Introduction to Matthew (2)
January 26th 2014
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mt 4, 12-23 or 4, 12-17

MATTHEW’S HOME GROUP

Many attempts have been made to locate Matthew’s people among known important groups in the latter part of the first century.

VARIOUS JEWISH GROUPS IN FIRST CENTURY

The usual divisions (Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Pharisees) come from Josephus, but they overlap, and when they do they are perhaps not so helpful in identifying a man like Matthew. A word about them, and then we can give attention to Matthew.

Sadducees are mainly temple priests, including the high priest. **Matthew is not one.** He is not a priest.

Essenes are into devotion and the daily practice of prayers, and are not into *lesteia* (robbing, plundering) but are not peaceful farmers either, they were more or less accepting of some violence in the ordinary run of life. Qumran was one place, but not the only one, where Essenes lived – they lived also, for example, in some parts of Jerusalem. **Matthew is not one of them.** He is not into organised piety.

In their attitude to violence the Essenes were somewhat positive to Zealots. Zealots would act violently for a cause. **Matthew is not a Zealot.** He is non-violent.

Pharisees – Josephus claims to be one. There were many subdivisions among them: depending on positions taken re rites (circumcision, baptism), or torah (scriptures generally), or ancestral customs outside torah (scriptures), or resurrection. **Matthew belongs in some way here.** He is at home among the Pharisees.

There might be more value in exploring those who could broadly be called Messianists. They overlap most of the above categories. They have an intense expectation of the end of everything, and of the imminent coming of the Messiah. They are agitators. Aquila is one of them, even more significantly, it seems, than his friend Paul. They seem to have some affinities with the Baptist movements. There could have been Messianists and Baptist sympathisers among Pharisees, Essenes, Qumranites, even Zealots. In Jn 1,24 there are Pharisees who are open to the Baptist movement of John the Baptist and Jesus. **Matthew is more of a thinker and litterateur than a political agitator.** He is a quiet man.

The Paul of Acts is a literary elaboration. There he is originally a Pharisee, educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, affirmed by the Pharisee party, with credential letters from the (Sadducee) high priest, and commissioned to Damascus (which was not under the jurisdiction of the High Priest). The Paul of Acts always remained a Pharisee.
I am beginning to see the historical Paul as originally among Messianists (though not then identifying the Messiah with Jesus). It may be clearer to see him among the Essenes – which would not contradict his links with Messianists. All this seems more central to the historical Paul than a primary link with Pharisees. When he calls himself a Pharisee kata nomon (according to the law), I think he means that for him the usual hermeneutic key to moral issues is the torah, much in the way that it was for Pharisees. In other words, he is inclined to the law in most arguments.

Was Matthew like that? Yes and no.

THE ‘MATTHEANS’?

On this basis, scholars are now asking to what Jewish group Matthew might have belonged. The expression ‘The Mattheans’ is now being used about that group. It is the group that our Matthew came from. They probably would not have called themselves Mattheans – most of them finally did not like Matthew! But it suits contemporary historians to give them that name. But who were they? Some kind of Pharisees. So you could say:

The Mattheans were initially part of the Pharisaic association, taken broadly, but were in the process of leaving that larger collectivity after the war of 68-70, and so standing more on their own.

To unpack that summary statement, we need to start with what has been called ‘common Judaism’. By that I mean a broad coalition of a lot of approaches, the common denominator among ordinary people who gathered around synagogues on Sabbaths and accepted the reality of quite a few voluntary associations within their fold. Note that this common Judaism is not exactly the same as the ‘Rabbinic Judaism’ that became the common Judaism after the assembly of Yebneh (Jamnia) after the Jewish War was over.

The Pharisees were one of these voluntary associations. I could call them a denomination of and inside the old common Judaism. I would not call them a sect, as they never saw themselves as separate or separating from common Judaism. Outsiders did refer to them as a sect. They are a lay group, not priests, they believed in resurrection, they hoped for the restoration of Israel, they were convinced that a Messiah of Israel would come, indeed was coming, who would bring about these dreams of reform. Pharisees are a reform-oriented, Messianic positive denomination. A fairly large one.

