

# The social setting of the Matthean community: New paths for an old journey

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## Abstract

*The scholarly debate about the social setting of the Matthean community has largely focused on the single but complex issue of the relationship between the Matthean community and the Jewish world. In the last decade, there has been strong support for the view that Matthew's conflict with the scribes and Pharisees was taking place within the sphere of Judaism; the conflict was between two types of Judaism, formative Judaism and Christian Judaism, rather than between Judaism and Christianity. But if this view is correct, and the Matthean community did indeed comprise followers of Jesus who observed the Torah and identified their religious tradition as Judaism, then it raises questions concerning the relationship between Matthew's community and other groups, notably the Gentiles and other Christians who did not observe the Jewish Law (e.g. Pauline Christians).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The social setting of the Matthean community has long occupied the attention of scholars, but the last decade or so has witnessed a significant increase of interest in this particular subject. No less than five major studies devoted to this theme, four monographs and a

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collection of essays, have appeared in this period.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these, this subject is often mentioned in other Matthean monographs and articles, and it is an obligatory issue for discussion in the introductory sections of the Gospel commentaries.

In this paper I wish to make a number of general points. First, I want to examine in very broad terms the dominant issue in the current debate. Secondly, I wish to suggest some new directions that this debate can and should take. Much of the discussion up to this point, though of immense importance, has been largely in one direction. Scholars have tended to focus on a single issue, but I believe that, if we are to understand the full complexity of the social setting of the evangelist's community, then we need to broaden the parameters of the debate. Much of what follows is to be found in my major study of the history and social setting of the Matthean community, but I welcome the opportunity to present these ideas again before my peers and critics.

## 2. THE MATTHEAN COMMUNITY AND CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM

For the last fifty years or so scholarly analyses of the social setting of Matthew's community have focused upon a single (though very complex) issue. This issue is the relationship between the Matthean community and the Jewish world. I should say at the outset that it is entirely appropriate that scholars have paid considerable attention to this theme, since the Gospel itself demands such an investigation. The Gospel of Matthew is the most Jewish of all the Gospels, and yet it contains an inordinate amount of polemical material against certain Jewish groups, notably the scribes and Pharisees. This combination of Matthew's Jewish perspective and his bitter polemic against other Jews raises a number of inevitable questions about the evangelist and his community. How can we explain the Jewish world view of Matthew and his group? How do we account for his

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<sup>2</sup> J A Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); D L Balch (ed), *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); G N Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992); A J Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), and D C Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community*, (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

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vigorous and harsh polemic against the scribes and Pharisees? Does the Jewishness of the evangelist and his community place them within Judaism, or does his vigorous criticism of the scribes and Pharisees mean that this once Jewish group has now broken with its parent religion? These are important questions, and Matthean scholars over the past few decades have quite correctly devoted considerable time to finding their answers.

During this period a very broadly based consensus has emerged. Most scholars would accept that Matthew's community was originally a Jewish group of Christians (Jewish Christians or Christians Jews depending upon one's preference), which had come into conflict with other Jewish groups in the decisive period following the first Jewish revolt against Rome. Within this general agreement, there is of course significant dissension over details – the significance of the *Birkath-ha-minim*, the precise identity of Matthew's opponents, the nature of the dispute between the two parties and other points – but a wide consensus exists that this hypothesis explains both the Jewish emphasis of the Gospel as well as its polemical stance against the scribes and Pharisees. This agreement on the broad historical situation, however, soon yields to utter disagreement when the consequences of this information are assessed. There is an enormous division within Matthean scholarship concerning the precise relationship between Matthew's Christian group and the religion of Judaism. On the one hand, some scholars argue that the Matthean community, despite its dispute with other Jews, still defined itself within Judaism. Other scholars, on the other hand, affirm that its situation of conflict had led to a definitive break with its parent religion; the Matthean community was no longer within the orbit of Judaism, but was forging a new identity independently of the Jewish faith.

This division within Matthean scholarship is not new but has a long history. It was identified and emphasized by G N Stanton in his 1985 survey of Matthean studies between 1945 and 1980.<sup>3</sup> In his examination of Matthew and contemporary Judaism (pp 1910-21), Stanton listed the leading scholars who held each view. G D Kilpatrick, G Bornkamm, R Hummel and W D Davies all affirmed that the Matthean community, despite its conflict with other Jews, still remained within Judaism. They were opposed by

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<sup>3</sup> G N Stanton, "The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel: Matthean Scholarship from 1945 to 1980", in H Temporini and W Haase (eds), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 25, 3, (Berlin: de Gruyter 1985), pp 1890-1951.

