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The Gospel of Mathew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community (Studies of the New Testament and its World). By David C. Sim. Pp. xvi, 347, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1998, £27.50

David Sim is becoming a major authority on the Gospel according to Matthew. A former student of Graham Stanton, Sim has followed up his *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* with a major monograph on the history of the community for whom the Gospel was written. In a thorough, ambitious, clearly written study, Sim attempts to locate “the Matthean community” and then to write its history, from inception to ultimate demise.

His thesis owes much to the recent studies of Overman and Saldarini in its fundamental claim that the Matthean community was a sectarian, Christian Jewish group that defined itself over against a “formative Judaism” with which it was in dispute. But the community is further defined by an antagonism with representatives of Pauline Christianity, preaching a “law-observant” gospel in deliberate contradistinction to their “law-free” mission. The Matthean community is thus the successor, in Antioch, of the Petrine faction that is said to have won the day there and Peter is accordingly the hero of the group. The community is also strongly antagonistic to “the Gentile world” and it was persecuted by Gentiles as well as by other Jews. The ultimate, post-Gospel fate of the group, after surviving attack by the Pauline Ignatius, was a split. One faction became the Nazarene sect located in Beroea

and the other faction finally assimilated to the now entirely Gentile Christian church in Antioch, bringing its gospel with it.

Much of Sim's history is presented with the kind of clarity, good judgement and intelligent engagement with the literature that will ensure that this book makes an important contribution to Matthean scholarship. Sim has read widely (though consideration of Paula Fredriksen's views might have nuanced Sim's discussion in Chapter 2) and is never afraid to launch weighty challenges to the consensus views. In particular, the argument that scholarship has failed to engage adequately with the "anti-Gentile stance" of Matthew is well sustained. And the general approach is laudable: Sim's first stage is to set the Gospel, plausibly enough, in Antioch in the post-war period and he then proceeds to contextualise it, with detailed discussion of what went on before, during and after the production of the Gospel.

Another of the book's assets is a kind of "no nonsense", "plain meaning" exegesis of the Gospel. As far as Sim is concerned, Matthew meant what he said. It is a reading that avoids taking refuge in the dubious excesses of redaction-criticism every time one finds a passage that seems to challenge one's view, an approach to which Matthew has been subjected more than any other gospel. The only disadvantage with the approach is that Sim does not always give full voice to the scholars he is challenging as, for example, when he does not explain to the reader the redaction-critical basis for Meier's preference for "until all is accomplished" in Matt. 5.18b (pp. 124-5), without which Meier's view looks quite arbitrary.

In spite of such indubitable merits, some readers will probably be disappointed not to find an argument for the existence of the “Matthean community”, or at least a clear attempt to define what is meant by the term that is used so regularly. These matters become all the more noticeable in the light of the recent volume edited by Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels for all Christians* (also from T & T Clark and also published in 1998, so there is no question of Sim’s having seen it). It seems clear that for Sim the Matthean community is the group “for which” the gospel was written (pp. 27, 36, 115, 141, 257 and 285), rather than from which or by which it was written; and since there is so much stress on the community’s sectarian nature, the function of the gospel is presumably taken to be group legitimation. The community’s views seem to be taken to be identical with the views of the reconstructed author of the gospel -- there is no element of attempted corrective. But these views are assumed rather than demonstrated and little justification is given for the attempt to read the community’s identity straight off the pages of the gospel.

It may be that this is the ideal way to reconstruct the background to the gospel and the plausibility of the picture Sim paints is the key argument in favour of this approach. However, one cannot help having several qualms about the approach, sensitivity to which might have improved the (nevertheless stimulating) thesis. First, the community’s views are equated with the evangelist’s views rather too quickly, and the evangelist’s views are equated with the Gospel’s rhetoric even more quickly. The author does not pay enough attention, in other words, to the distinctions between the narrative world of the gospel and the hypothetical, historically reconstructed world of Matthew’s community.

Second, Sim does not discuss the complexity of dealing with a group that has chosen to write a narrative about events in the past, a *gospel* rather than a church-history, a homily, an epistle or an apocalypse. If Sim is right that Matthew was writing for a Christian Jewish community, his case might have been stronger still if he had taken seriously the possibility that Matthew chose to write a gospel because he perceived there to be continuity and interaction between the events of Jesus' ministry and the events in his post-war Christian Jewish group. In other words, perhaps the Matthean community saw the events narrated in the Gospel not purely as *paralleling* their own experiences but also in some way *causing* them.

Third, there is no discussion about what it was about Mark's Gospel (which Sim rightly assumes Matthew read) that had such an important effect on such a sectarian group. This is one key element in the (presumed) history of the group that is not considered, the profound effect that Mark must have made on Matthew. Was the arrival of Mark's Gospel in the community the catalyst for Matthew to have begun writing his own Gospel? If so, what does that tell us about the sectarian nature of the group? Is Matthew's Gospel wholly a corrective work or does Matthew's interaction with Mark show him also to have been profoundly influenced by it?

Fourth, Sim does not take seriously the possibility that the function of the Gospel was to provide propaganda in order to advertise and persuade the wider world of his community's distinctive views. Such a thesis might have added to the plausibility of Sim's reconstruction: it would explain the widespread knowledge and use of Matthew from so early (popular from the turn of the century) and it would provide a reason for the vociferousness of the anti-Pauline polemic that Sim sees throughout

The failure to exploit this last possibility arises in part from a loss of nerve on Sim's part. After having defended a type of "no nonsense" exegesis throughout, it is surprising to find that Sim does not take the key verse 28.19 ("Therefore go and make disciples of all nations . . .") as an injunction in any way binding on the Matthean community. They "believed the Gentile mission to be equally as valid as the mission to the Jews" (p. 245) but "the Matthean community played no role in this mission" themselves (p. 246), leaving it rather to others in Peter's legacy. The difficulty is that elsewhere in Sim's analysis, "the disciples" are simply equated with "the Matthean community" (for example "this authority to bind and loose has since passed on to the Matthean community as a whole" (18.18), p. 197), and we might expect to see the same community directly addressed in the Great Commission of 28.16-20, particularly given its climactic place in the narrative, the themes found here that are so important in Matthew as a whole (especially "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you", 28.20), and the fact that it is spoken directly by the Risen Jesus, to whom "all authority" has been given. With 28.19 taken seriously, Sim might have been able to crown his insights into the community by seeing the existence and nature of Matthew's Gospel itself as providing the best evidence for the pervasiveness and influence of the group that produced it, a Christian Jewish group who wanted to persuade others of the legitimacy of their law-observant lifestyle and mission, sanctioned by the Risen Jesus himself at the very climax of a narrative all about providing propaganda for a cause.

David Sim's book is thorough, stimulating and important. The scope of its ambition is matched by the author's ability to use his imagination, to write clearly and to make

a major contribution to Matthean scholarship. If not all elements of its thesis ultimately prove convincing, that will only be because it has provoked its readers to think.

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