities to define their norms of existence. In the first Gospel the author defines their position terms of specific Torah observance. While countering some form of Christian libertinism and allegations against the Torah observance of his community, he assures his community of their convictions.

1. INTRODUCTION

New Testament scholars, specifically those with a socio-historical (e.g. Malina 2009:154-193) or social-scientific (e.g. Love 2009) approach, have focused a great deal on discerning the situation behind various writings. Whoever produces or listens to a text carries certain assumptions and expectations from his or her background into it. Radical a-historical or text-immanent approaches advocated during the peak of the New Criticism[1] of the 1950s and 1960s neglect this significant relation to the world in which

1 New Critics focused on the text of a work of literature and tried to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis (e.g. Ransom 1941).

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a text had been produced and read. If the horizons and expectations of the first readers of a text are ignored, "interpretation would be like a picnic – a picnic to which … we all bring our meanings" (Stanton 1992:380). Scholars should therefore consider the social and religious setting of a community to better understand what the author of a text intended and how its readers would have appropriated it. This obviously is also the case with Matthew's Gospel.

It is generally true that the New Testament documents are occasional writings which means that an author wrote to address specific concerns of his communities (Luz 2005:17). When reading Matthew, one soon realizes that the author has a specific interest in the meaning and interpretation of the Law (Loader 1997). Jesus is presented as the new and authoritative interpreter of the Law, while the interpretation of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law is frequently denounced. The question therefore arises as to what in Matthew and his community's situation led to this focus. This article attempts to make a contribution with regard to the influence of the situation of the Matthean community on the discussion of the Law in the first Gospel. Relevant questions to be asked are: Who were the members of this community? How did they view themselves? What kind of society did they live in? How did the society understand the Law? What cultural and religious assumptions shaped the author's formulation of the text and the readers' understanding of it? What were their experiences? Which issues did they encounter?

To address these issues, the Matthean text is read as a transparent story to discover issues that were prevalent in the community where the text was produced and read. This is followed by an investigation into developments in the broader Jewish society in the second half of the first century C.E. Reference is made to several ancient texts to demonstrate the fragmentation of the Jewish society and an urge that developed to consolidate the Jewish societies. It is demonstrated that newly formed communities used the *Torah* to justify their parting from other communities and to define their norms of existence. It is argued that when reading the first Gospel against this background, it becomes clear that the Matthean community was caught up in this unstable situation. The author defines the position of his community in terms of specific *Torah* observance. While countering some form of Christian libertinism and allegations against the *Torah* observance of his community, he assures his community of their convictions.

2. MATTHEW READ AS A TRANSPARENT STORY

The recognition of the interconnectedness between text and context as developed in Social-scientific criticism[2], has made an important contribution towards Matthean scholarship. However, external evidence about the situation of this gospel is sparse. Therefore scholars are forced to mostly rely on internal evidence. This immediately raises the problem of the hermeneutical circle: In order to read the text responsibly, one has to consider its circumstances, but to create a picture of these circumstances one has to rely on the text itself. Unfortunately there is no way to avoid this dilemma. One can only read the text as cautiously and sensitively as possible, and one should be willing to correct one's previous judgments.

In order to recognize the underlying tension in Matthew's argument, one should read the Gospel as a transparent story – a term which Luz (2005:17) applies to Matthew. Although one should be careful to make a historical reconstruction of the gospel community based on the contents of the Gospel (as this requires a considerable amount of interpretation), one can regard the Matthean Jesus story as an "inclusive" story. From the text a reader can discover issues that were prevalent in the Gospel writer's community. The author retells the story of Jesus to address the contemporary needs of his audience. Gospels obviously are more "open texts" and are less likely to have specific information of local situations such as would be expected from letters (Bauckham 1998:48). Yet the different Gospel writers address particular situations and issues from the world in which they participated. Thus the author of the Matthean gospel formed part of an early Christian community and he wrote his gospel with his community and its issues in mind (cf. Love 2009:1; Carter 2000:7; Klijn 1968:45).

In Matthew's Gospel a considerable number of emphases are apparent from which one can recognize some of the issues of those days. To put it in other words; the *Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche* can indirectly be recognized in the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* as described in the Gospel material[3]. The Gospel therefore has a double meaning functioning on two levels (Luz 2005:27). It tells the story of Jesus, but in such a way that the story of the

2 Social-scientific criticism studies the text both as a reflection of and a response to the social and cultural settings in which the text was produced (Elliot 1995:8)

3 The story of Jesus actually had three successive life-settings: its setting in the historical ministry of Jesus (Sitz im Leben Jesu), its setting in the restricted selection of Jesus' sayings in the Matthean community (Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche), and its setting in the Gospel of Matthew (Sitz im Leben der Evangelium). The last setting is immediately accessible to us. From the Gospel itself, tendencies can be identified to provide some idea of the community.