K Stendahl, C F D Moule, E Schweizer and G N Stanton himself, all of whom argued that the conflict had led the Matthean community to cut all ties with its parent religion. They claimed that this Christian group still engaged its Jewish opponents, but was now in the process of defining itself over against Judaism and creating a new identity as a result.

This issue has not been resolved in more recent studies. Modern Matthean scholars are just as divided on this point as were their predecessors. Those scholars who support the view that the evangelist's community had broken its ties with Judaism include G N Stanton, W A Meeks, S Freyne, B Przybylski, U Luz and D A Hagner. The contrary position is held by, amongst others, J A Overman, A J Saldarini, D J Harrington, W D Davies and D C Allison, and myself. I want now to turn to some of the more important studies from each side in order to determine and assess the relevant issues.

The major protagonists in the last decade or so have been Stanton on the one side, and Overman and Saldarini on the other. In his 1992 book on the Gospel of Matthew, Stanton states that the evangelist's communities have parted company with *Judaism*, in which case the Gospel can be seen as a defence of Christianity over against non-Christian Judaism.<sup>4</sup> The opposite conclusion was reached by Overman in his study of Matthew's Gospel and formative Judaism. According to Overman, the people in Matthew's community understood themselves not as Christians but as Jews.<sup>5</sup> The same point was later made by Saldarini, who claimed that Matthew's group considered itself to be Jewish and was still identified as such by other Jews.<sup>6</sup>

One interesting aspect of this debate is that the difference between these competing views is not a matter of different evidence, but a matter of emphasis and perspective. In the last two decades, scholars from both sides of the fence have attempted to explain certain features of the Gospel by using modern sociological methods, and there is no doubt that the application of these methods has refined considerably our understanding of Matthew's social setting. Overman, Saldarini and Stanton have been among the leading advocates of sociological analysis, and each of them is convinced that

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<sup>4</sup> Stanton, *Gospel for a New People*, p 124. Stanton argues his case throughout the book, but see in particular pp 124-31, 139-42, 151-2, 156-68.

<sup>5</sup> Overman, *Matthew's Gospel*, pp 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, p 1 (and elsewhere).

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these methods demonstrate that the Matthean community was a sectarian group. Overman claims throughout his monograph that the evangelist's community bears the same features as other Jewish sects of this period, while Saldarini presents evidence in his study that this group betrays the characteristics of a "deviant" group within the wider Jewish world. For his part Stanton offers an illuminating comparison of the Gospel of Matthew and the Damascus Document from Qumran, which leads him to draw important parallels between the sectarian nature of the Qumran community and that of the Matthean community.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this substantial agreement between them, Stanton and the others fail to agree on the consequence of the sectarian or deviant nature of the evangelist's group. The reason for this is that the sociological evidence allows either interpretation, depending upon where one places the emphasis. Sociological studies of sectarian groups and their use of polemical language, which have correctly been applied to the Matthean community, have revealed that such groups show, on the one hand, distance from the parent body, and, on the other hand, closeness to it. The vigorous polemic is in fact intended to put distance between the two competing groups, which are in many other ways ideologically close. It is clear that the three scholars have emphasised different aspects of this sociological principle. Where Stanton places the emphasis on the distance at the ideological level between the Matthean community and its Jewish opponents, Overman and Saldarini highlight their closeness. The former interprets the distance in terms of a definitive break with Judaism, while the others affirm that their ideological proximity demonstrates their shared religious tradition. Which of these alternatives is correct? I have argued in detail in my recent monograph that Overman and Saldarini have the better part of the argument. Let me set out briefly here the reasons in favour of this view and the arguments against its alternative.

The most important argument is that the Matthean community observed the Torah, and it is understandable that both Overman and Saldarini emphasise this very point.<sup>8</sup> This is of course a very complex issue which can only be touched on here, but I

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<sup>7</sup> Stanton, *Gospel for a New People*, pp 85-107.

<sup>8</sup> Overman, *Matthew's Gospel*, pp 78-90 and Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, pp 124-64.

would point to my full discussion of this theme in my monograph.<sup>9</sup> The clearest statement that the Matthean community observed the Mosaic code in full appears in 5:17-19. These three sayings specify in quite unambiguous terms that Jesus had not abolished the law and that even the least aspects of the Torah were to be observed until the parousia. As the first statement concerning the Torah in the Gospel, this material is programmatic for what follows later.