After the Jewish War (70) there was a significant influx of ordinary Jews to the Pharisee denomination. Many of these people were of higher social status (landowners, for example), and some of them were educated, of the elite literate class. They tended to be leaders wherever they were. They believed that the coming Kingdom of God was within reach.

The Mattheans are a group within these Pharisees. They believed that Jesus was the hoped for Messiah. They had a missionary outreach, even to Gentiles, and they recruited lower status Jews. Naturally there was polemic between them and Pharisees who were not Mattheans. They tended to blame the other Pharisees (those who
didn’t go along with the Matthean faith in Jesus) for the death of Jesus. [Historically, it seems that not these but the Sadducees were the instigators of the action against Jesus.]

The text we call the Didache may well come from the same (Matthean) community as Matthew. Its earliest form may predate Matthew. It then continued to evolve over the years, in tandem with the evolution of Matthew’s text. Matthew’s gospel eventually replaced it as central for the community that was the origin of both. [So J. Draper, in W. Pratscher, ed, The Apostolic Fathers, an introduction, Baylor U Press, 2010] The Didache contains a Eucharistic prayer, presumably used at the Eucharist of this early community.

The Mattheans thought that some groups connected with the temple and the city (Sadducees) were corrupt and acted as bad servants or bad shepherds or bad tenants of the Land – this was really why both temple and city had been destroyed.

They tried to transfer this guilt to the non-Matthean Pharisees. They thought that the Pharisees were part of the leadership handing Jesus over to the Romans. This is evidence, not of history and Jesus, but of their attitude to other Pharisees. [In Mt, Pharisees are repeatedly singled out for categorical condemnation by Mt. Mt often uses hyperbole. I don’t see him just as a preacher, exaggerating for rhetorical effect. I see him at a loss to describe the event of Jesus as he has come to enter into it.]

In a short time, a large enough group of these Mattheans left the mainstream Pharisees, and could be seen as a sect of Phariseeism. At the same time, the boundaries are far from clear, and we are dealing with an incipient movement only. The majority of Mattheans experienced real life evidence that the coming kingdom of God was within their reach. This spurred a never before witnessed missionary outreach on the part of the majority of the Matthean reform movement. This expanded beyond the Jewish people – at the dawn of the new age, the Gentiles must come to Zion.

Cell division usually continues rapidly in such separating groups, and not all such Mattheans were of the same persuasion. The term Mattheans is probably best used of one splinter within the group that was in the process of defining itself and etching out its clearer identity. [It is only recently that the term itself, the Mattheans, is being used by scholars.]

To sum up, the Mattheans are urban based Pharisees who became convinced (via missionaries) that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of Israel. The kerygma of Jesus’ resurrection confirmed their (already strong) belief in the resurrection of the dead and their almost radical hope for a restored Israel. The larger Pharisaic association, and even some groups within it, remained unconvinced about this identification of Jesus – now dead – with the Messiah.

The development of the Matthean reform movement happened co-terminously with an increased influx of people to the wider Pharisaic denomination. They were largely of relatively high social status. They had less interest in a radical reform movement proclaiming the imminent coming of the end. They were more interested in how to live now, in the ordinary everyday, if you believed in Jesus.
It seems that Matthew the gospel writer, and his gospel, came from a group like this. These people lived **within the larger Jewish system of religious practices.** From Mt’s gospel, we glean that Mt goes along with a Jewish understanding of divine judgment, and with most of the practices of Jewish life: prayer, almsgiving, fasting, the law and the commandments, dietary rules, purity rules, Sabbath, festivals (Passover), tithing, temple cult, temple tax, and (very probably) circumcision. Some non-Jewish characters in the gospel (magi, a Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman) are presented positively, but as exceptions. The group in which Mt’s gospel originated was ethnically and spiritually Jewish.

Note that there were synagogues where people of these various persuasions gathered. Sometimes they were purpose-built edifices, more often they were not, just gathering points. I don’t think they excluded those of other persuasions from most of their assemblies. We used to talk about a clear rift, early, between ‘the Jews’ and ‘the Christians’. The Jews were not as uniform as that suggests, and Christian was an adjective used to describe only the Antioch group of Jesus believers. It is not really hard and fast.


To make the point of these introductory remarks, **Matthew seems to me to come out of this background, and to carry in himself many of the positives and negatives of it, and to contribute, through his personal gifts, to its further development.**