

MATTHEW AND THE GENTILES: A RESPONSE TO BRENDAN BYRNE

David C. Sim

I would like to thank Professor Byrne for his paper on a subject of particular interest to me. In this brief response there is unfortunately insufficient space to engage Byrne's direct criticisms of my work. It is, however, both possible and necessary to raise two points that arise from his study. The first is that, while the details of Byrne's argument are clear enough, his overall purpose is not. What exactly is Byrne trying to demonstrate in his paper? The second concerns his extremely vague reconstruction of the community behind the Gospel of Matthew. Byrne describes this community as a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, but says nothing more than this. Such a description is rather meaningless, however, and Byrne needs to provide a much more concrete portrayal of this church to accompany his interpretation of the Gospel texts.

A brief review of Byrne's study reveals its lack of clear objectives. Byrne opens his paper by correctly noting that the social setting of the Gospel, particularly its relationship to Judaism, has dominated recent Matthean studies. He then asks whether the evangelist's community saw itself within the broader Jewish commonwealth or as a member of the mixed (Jewish and increasingly Gentile) churches. Byrne then narrows the discussion to the particular question of the status of the Gentiles in Matthew's church, and his words need to be quoted in full; "... to put the matter bluntly, the issue is whether Gentile converts to Matthew's community are expected to become Jews (proselytes) when they become believers, or whether they join a new people of God, made up of Jews and Gentiles ..." (p. 55). Byrne follows this with two lists of scholars, one representing the view that Matthew's community had separated from Judaism and the other of the alternative opinion that it was still within the orbit of Judaism (pp. 55-56). My own work on this question is correctly listed with the latter view, but it is qualified as being its "most extreme representative" because I have also argued that Matthew's community was anti-Gentile and was not involved in a Gentile mission (pp. 56-57).

At this point Byrne appears to lose his way. The remainder of his study consists of a reading of the Gospel that is intended to refute my claims regarding the evangelist's attitude towards the Gentiles and his church's participation in the Gentile mission. Byrne works his way through the whole Gospel narrative, but gives primacy to five particular

sections (1:1-2:23; 4:12-17; 12:15-21; 15:21-8; 28:16-20). The upshot of his discussion is that Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah with special relevance to the Gentiles; he is the one in whose name “the Gentiles will hope” (12:21). In terms of the evangelist’s community, it is specified clearly in 28:19 that this church was commissioned to evangelize the Gentile world, a mission that was foreshadowed in the earlier activity of Jesus himself (cf. 4:15-16, 23-25; 8:5-13; 15:21-8) and which accords with God’s salvific plan.

It is evident even from this brief summary that Byrne’s discussion undergoes a radical change of direction. The two issues he himself nominates as the most crucial, 1. whether or not the Matthean community is still attached to Judaism and 2. the obligations of its Gentile members, are soon forgotten as the analysis turns to the quite different questions regarding the place of the Gentiles in the divine plan and the participation of Matthew’s group in the Gentile mission. That Byrne has not directly engaged the initial questions he poses is clear from the fact that he does not discuss the major evidence pertinent to them. Whether or not Matthew’s community identified itself within Judaism and expected its Gentile converts to proselytize is a complex issue that requires detailed analysis of many Gospel pericopae. Of fundamental importance, needless to say, is the matter of Law-observance in Matthew’s community. Did this group still observe the Torah (cf. 5:17-19)? If so, was this required of its Gentile converts?¹ While we would expect, in the light of his opening comments, that Byrne would address these crucial questions, he does not. He says almost nothing about the Mosaic Law, and certainly never argues what role, if any, the Torah played in the evangelist’s church.

Herein lies the problem of gauging Byrne’s overall purpose in this study. Is his aim to establish his views that the Matthean community had separated from Judaism and did not require its Gentile converts to observe the Torah? If so, then he has failed to address the most significant issues and the pertinent Gospel evidence. Alternatively, is it Byrne’s intention to take particular issue with my work concerning Matthew and the Gentiles, and demonstrate that the Gentiles were an important part of the evangelist’s theological schema and that his community was actively involved in the Gentile mission? If this is the case, then it remains a mystery why he would identify at the beginning certain issues as central and then move without explanation to other areas of discussion. A third explanation is possible. It might be the case that Byrne accepts that these issues are very closely related. Perhaps he is under the impression that a Matthean community which includes the Gentiles and is involved in the Gentile

¹ See D. C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 123-50, 247-55.

mission necessarily entails a break with Judaism and a rejection of the Mosaic Law for its Gentile converts. If this is the argument, then Byrne is under a mistaken impression on both counts.