The interpretation of the law followed by the Matthean community was the messianic exegesis of (the Matthean) Jesus. In typical Jewish fashion the Matthean Jesus summarises the law under two basic principles, love of God and love of neighbour (22:34-40). The love of neighbour is also expressed in the Golden Rule of 7:12, and in the so-called antitheses (5:21-48) Jesus provides a number of examples of how this principle should be put into practice.

The Matthean Jesus also relativises the law; some commandments are more important than others. Justice, mercy and faith belong to the weightier matters of the law (23:23; cf 9:13 and 12:7), and they outrank Sabbath observance and tithing. This is not to say, as some scholars do, that these ritual requirements of the Torah are unimportant and was therefore not practiced by the Matthean community; the point made by the Matthean Jesus is that they too must be obeyed unless they come into conflict with a weightier commandment. In this case the less important demand of the law can be broken if doing so sees the fulfilment of the more important requirement. This distinction within the component parts of the law is perfectly Jewish and recalls the distinction between the light and heavy commandments in the later rabbinical literature (cf *m* Abot 2:1).

It is precisely over this issue of the relative importance of the demands of the Torah that the Matthean Jesus (and the Matthean community) comes into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. According to Matthew, these opponents have lost sight of the true purpose of the law; they place strict Sabbath observance over mercy (12:1-14), tithing above justice, mercy and faithfulness (23:23), and they transgress the demands of God by following their own non-biblical traditions (15:1-20). It is essential to note that in the Marcan conflict stories that concern the laws of Moses the Marcan Jesus often

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<sup>9</sup> Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp 123-39.

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rejects and breaks the Torah, but the same is not true of the Matthean Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel it is a given that the law is still operational (cf 5:17-19), and the conflict between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees is always over the correct interpretation of the law. This difference over the proper observance of the Torah was presumably one of the major sources of conflict between Matthew's group and its opponents.

The consequence of this conclusion is clear. Observance of the Torah was perhaps the most decisive boundary marker for Judaism in the ancient world. It signified the human obligation within the ancient covenant between the people of Israel and God, and the Jews attempted to follow faithfully the precepts of law in order to fulfil their covenant requirements. In short, keeping the Torah necessarily placed one within the religion of Judaism, and for this reason Gentile converts to the Jewish faith were expected to keep all the demands of the law. Of course the Jews themselves differed over how to observe the law correctly, and competing groups would charge their opponents with breaching the law's demands and therefore of being apostates. But each Jewish group, no matter what its opponents believed, were firmly of the opinion that they themselves represented the true form of Judaism.

This is how we should regard the Matthean community. Although its scribal and Pharisaic opponents might have charged them with apostasy, they themselves firmly believed that they obeyed the Torah in the correct way, the way revealed by the messiah. The fact that the Matthean community observed the Torah in all respects, both its moral and its ritual requirements, entails that this Christian group understood its religious tradition to be Judaism. To say, as some scholars do, that this law-observant Christian community somehow perceived itself to be outside the borders of Judaism is in reality a contradiction in terms. It is for this reason that I term the members of this group "Christian Jews", and their religious tradition "Christian Judaism". They were followers of Jesus the Christ, therefore Christians, within the confines of the Jewish faith.

A further argument supporting this view concerns the sectarian status of the Matthean community. Once we understand the evangelist's community as a sectarian group in conflict with a Jewish parent body, and Stanton agrees with both Overman and Saldarini on this, then it seems more appropriate to speak of a Jewish sect within Judaism than of a sectarian group within Christianity in opposition to Judaism. In other words, the

model of sectarianism does not really suit the hypothesis of a clear and definitive break with Judaism by Matthew's group. Moreover, the evidence Stanton compiles from Qumran points precisely in this direction. The Qumran community rejected mainstream Jewish society (including the temple cult) and physically removed itself from the surrounding society, but there is no question that it remained within the religion of Judaism. Stanton demonstrates that the Matthean community exhibits very similar sectarian tendencies, but rather than drawing the obvious conclusion from this – the Matthean community too rejected its parent body but remained within Judaism – Stanton concludes that it had broken with its parent religion. He has drawn the wrong conclusion from the evidence.

Let me now very quickly mention the arguments against this view. One argument consists of citing a number of Matthean texts, which seem to point to this conclusion. Two of the most cited are 21:43 and 28:15. Limitations of space preclude a discussion of these texts here, but it is sufficient to state that in neither case is it permissible to conclude that there has been a definitive break between the Matthean community and the religion of Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most significant argument in favour of the view that the Matthean community had broken with Judaism is the evidence that this group no longer had official contact with the local synagogue. Scholars argue that, since the evangelist constantly refers to “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54), it has to be concluded that the members of his group do not frequent the local synagogues. Moreover, when describing his own community, Matthew uses the term *ekklesia* (16:18; 18:17). Many scholars infer from this evidence that the evangelist is drawing a distinction between “the (Christian) church” and “the (Jewish) synagogue”. In other words, the religious tradition of the Matthean community is Christianity (represented by the church) and not Judaism.