Matthean community can also be recognized in it (Saldarini 1991:39). The past story of Jesus and his disciples includes the story of the community's experience. Thus the disciples serve as a "transparency" for the later Matthean community and symbolize their attitudes and behaviour. On the first level, the world of the text, Matthew tells the story of Jesus' ministry and teaching in Israel. As a result of his ministry and teaching Jesus was rejected and executed while He pronounced judgement on Israel's leaders and its people and commissioned his disciples to preach to the Gentiles. On the second level the external world of Matthew's community is reflected. The evangelist tells the story of the church's commitment to Jesus and his teaching, which resulted in their alienation from the synagogue. Though many aspects of the Matthean community remain obscure, some stand out and make it possible to characterize Matthew's group and its relation towards the non-Christian Jewish community (France 1998:95; Stanton 1992:99). It appears as if the Matthean community went through a dark period of feeling rejected by the synagogue and that they had to work through this traumatic experience. This grief is expressed in the Gospel. The Gospel speaks of persecution against missionaries on the part of Jews (Matt. 5:11-12; 10:23; 23:34), of martyrs' deaths (Matt. 10:21, 28; 22:5; 23:34, 37), of being handed over to Gentile courts (Matt. 10:17-18) and of divided families (Matt. 10:34-37). Thus the second level of the story gives perspective on the church in a difficult period of reorientation because of this separation. The Gospel represents a (mainly-) Jewish Christian community in conflict with the Jewish mainstream. It is a community that has been expelled from the synagogues. The Matthean community also lived within the Roman Empire, which caused tension in two directions. They felt themselves threatened by the Gentiles for being Jews, and by Jews for being followers of Jesus. This put them in a defensive position, and this can be recognized in the Matthean text.

When considering the Matthean community, however, one must be cautious not to view it as a single group of believers or a house church (cf. Saldarini 1994:87). As first century Christians met in houses, which would have more than likely not have been able to accommodate more than fifty persons, the Matthean community should rather be regarded as a loose group or groups that interacted with one another in terms of shared beliefs, concerns and aspirations. It is even possible that the author had a circle of communities in mind and that the Gospel was already circulated at an early stage (Stanton 1993:51).

3. RIVALRY WITHIN A FRAGMENTED SOCIETY

The Matthean community developed during an unstable period in Israel's history[4]. Since the post-exilic period Israel was respectively encroached by Seleucid and Roman leaders and often mistreated by Hasmonean rulers. Revolts and the eventual destruction of the temple in Jerusalem left the people of Israel volatile. The broad society mistrusted persons in powerful religious and political positions. Several factions such as Zealots and various quietist-pietistic apocalyptic groups were formed. Some scholars characterize these factions as sectarian in nature (Blenkinsopp 1981:25; Stanton 1992:386). Sects saw themselves as minority groups that are subjected and exploited by groups in power. They were therefore critical of the establishment that controlled their lives. These factions also competed amongst one another to claim their positions. As minority groups they usually regarded themselves as the righteous remnants of Israel and the ones that are endangered by others.

Factions developed systems to justify their own existence and to define and protect inner group values. In this process such groups would frequently oppose outsiders openly. Stereotypical terms were repeatedly used as "buzzwords" to justify themselves (e.g. the righteous ones) and to denounce outsider groups (e.g. the lawless ones) (e.g. 4 Ezra 7:17, 51; 9:14; 2 Baruch 14-15; 1 Enoch 94:1, 4; Psalms of Solomon 1:1; 2:16, 35). These terms are familiar to Matthew too. Matthew frequently refers to the righteous (e.g. Matt. 1:19; 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; and 10:41), while denouncing this lawless wicked generation (e.g. Matt. 7:23; 12:39-45; 13:41; 16:4; 17:17 and 24:12) and the Pharisees and teachers of the law as hypocrites (e.g. Matt. 23). Such terms were often used in a polemical sense to distinguish the insiders as minority group from the outsiders who controlled them (Overman 1990:17). The use of such terms obviously led to much tension between communities.