A Matthean community open to the Gentile world and engaged in a Gentile mission does not necessarily entail that it had broken with its Jewish heritage. Most scholars who place Matthew within Judaism, including those listed by Byrne, would agree with him that the evangelist's group was actively involved in the Gentile mission and that it included many Gentiles amongst its members. Although I do not share this view, there is nothing illogical about it. Paul's epistle to the Galatians reveals that there were Christians who remained attached to Judaism and who successfully conducted a mission to Gentiles. By the same token, a Matthean church that accepted the special place of the Gentiles in salvation history and conducted a mission to them does not necessarily mean that this group permitted the conversion of Gentiles without the prior obligations to join the people of Israel and to obey the Torah. This point is rightly acknowledged in the recent article of Donald Senior (cited by Byrne), which also criticizes my work on Matthew's view of the Gentiles and the Gentile mission.² Senior agrees with Byrne that the Gentiles were an integral part of the evangelist's theological scheme and that this church fully endorsed the Gentile mission (which was foreshadowed by the Matthean Jesus). But when Senior comes to the issue of the status of the Gentiles in the evangelist's community, he adopts my view that they would have necessarily converted to Judaism prior to their induction into Matthew's Christian Jewish group.³ Once again Paul's opponents in Galatia represent such a position in the first century Christian movement.

This third option is therefore not viable. Even if we accept Byrne's arguments concerning the importance of the Gentiles in Matthew's scheme of salvation and his community's role in the Gentile mission, we cannot infer from these conclusions that his community had broken with Judaism or that it accepted Gentile converts without observance of the Mosaic Law. These questions must be decided by other evidence.

I wish to move now to the second point. This involves a similar lack of clarity in Byrne's description of the Matthean community. According to Byrne, this group identified itself not within Judaism, but rather with "... the mixed (Jewish and increasingly Gentile) churches gathered in the name of Jesus ..." (p. 55; cf. p. 70). Its members comprised "... a new people of God, made up of Jews and Gentiles ..." (p. 55). This sort of description is so vague as to be meaningless. There were of course a few "mixed" communities in the first century that contained people of both a

²D. Senior, "Between Two Worlds: Gentiles and Jewish Christians in Matthew's Gospel," *CBQ* 61 (1999) 1-23.

³Senior, "Between Two Worlds," 19-20.

Jewish and a Gentile background, but there were different types of such churches.

Some mixed communities practised their faith in Jesus outside the boundaries of Judaism. A good example here is the initial church in Antioch, founded by the Hellenists (cf. Acts 11:19-20), where neither Jewish nor Gentile member observed the Torah.⁴ The later churches established by Paul, in which there was no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile (cf. Rom. 10:12; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28), followed this pattern, but it is questionable whether Paul's churches were racially mixed. Paul considered himself to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and his communities appear to have been solely Gentile in nature. Other mixed communities, however, remained within the sphere of Judaism and all members, regardless of racial origins, observed the Torah. Both Senior and I would view the Matthean community in these terms, and it is clear that it was this type of Christian group that Paul's opponents in Galatia wished to create. In order to say something meaningful about Matthew's community, therefore, Byrne needs to do more than simply define it as a mixed church composed of Jews and Gentiles. He is required to spell out which type of mixed community he has in mind, or indeed whether he envisages another kind of mixed group.

Since Byrne does not accept that the Gentiles in Matthew's community needed to proselytize and observe the Mosaic Law (p. 55), he would appear not to entertain the notion that it was a mixed community of Jews and (former) Gentiles who all obeyed the Torah. This leaves only two other major alternatives. The first is that no-one in the Matthean community, Jew or Gentile, followed the Torah. This would put Matthew's group either very close to or even within the various Hellenist and Pauline churches. Yet any argument along these lines would place Byrne very much against the mainstream of current Matthean scholarship, which tends to accept that Matthew's community was not Pauline in any respect.⁵ In addition, he would also have to explain away the many texts which confirm that the Mosaic Law was revered and observed in the Matthean community.

The second option open to Byrne is to argue that the Jews in the evangelist's community observed the Torah, while the Gentiles either did not or did so partially. This would be a truly "mixed church", and some Matthean scholars have argued in this fashion.⁶ But there are serious problems here as well. In terms of the Gospel text, the Matthean Jesus

⁴Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 64-77.