This very common argument is not without its difficulties. While it can be admitted that the Matthean community no longer attended the local synagogues and referred to itself as the *ekklesia*, it remains very questionable whether this means it had broken with the Jewish faith. Scholars have interpreted the term *ekklesia* in Matthew

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<sup>10</sup> I have discussed these texts in detail in my book. See Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp 148-50.



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very much through a Pauline lens, where it does often stand for a religious entity independent of Judaism. It is debatable, however, whether this Pauline sense can simply be transported to the evangelist. Further, despite the claims of some scholars, Matthew does not refer to *the synagogue* as a synonym for Judaism. He does refer to “the synagogues” in the plural (6:2, 5; 23:6), but in these instances he clearly has in mind the local synagogues of his setting and not every synagogue in the Jewish world. The evangelist’s most common expression is, as noted earlier, “their synagogues”, and the implications of this term need to be understood. The use of “their synagogues” (not *the* synagogue) suggests the existence of “our synagogue(s)”, and this must mean that the Matthean *ekklesia* is itself a synagogue of sorts. It is probable that, having left the local synagogues, the Matthean community abandoned the term “synagogue” on account of its close associations with their opponents, and that they chose the synonymous and biblical word *ekklesia* to describe their own Jewish assembly.<sup>11</sup>

A further point to note here is that often underlying this argument is the assumption that leaving the local Jewish synagogues entails a rejection of Judaism. But this assumption is completely unwarranted. The Matthean community certainly withdrew from those synagogues controlled or influenced by its Pharisaic opponents. This does mean that it rejected formative Judaism, but we must be careful not to equate formative Judaism, a type of Judaism which emerged in the post-war period, with the religion of Judaism. That is an unforgivable anachronism. By leaving the synagogues under the influence of their opponents, the Matthean community was cutting all ties with merely one form of Judaism and setting up its own brand of Judaism in competition to it. The Qumran community again provides a good parallel of a sectarian group rejecting the major institution of its opponents (in this case the Jerusalem temple), but in no way severing its ties with its original religious tradition.

### **3. NEW DIRECTIONS**

I have spent some time describing the current scholarly debate concerning the social setting of the Matthean community. This debate has focused mainly on the relationship

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<sup>11</sup> See the discussion of Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, pp 116-20.

between the Matthean community and the Jewish world. While each side agrees on a good deal in terms of the historical situation of the evangelist's group, there is a complete lack of consensus with regard to the significance of this information. I have presented a case here (which is much more fully defended in my book) that the Matthean community, though in dispute with other Jewish groups, nonetheless remained within the tradition of Judaism (in agreement with Overman and Saldarini); the dispute was not between Christianity and Judaism, but an internal dispute within Judaism, Christian Judaism versus formative Judaism.

The question to pose now is, does it matter? How important is the conclusion that the religious tradition of the Matthean community was Judaism and not Christianity?

The short answer to this question is that it is very important, since enormous consequences flow from this conclusion. Neither Overman nor Saldarini, who stayed very much within the confines of the current debate, took the opportunity to explore these consequences, but they simply cannot be ignored. In my book on the social setting of the Matthean community, I tried to take the views of Overman and Saldarini to their logical conclusion, and this necessitated taking the debate about this whole subject in new and largely unexplored directions. I want now to spell out some of these new directions.

The most obvious point concerns the relationship between Matthew's Christian Jewish community and those Christians who no longer observed the law and who, by definition, were not practitioners of Judaism. Specifically, what was the relationship between the evangelist's law-observant Christian group and the Pauline churches, which largely comprised Gentiles who claimed to be Christians outside the parameters of Judaism? We should expect that Matthew's community would have been firmly opposed to these nominal Christians. For this Christian Jewish community, salvation was only possible for people who were both Christians and Jews. Being Jewish was not sufficient, as the example of the scribes and Pharisees shows, but being merely Christian was not sufficient either (cf 7:21-2); both criteria had to be satisfied. From Matthew's perspective Jews who did not profess Jesus to be the messiah (and all that involved) were doomed, just as Gentiles who claimed to follow Jesus were doomed if they did not convert to Judaism and faithfully uphold the Torah as well.