The Essenes of the Qumran community is a clear example of such a faction. During the first century B.C.E. they withdrew themselves from the established community, as they regarded the establishment as foul and unrighteous. They formed a new remote community at the Dead Sea and organized themselves based on the ranking of holiness under the leadership of the "teacher of righteousness". They created documents in which they justified their separation and strongly denounced the apostasy of the majority of Israel and its religious leadership in particular (1QS 9, 11; cf. Vermes 1975:88-93). 1 Enoch and the Psalms of Solomon, which date back to approximately the same time as the Dead Sea scrolls, express

4 Along with most scholars I assume that Matthew was written some time after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E.

similar sentiments. The author of 1 Enoch writes that those in power are corrupt and will be punished, while he regards his own community as righteous (cf. 1 En. 94-104). Similarly the Psalms of Solomon denounces the hypocrisy of lawless people in powerful positions, while his own community will eventually receive the power to pass judgment on those sinners (cf. Ps. of Sol. 1:3-8). Two documents from the late first century C.E., 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, reflect the same sentiments and convictions. 2 Baruch describes the many that did not follow the Torah and the few, Baruch's community, who did (2 Bar. 15-18). 4 Ezra contrasts the wicked many with the few of its own community who truly kept the Law. These few are called the righteous who will inherit the world to come (4 Ezra 3-8). The Jewish historian, Josephus, identified three sects (αἵρεσις) among the Jews: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes (Jewish War, 2.8.2). According to Josephus the Pharisees "seem to interpret the laws more accurately" (Jewish War, 1.5.2). Matthew, however, presents Jesus as the true interpreter of the Law. For Matthew's argument it was important to defend his conviction that Jesus gives the correct interpretation of the *Torah*. Jesus' relation to the *Torah* forms a central motive in his Gospel. Thus Jesus is seen as the last and greatest expositor of the Law (Davies 1966:102). Jesus' relation to the *Torah* is taken up in the Sermon on the Mount – specifically in Matt 5:17-48 (Viljoen 2011:386).

In the post-70 period religious leaders were increasingly mistrusted. Factions regarded them as fraudulent leaders who betrayed their people and turned from God. This was believed to have caused the hardship the people were experiencing. The keys of the temple became a symbol to indicate whether leaders were reliable to execute their religious duties (Viljoen 2009:658). 4 Baruch 4:4 expresses this sentiment: "Take the keys of the temple … because we were not worthy of keeping them, for we were false stewards" (cf. also 2 Baruch 10:18 and 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan). Other people who are able to perform those duties properly, including the correct interpretation of the Law, would emerge to handle the keys. The Testament of Levi 10:3 describes the tearing of the temple veil in order to expose the shameful behaviour of the priests behind the veil. They broke the Law and set the words of the Prophets aside (Test. Levi 14:4-6). The Testament of Levi continues to describe the wickedness of the priests who did not understand or follow God's laws, defiled the altars, persecuted just men and took innocent blood on their heads (Test. Levi 16:2-4). Matthew too talks in terms of the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19[5])

5 Matt. 16:19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will (but rather: have been) be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will (but rather: have been) be loosed in heaven".

according to which a tremendous degree of authority is assigned to Peter and the community in contrast to the Jewish religious leaders.

Blenkinsopp (1981:1) discusses the dynamics between the group that possesses the authority and those who split off from it in terms of a parent body and the offspring or siblings. While siblings often criticized the parent body, rivalry amongst siblings became severe. It is very often the case that the closer the relationship between groups, the more intense the conflict between them (Coser 1998:67). In its self-definition a group competes with other related groups.

It is within this turbulent environment with its complex group relations that the Matthean community developed and struggled to define itself. The tension of the Matthean community with other Jewish groups was born from proximity rather than distance. Sim (1999:186) remarks:

> Polemical and stereotypical language such as we find in Matthew does not reflect distance between the parties. On the contrary, it reflects both physical and ideological proximity between the disputing groups, since its very purpose is to distance one party from the other.

The Matthean community was caught up in a "family conflict" that was associated with "rival claims to exclusive truth within the same religious symbol system" (Radford Reuther 1974:30). Hummel (1966:55) regards this tension as a rival amongst *feindliche Brüder*.

Bornkamm (1963a:55) argues that this unstable environment is reflected in the Matthew story of the stilling of the storm (Matt. 8:23-27). According to his view the little boat in the stormy sea represents the church. With this story Matthew expresses his sentiments that his community was endangered and struggled to survive, but by putting their trust in Jesus, they were able to survive and establish their own identity. Bornkamm (1963b:22) argues that the conflict was mainly inner-Jewish. Within this Jewish environment, the Matthean group struggled on two fronts. On the one hand they defended themselves against non-Christian Jews who rejected them for accepting Jesus as the Messiah. On the other hand the Matthean community defined themselves against antinomian Christians who set aside the Law in their doctrine and mission. The view point of Bornkamm that the Matthean community struggled within the synagogue environment (*intra muros*), has been shared by several scholars (cf. Barth 1963:65; Hummel 1966:159 and Davies 1966:276).