⁵See D. C. Sim, "Matthew's Anti-Paulinism: A Neglected Feature of Matthean Studies", forthcoming in *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*.

⁶For discussion and critique of these views, see Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 252-3.

makes it crystal clear that the Law is to be obeyed until the parousia and that it is wrong for followers of Jesus to teach anyone (Jew or Gentile) to relax even the least of the commandments (5:17-19). A group of Law-observant followers of Jesus accepting Gentiles without an obligation to observe the Torah in full would be in serious violation of this demand.

A further problem resides in the real world behind the text. We know that in the first century there were Christian groups which did not keep the Mosaic Law (e.g. the Pauline churches), and other communities that remained completely faithful to the Torah (e.g. the Jerusalem church). But where is the evidence of mixed Christian communities where some members kept the Torah and other members did not? Where do we find Law-observant Jews and Law-free Gentiles living and worshipping together as equal members of the same community? I am yet to be convinced that such Christian churches existed. The apostolic decree of Acts 15, which recommends churches of fully Law-observant Jews and partially Law-observant Gentiles, is nowhere else attested in our early sources and must in any case be treated with great suspicion.⁷ The nearest we get to such a scenario is the Christian church in Rome in the late 50s. If it is correct to identify the strong and the weak in Rom. 14-15 as respectively Roman Christians who reject the Torah and Roman Christians who observe the Mosaic code, then it must be the case that both types of Christian were found in the Imperial capital. But Paul makes clear that these particular groups have little or no contact with one another (cf. Rom. 14:10-11; 15:5-7, 15). We are therefore not dealing with a single mixed community of Law-observant and Law-free members, but with two entirely independent Christian churches in the same city.

This tendency of the divergent Christian traditions deciding not to mix with or even tolerate one another is well attested in other sources. The Christian Jews who kept the Torah were keen that Gentiles do likewise, as is evident from the incident at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14) and from the situation in Galatia itself. From the other perspective, the later Pseudo-Pauline texts are scathing in their attacks of Christians who adopt Jewish ways (cf. 1 Tim. 1:4, 6-7; 4:3-7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:10, 14-15; 3:9; Col. 2:8-23).⁸ A little later Ignatius of Antioch declares that it is monstrous for Christians to adopt Jewish doctrines and practices (Mag. 10:3; cf. Mag. 8:1-2), and he makes clear that those Christians who do so live independently of his own Law-free church (Mag 4:1; 6:2; Philad. 3:3; 7:1).⁹ Consequently, the mixed church of Law-abiding Christian Jews and Law-free Gentile Christians is not supported by any evidence from either side of the Christian divide.

⁷ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 88-9.

⁸ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 172-6.

⁹ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 272-82.

Byrne needs to avoid the vague description of the Matthean church as a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, and define this group in a more concrete fashion. Did any of its members observe the Torah, and were other members exempt from this requirement? However he reconstructs the evangelist's community, his description of it must be both supported by the Gospel text and defensible within the context of the first century Christian movement. Only when he has done so can the current debate about Matthew's attitude to the Gentiles and the status of the Gentiles in his church progress in a truly productive way.

BRENDAN BYRNE RESPONDS TO DAVID SIM

While grateful to Dr David Sim for his courteous response to my article I am puzzled that he finds my overall purpose so hard to discern. I thought I had indicated this sufficiently clearly by indicating in the third paragraph what I aimed to contend in the article: negatively, that downplaying the Gentile mission is not compatible with what emerges from a reading of the gospel as a whole; positively, that Gentile inclusion emerges as central to the community's sense of identity. The opening two paragraphs, it is true, did raise questions regarding the position of the community behind the gospel in relation to Judaism—and specifically in regard to the circumcision or non-circumcision of Gentile converts. In accordance with scholarly convention, these remarks were offered by way of setting the particular issue I proposed to address within the wider state of the question in Matthean studies; they were not intended to set the agenda for the paper, as Sim appears to have deduced. I can understand why, granted his scholarly interests, he is disappointed and puzzled as to why I did not pursue them. But, as indicated, my intention was not to speculate at length about the composition and placement of the community behind the gospel (a historical question) but rather to ask what the unfolding *narrative* seems to imply concerning a Gentile mission (a narrative-critical and theological question). His criticism, then, while meriting close attention on several points—notably the place of the Torah and the on-going validity of its prescriptions—is focussed on the study he holds that I *should have written* rather than the one I actually did compose.

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