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This is not mere speculation. There are, I believe a number of texts in the Gospel that are inherently anti-Pauline; that is to say they oppose Paul himself as well as his law-free or lawless (cf *anomia*) version of the gospel (5:17-19; 7:13-27; 13:36-43; 16:17-18). These texts are fully discussed in my book.<sup>12</sup> The proposal that Matthew is anti-Pauline is not new, but I think that scholars should give this hypothesis far more credence than they do, particularly if it is accepted that the Matthean community stood within Judaism.

Another obvious and related issue raised by the thesis that the Matthean community was within the orbit of Judaism concerns its relationship with the Gentile world. This is a subject of longstanding interest to me. I have published a large article on this theme,<sup>13</sup> a chapter of my latest book was devoted to this topic and I hope to complete a large monograph on this whole subject in the near future which takes into account all the relevant evidence. Much of the literature on this theme is based upon the view that the Matthean community had broken with Judaism. Many scholars, argue that with the failure of the Jewish mission the Matthean community was turning in earnest to the Gentile world. It was either replacing the Jewish mission with the Gentile mission or expanding its missionary horizons to include the Gentiles as well as the Jews. This view appears to be reasonable if it is assumed that this community had parted company with Judaism, but it needs drastic re-assessment if the evangelist's group still considered itself within Judaism. There are a number of complex issues here, but I want to mention just two of them.

It is questionable whether the Christian Jewish Matthean community was actively engaged in a Gentile mission. The only text which really points towards this conclusion is 28:16-20, but I think there are problems in ascribing this command to the disciples to the Matthean community.<sup>14</sup> But over and above this, there are a number of texts in the Gospel that contain anti-Gentile sentiments and which imply that this Jewish group kept its distance from its Gentile neighbours (cf 5:46-7; 6:7-8, 31-2; 7:6; 18:15-17). These texts are often overlooked or played down by those scholars who argue that the Matthean

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<sup>12</sup> Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp 199-211.

<sup>13</sup> D C Sim, "The Gospel of Matthew and the Gentiles", *JSNT* 57 (1995), pp 19-48.

<sup>14</sup> See Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp 243-6.

community had a generally positive view of the Gentiles. If we are to explain why the evangelist's group largely avoided the Gentile world, then we need look no further than the Gentile persecutions of the Jews both during and after the Jewish war. If the Gospel was written in Antioch, as most scholars believe, then it is almost certain that it, as a Jewish group, would have been caught up in these terrible events (cf 24:9). I remain to be convinced, despite the witness of 28:16-20, that this Christian Jewish community, whose focus had always been on the Jewish mission (cf 10:1-42; 22:1-10; 23:29-36), would immediately launch a mission to the group that had recently persecuted it.

The other point I wish to explore is that, even if we accept that Matthew's community was engaged in a Gentile mission, on what grounds was this mission conducted? Most Matthean scholars accept that the mission would have been law-free, but this common view appears quite unlikely if this community was still attached to Judaism, and especially if it was anti-Pauline. It was noted earlier that this group accepted two criteria for salvation, membership of the people of Israel and belief in Jesus as the messiah. This means that any Gentiles within the Matthean community must have converted in the first instance to Judaism before becoming members of the evangelist's sectarian Jewish group.

This view supported and not contradicted by the conclusion of the Gospel. In 28:16-20 the risen Christ commands the disciples to make disciples of all the nations by baptising them and by teaching them to observe all the commandments of Jesus. Even though circumcision is not mentioned, it is clearly presumed because the commandments of Jesus in the Gospel include, amongst other things, the demand to observe the Torah in full (cf 5:17-19). Conversion of the Gentiles to Matthew's community was therefore a two-part process – an initial conversion to Judaism (for men this meant circumcision), and a further initiation into this Christian Jewish sectarian group by the separate ritual of baptism. Once we view the mission of the Matthean community as law-observant, then we are immediately forced to revise many of the opinions regarding this group and its relations with the Gentile world. The common picture of law-free Gentiles streaming into the Matthean community and overtaking its original Jewish members needs serious adjustment. It is far more likely, as both Overman and Saldarini note in passing, that very few people of Gentile origin were members of the evangelist's community.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this very general paper, I have presented a case that the social setting of the Matthean community is more complex than scholars have realised. The focus of attention has remained on the relationship between this group and the Jewish world, and on this point the evidence strongly suggests that the evangelist's community was in conflict with formative Judaism but not with Judaism proper; it continued to observe the Torah and defined its religious tradition as Judaism. This conclusion, however, has significant ramifications, which most scholars have overlooked. I think, as I argued in my monograph, that we need to revisit a number of crucial issues, especially the relations between this community and law-free Pauline Christianity, and its relationship with the Gentile world.