However, some scholars have adopted an *extra muros* perspective (Stendahl 1968:xiii; Schweizer 1963:405; Stanton 1992:102). They argue that the Matthean community no longer formed part of the synagogue,

as they withdrew or have been expelled from it. This distance between Matthew and the synagogue is reflected in Matthew's references to the synagogue. Matthew uses the phrase "their synagogue" five times (Matt. 4:23, 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54) and "your synagogue" once (Matt. 23:34) to underline the distance between Jesus and the synagogue community (Carter 2000:31). Hare (1967:125) speaks of "social ostracism and mutual hostility" between these two groups. Within this "family conflict" the "parent group" felt betrayed and thought their values were being undermined, while the dissenting group struggled to come to terms with their new separate status. The struggle of the Matthean community is reflected in the intensity of conflict in the Gospel with the parent body. Boundaries were established to exclude opposing outsiders[6], but also to define the convictions of those within the community[7].

This "family conflict" of the Matthean community within the broader Jewish society needs specification. It was not so much a conflict of Matthew's community with Judaism as the parent religion. This makes the Matthean community the rebellious child of its Jewish parent religion. As is evident from the fragmentation of the Jewish society in those days, it is inappropriate to view Matthew's opposition to a stable parent group. The "normative" Judaism was largely replaced by "sectarian" Judaisms. Thus the "Jesus-movement" was caught up in this rivalry amongst Jewish religious groups for self-definition. In the aftermath of the destruction of the temple competing parties claimed to be true inheritors of ancestral traditions and made continuity claims. As a marginalized group, the Jewish Christians defined themselves distinct from the other current Judaist movements (Saldarini 1991:49). The conflict between Matthew and Judaism should therefore not be defined as mother-daughter conflict, but rather as a rivalry between siblings. Matthew's polemics are not aimed against Jewish people as an established group, but against other "siblings" who rejected the Matthean community for their understanding of God's will.

Amongst these siblings, the Pharisees emerged as the dominant group. It is therefore significant that Matthew's polemic with the Pharisees is particularly harsh. This heightened conflict is strongly reflected in Matthew's controversy stories with the Pharisees. "Matthew intends the audience of the controversy stories to reflect a group that turns from the fraudulent leadership of the opponents of Jesus towards an acknowledgement of

6 Matthew has a twofold view of the outsider-group. One part consists of the opponents, who are the scribes, Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders. The other part consists of those who need evangelising.

7 The formulation of group convictions provided means to discipline insincere and unfaithful insiders.

the Matthean community as the rightful leaders of Israel" (Repschinski 2000:329). Anti-Pharisaic arguments played an important role in this self-definition of the Matthean community in the crises of separation and transition (Carter 2000:6). Carter (2000:1) labels the first Gospel a "counter narrative" against synagogal control[8]. Especially the discourse of the woes (Matt. 23) and the parables on salvation history (Matt. 21:33-22:14) express this conflict (cf. Saldarini, 1994:46). This conflict is also expressed as Matthew intensifies the conflict in the narratives he took over from Mark (Repschinski, 2000:63ff). Mark's sympathetic scribe (Mark 12:38) is portrayed as a hostile Pharisee in Matt. 22:35. Whereas Mark refers to the Pharisees as hypocrites once (Mark 7:6) and Luke not at all, Matthew has twelve such references, six of which are in Matt. 23. Different from Mark, the synagogue became an almost foreign institution to Matthew. At the climax of Matthew's story he addresses his readers directly by telling them of a rival account of the resurrection of Jesus which holds that his disciples stole his body from the tomb, and adds "and this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day" (Matt. 28:15). Hereby Matthew makes it clear that those who accept the alternative story are miserably misled.

4. MOVEMENT TOWARDS FORMATIVE JUDAISM

The fragmentation of the Jewish society after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple created the need for a new religio-cultural formation. This led to a process of self-definition and consolidation of the fragmented society in a movement towards formative Judaism. Formative Judaism was in a process of social construction and self-definition in Jewish communities. In this process several movements competed to claim their position and to gain influence. It has been increasingly recognized that the social context of Matthew is closely related to the author's relationship with parties in formative Judaism (Keener 1999:45; Overman 1990:2).

According to tradition a council took place in Yavneh (Jamnia) around 90 C.E. to consolidate the different Jewish factions and to reconstruct their social, religious and communal life (Overman 1990:38). Rabbis were emerging as leaders of this formative movement, which developed to fuller expression in the later rabbinic Judaism (Shanks 1963:344). Synagogues developed as identifiable places of gathering and worship (Kee 1990:20).

8 Though to a lesser extent, the tension with the Roman Imperial power is also reflected in the characters of Herod (Matt. 2) and Antipas (Matt. 14) as Roman allies, Vespasian (Matt. 17) and Caesar (Matt. 22) are indirectly mentioned in relation to Roman taxes, and Pilate directly in person (Matt. 27) (Carter 2001:35).

To legitimate themselves groups claimed their beliefs and behaviour to be based on ancient and established traditions. Adherence to traditions of the fathers lent credence and pedigree to themselves, as they claimed to be heirs of a great movement (Baumgarten 1987:77). Competing parties claimed the ownership of what was left of their heritage (Overman 1990:160). A significant part of their communal self-definition was the adaption of procedures to expel those who did not conform to a number of values that were principle to the life of the community. Such a procedure is pronounced in the *Birkat ha-Minim,* a "Blessing on the heretics", which went through a process of formation to be finalised around 85 AD (France 1998:85; Horbury 1982:19-61):

> For apostates let there be no hope.
> The dominion of arrogance do thou speedily root out in our days.
> And let the *Nazareans* and the *Minim* perish in a moment.
> Let them be blotted out of the book of the living.
> And let them not be written with the righteous.

The Matthean community found themselves in a process of separating from its Judaist roots. This led to alienation. In the first gospel they struggle to come to terms with this estrangement. As a partially transparent document Matthew's Gospel reflects specific tensions, underlying conflict and concerns (Foster 2004:3; Stanton 1993:26), which fits into the history of the complex Jewish-Christian relations of the first century.

Like formative Judaism, the Matthean community was a new movement. As the formative Judaism attempted to assure credence by claiming that their procedures were based on that of the traditions of their ancestors, Matthew presented the life of Jesus in terms of the fulfilment of Scriptures (Viljoen 2007:314-320). While other New Testament writers quoted a few obvious texts as fulfilled in Jesus, Matthew explored this motif extensively (Davies & Allison 2004:211; Menken 2004:3; Versteeg 1992:23). France (1998:167) labels fulfilment as "the special trademark" of this Gospel. Matthew thus claims his community to be heir to a great movement.

While the synagogues became gathering places in formative Judaism, Matthew distances his group from the synagogues and establishes a separate structure that stands independent from the synagogue. Matthew's Jesus refers to this new community as the ἐκκλησία (Matt. 16:18 and 18:17). Being a general LXX translation for *qahal*, the congregation of the people of God (e.g. Deut. 31:30), Jesus uses the term to describe the group of restored Israelites that He was gathering around Himself. However, συναγωγή was also commonly used as translation of *qahal* (Keener 1999:428). In the usage of this emotive concept from the Old Testament,

and translating it distinctively as ἐκκλησία, Matthew obviously intends to indicate that the church as an identifiable group took over the role of the Old Testament congregation of the people of God and distinguishes them from the synagogue and its leaders. Matt. 8:11-15[9] even speaks of transference of the kingdom of God to a new people.

With the authority of Jesus the church disciplined those who were unfaithful to the values of this community (Matt. 18:15-17[10]). The formula of Matt. 16:19[11] and 18:18[12] propose a tremendous degree of authority for Peter and the community. The first pronouncement refers to Peter himself, while the second indicates the corporate responsibility of the community. The authority is exercised by Peter on behalf of the community (Matt. 16), as well as by the community corporately (Matt. 18).

5. THE *TORAH* BECOMING A FEATURE OF DIVISION

In reaction to the Jewish revolt, Rome destroyed Jerusalem, the temple and the temple service in 70 C.E. This left the Jewish community bewildered. The Jews struggled with the question of whether this destruction was the punishment of God for their sins. If the destruction was God's punishment for sin, they had to consider how to know God's will with certainty in order to avert similar disasters in future. This resulted in many significant reformulations of important theological ideas and religious practices. Various Jewish groups debated questions about the meaning and practice of Scripture and about the authority to interpret it (Carter 2000:140). The temple based worship was replaced by small localized groupings with a mutual emphasis on *Torah* interpretation and observance (Neusner

9 Matt. 8:11-15: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

10 Matt. 18:15-17: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

11 Matt. 16:19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will (but rather: have been) be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will (but rather: have been) be loosed in heaven".

12 Matt. 18:18: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be (but rather: have been) bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earthy will be (rather: have been) loosed in heaven".

1979:42). The Law emerged as a central symbol in Jewish religion. Overman (1990:69) writes:

> The law now emerged as the central symbol for post-70 Judaism. Who was recognized as the authoritative interpreters had a great deal to do with who emerged as the accepted and established movement.

The group that would be recognized as the most authoritative and accurate interpreters of the Law, would become the dominant force. While Josephus described the Pharisees as the most accurate interpreters of the Law (Jewish Wars 1.5.1; 2.8.14), he also wrote that the Pharisees prided themselves on the accuracy of their adherence to ancestral tradition (Antiquities 17.2.4).

The importance of the Law obviously was nothing new. Since the time of the Deuteronomistic historian there had been a continuous urge to a more exact observance of the Law (Foster 2004:49). Yet in the fragmented Jewish society of the first century C.E., this observance became more intense. Competing groups, who each regarded themselves as the righteous few, used the Law to legitimate their own position against their adversaries. The Qumran community believed they understood the Law correctly and that others in Israel, especially in the temple, failed to understand it. According to 1QS9 God has

> concealed the teaching of the Law from the men of falsehood, but shall impart true knowledge and righteous judgement to those who chose the Way.

The true meaning of the Law was explicated by the Teacher of Righteousness. With his interpretation of the Law the Qumran community validated their own beliefs and practices and denounced those of other groups, specifically of the Jerusalem leaders. Similarly 1 Enoch claimed that the enemies of its community did not follow the Law correctly and led people astray with false versions of the Scripture (1 En. 99:12), while its own community understood their mysteries and made them available for the chosen community (1 En. 92:1; 93:1). The Psalms of Solomon also attacked the Jewish leaders as people who violated and corrupted the Law (Ps. Sol. 4:1, 8, 22), while its own community was regarded as the faithful people who remained true to God's Law (Ps. Sol. 14:10). In 2 Baruch, Baruch himself emerges as God's agent who truly instructs the righteous community (1 Bar. 38:1-4). Baruch is paralleled with Moses as Baruch left his people and ascended Mount Zion to receive God's instructions. Like Moses, Baruch is portrayed as God's lawgiver. In 4 Ezra 14, Ezra appears as Moses *redivivus*.

Because of the importance of the *Torah* for the people of God, the interpretation of the *Torah* became a feature of the division in Judaism. The different groups studied the Law in minute thoroughness. They discovered 613 commandments in the *Torah* (248 positive and 365 negative) (Morris 1992:107). It was their desire to meet the specific obligations of these commandments that resulted in competitive disputes as to what they meant in practice. With a legalistic turn of mind each group claimed to be living according to the principles of the *Torah*. Obviously this implied that other groups were not doing so.

> In such polemic the need for a group to find in the *Torah* its own self-affirmation had the inevitable corollary of making the *Torah* an instrument by means of which one group condemned another (Dunn 2003:292).

The social location of Matthew is linked to the evangelist's view on the Law. Barth (1963:159) remarks:

> Matthew does not share the understanding of the law in the Rabbinate but rather opposes the Rabbinate face to face. But it will still not be correct to speak of a *lex nova* because the identity with the law of Sinai is not strongly emphasised.

With regard to Matthew's discussion of the Law, the evangelist developed a subtle dialectic with contemporary Jewish groups. The Jewish groups thought their core values to be undermined by Jesus' followers. This led to Matthew's community being accused of not taking the Law seriously. The Matthean Jesus rejects such accusations in texts such as Matt. 5:17-19 (Viljoen 2011:393-403). The Matthean community, as offshoot from Jewish groups, strived to establish its claims of following the true interpretation of the Law (Foster 2004:28). Matthew presents Jesus as a unique and authoritative teacher of Law who was in continuous dispute with Jewish leaders who concentrated on the minute interpretation of the commandments of the *Torah*, but missed the true intention of the Law.

Matthew described Jesus as the one who brought the definitive interpretation of God's will. Matthew claimed that Jesus provided the answer. Jesus superseded current understandings of the Law with his reinterpretation. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus somehow is presented as Moses *redivivus*. In the beginning of the Sermon (Matt. 5:1-2) the Sinai typology is significant (Loader 1997:165). This leads to an anticipation of a new revelation to be delivered by a new Moses. He had come to fulfil the Law (Matt. 5:17). Matthew claims that "He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt. 7:29) (Viljoen 2012:5). Therefore Matthew reports the words of Jesus: "All authority in heaven and on earth

has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples … teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus has the authority to interpret the Scriptures. His interpretation provides the answer to the correct way of understanding the Scriptures. Matthew sees himself and his community as the guardians of the correct understanding of the Law and the Prophets (Overman 1996:50).

6. THE *TORAH* BEING USED AS FEATURE OF EXCLUSIVENESS

The tension amongst the Jews was intensified by the fact that they struggled to maintain their identity within the Hellenistic culture and under the Roman Empire. This resulted in a strong tendency towards Jewish exclusiveness. The Jews fended them from foreign influences in their struggle to maintain their identity. The synagogue activities played an important role in this self affirmation (Knight 2004:11). It was at this point that the distinction between Judaism and Israel became apparent. Specific interpretation of the *Torah* was used to assure Jewish exclusivity. Such emphases gave "Judaism" its national, anti-Gentile and exclusive character (Dunn 2003: 292).

In contrast to this exclusivity, the Matthean community was convinced of their responsibility to spread the teaching of Jesus to all nations[13]. The Matthean inclination to Gentile mission in contrast to the exclusivity of the Jewish community is evident from aspects that are highlighted in the Gospel (Versteeg 1992:21-27):

- The Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus with the unusual inclusion of the names of gentile women (Matt 1); the veneration of the baby Jesus by the magi from the East in contrast to the animosity of Herod and the Jewish religious leaders (Matt 2); and the child murder and flight from Bethlehem to a safe haven in Egypt (Matt 2).
- The story develops around the theme that Jesus came to his people, but was rejected by them (Matt 1:21).
- The privileged position of Israel is emphasized when Jesus sends out the twelve exclusively to the people of Israel (Matt 10).

13 It has often been suggested that Matthew's Gospel was written in Antioch, though conclusive evidence are lacking. According to Acts this was the city in which the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). They were mission-minded as it was this community who sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey (Acts 13).

- While the animosity of the Jews against Jesus increases, the Canaanite woman recognizes Jesus as the Lord (Matt 15).
- The scribes and Pharisees reject Jesus and Jesus delivers the terrible accusation of the scribes, Pharisees and Jerusalem (Matt 21).
- The Roman officer and soldiers confess: "Surely he was the Son of God" (Matt 27:54).
- The Roman guards report that Jesus rose from death, while the chief priests and the heads of families offered them a large amount of money to pretend that Jesus' disciples stole his corpse (Matt 28:11-15).
- The Gospel ends climactically with the commissioning: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations …" (Matt 28:19-20).

In the verses directly before discussing Jesus' teaching on the *Torah* Matthew reports the words of Jesus: "You are the salt of the earth … you are the light of the world …" (Matt 5:13-16). It appears that Matthew drew a direct link between the interpretation of the *Torah* and the faithful people's responsibility to witness to the world. The Matthean community's decision to carry the proclamation of Jesus to the Gentiles must have created much tension with the synagogue, which used the *Torah* as means to maintain Jewish exclusivity (Repschinski 2000:27). Luz (1990:84) proposes that Matthew elected himself as advocate to defend his community's decision for the Gentile mission. An alternative interpretation of the *Torah* is proposed to combat Judaist exclusivism. In the light of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:20) the basic entrance requirement to the Matthean community was belief in Jesus and acceptance of his teaching (Saldarini 1994:79). The traditional Jewish boundary markers, circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance are not mentioned in this context.

7. POSSIBLE REACTION AGAINST ANTINOMIANS

Bornkamm (1963b:24) identifies another dimension in Matthew's attention to the Law. Based on Matt. 5:17-19 Bornkamm assumes that Matthew is reacting against a tendency amongst some Christians to abandon the Law. Thus Matthew was fighting on two fronts, namely the asserting of his communities' stance on the Law against Jews who were not believers in Jesus, and antinomians on the other side. It could be that these antinomians were part of Matthew's community or of another Christian branch. Barth (1963:75) argues along similar lines by stating that Matthew's understanding of the law was determined by his opposition to a double battle-front, on the one hand against the antinomians (with pericopes such as Matt. 5:17-20) and on the other against the Pharisaism and Rabbinate (with his use of

the love command *inter alia*). Barth developed the identity of such a group with lax attitudes to the Law based on three pericopes (Matt. 5:17-20; 7:15-48 and 24:11). He rejects the possibility of them being a group of Paulinists because no πίστις terminology is used in these pericopes, and suggests that they must have been Hellenistic Christians (Barth 1963:162). While Paul emphasized the Christian freedom from the bondage of the Law, Barth is of the opinion that Matthew directed his attack against Hellenistic elements in the church that went much further than Paul[14]. According to Barth they were libertines who were of the opinion that Christ had abolished the Law. Mohrlang (1984:42-47) also suggests that Matthew was engaged in fending off a more lax view of the Law supposedly deriving from Pauline Christians, while not totally condemning the Pauline perspective. He concludes that Matthew remains closer to traditional Judaism than Paul. In the same line of thinking, many scholars assume that Paul's conception of the Law differs radically from the teaching in this Gospel. Bruce (1983:43) indicates that in earlier scholarship the statement that "anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:19) was directed against Paul. This implies that these words did not come from Jesus, but from a group that did not like Paul.

Some scholars regard Matthew's Gospel to reflect the preference of a group of early Christians who felt strongly about the maintenance of the full authority of the Law for Christians without specific reference to Paul's teaching. Bultmann (1963:138) suggests that Matthew "records the attitude of the conservative Palestinian community in contrast of that of the Hellenists". It is often assumed that the collection preferred by stricter Jewish Christians has been used by Matthew – often labelled M as it was only used in Matthew's Gospel[15]. This would depict the outlook of the Matthew and his community (Bruce 1983:43).

One should however remain cautious of identifying such a group too specifically, as very little clear evidence is available (cf. Hagner 1993:182). These supposed antinomian adversaries are never explicitly mentioned "but rather must be 'discovered' beneath obscure texts and allusions" (Foster 2004:154). It is possible that there were people who tended to abolish the Law, but this *per se* does not mean that they were Hellenistic antinomians (France 1998:110). Matt 5:17-19 might just as well have

14 The relation of Matthew's church to Pauline Christianity has much been debated (see Davies 1963: 316-366; Hagner 1997:20-31).

15 Another, more comprehensive selection on which both Matthew and Luke are considered to have drawn is commonly labelled Q.

been directed to people within the community whose behaviour was incompatible with Christian discipleship.

8. DEFENCE AGAINST ALLEGATIONS ABOUT INTERPRETATION OF THE *TORAH*

A more convincing possibility for Matthew's insistence that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law is that Matthew reacted to counter Jewish suspicion[16] against Jesus' teaching as accepted in their community (Loader 1997:167). Matthew responds to Jewish charges that Christians abolished[17] the Law, and therefore emphatically denies such charge in Matt 5:17-20 (Carter 2000:140; Davies & Allison 2004:482; Keener 1999:50), verses that are unique to Matthew (Matthew *Sondergut*)[18]:

Moule (1982:69) commented that Matt 5:17-20 "which sounds like extreme legalism is better interpreted as a defence against anti-Christian Pharisaic allegations that Christianity lowered moral standards". Scholars have connected this accusation with the devastating circumstances resulting from Rome's destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the priesthood in 70 C.E. (cf. Matt 22:7; 23:38; 24:2; 26:61) (Neusner 1972:313-327). Jews probably accused Christians of lowering their moral standards and thus bringing God's wrath over his people. The author was writing in the painful situation of a Jew who followed Jesus' teachings and therefore experienced increasing rejection by fellow Jews. This tension probably is the reason of some of the emphasis Matthew puts on the beatitudes at

16 Following Jesus' interpretation of the Torah resulted in the alienation between the Matthean community and the synagogue. To be in tension with the synagogue was not only a religious matter. It meant estrangement from one's people and community.

17 Abolish means "destroy" as in the destruction of the temple in 24:2, 26:61; 27:49, Matthew's only other uses of this verb (Carter 2000:140), probably indicating some link between the interpretation of the Law and the destruction of the temple.

18 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, e.g.: "… Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness … who are persecuted because of righteousness, … blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me …"[19] (Matt 5:3-12). The Gospel was meant to provide a context for making sense of the past and a direction to shape the presence and the future of the community that found itself on the margins of the rest of the Jewish community (Carter 2000:33).

For Matthew's argument it was important to defend his conviction that Jesus gave the correct interpretation of the *Torah*. Jesus is seen as the last and greatest expositor of the Law. Matthew argues that Jesus has the authority to redefine the *halakhic* stipulations. The evangelist reassures his community that their way of observance of the *Torah* does not abrogate it, but is actually the fulfilment of the Law through a higher standard of righteousness.

9. CONCLUSION

Reading the Gospel of Matthew as a transparent story shows that the story of Jesus provides a window through which one could picture the community in which the gospel was created and for whom it was intended. One can see how the crisis of 70 C.E. led to a reconsideration of the correct interpretation of the *Torah*. Rivalling factions frequently defended their position based on their group's form of adherence to the *Torah*, while denouncing their opponents in the same instance. While formative Judaism constructed a new society in the synagogue and *Torah* observance, the Matthean community was structured as church and based their Torah observance on what Jesus had taught them. When Judaism started to use the *Torah* as means to fend themselves off from foreign influences, the Matthean community propagated gentile mission. This decision intensified their conflict with the synagogue, who accused them of not adhering to the *Torah*. Matthew defended the position of his community by claiming that Jesus, who brought the authoritative interpretation of the *Torah*, ordered them to do so. Jesus is presented as the new Lawgiver (Moses). Matthew thus comforted his community, who felt unsecure as a result of being rejected by Judaism.

19 Some scholars might argue that Matthew put these words in the mouth of Jesus to suit his argument. It can also be argued that the tension that Matthew and his community were experiencing, reminded him of these words of Jesus.

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