

Preface

*μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης,
ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.*

This study began its life on a somewhat dusty backstreet in Nairobi more than 20 years ago. My wife and I had completed a semester of undergraduate study at the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem and had then backpacked our way around the world for an additional seven months. After travelling mostly through the so-called two-thirds world, observing on a daily basis the ever-present results of the exploitation by the powerful of the less fortunate, the question became palpably acute whether the God of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament had anything to say about this intolerable state of affairs. Why are the perpetrators of injustice allowed to continue their abuse unhindered, flourishing in their endeavors, while those who fight corruption and its devastating consequences are made targets of mistreatment and violence? Is there no end to the suffering that the poor and defenseless must endure because of other people's greed and indifference? Why doesn't the biblical God interfere, condemning the oppressors and restoring justice to the destitute? And where did all the prophets of the Hebrew Bible go? Was their call for individual integrity and just laws—their insistence on the protection of orphans, widows, the poor, and the immigrants¹—silenced as the Messiah of the

1. E.g., Isa 1:15–17; 10:1–3; Jer 7:5–7; Ezek 9:9–10; 22:29; Amos 5:10–24; Zech 7:9–10; cf. Lev 19:17–18, 34; Deut 10:16–19; 24:17; Ps 68:6 [Eng. 68:5]; 82:1–8.

New Testament entered the scene, seemingly proposing a non-political and “religious” solution to the constant crisis we are encouraged to call “world order”? Did these proclaimers of rightful divine wrath and judgment vanish, never to return, superseded by doctrinal concerns in a community that, when faced with despotism and persecution, adjusts and withdraws from direct interaction, washing its hands with abstract theological constructs formulated to secure a heavenly salvation utterly divorced from the earthly deliverance of the downtrodden and demoralized? What is it, really, that the notion of the kingdom of heaven is trying to convey, and what does it mean to ask in prayer for its urgent realization, for the divine will to prevail upon earth as much as it does in heaven?²

Such were the questions that forced themselves upon me, and since I was a university student at the time, I thought it natural, first of all, to apply academic tools to see how the ancients would have dealt with these and similar issues; to seek insight by listening to voices from the past. Once we had returned to Lund University, the idea developed into an essay on divine judgment in the Hebrew Bible and Matthew’s Gospel (1994), which led to a licentiate thesis on the same topic (1997). Parallel to my work on ancient synagogues, Paul, and other aspects of Matthew, I have since continued to explore judgment discourse in biblical and related texts.³ The present study is an attempt to present parts of the research I have undertaken on and off over the years whenever I have found the time. I have focused here exclusively on one of the books included in the New Testament: the Gospel of Matthew. The reason for this limitation is that Matthew’s Gospel differs significantly from the other Gospels, not only in its fierce emphasis on divine wrath and judgment, unmatched by any other New Testament text with the possible exception of Revelation, but also in its coherent, almost systematic treatment of this theme throughout the narrative.

In addition to the uniqueness of Matthew’s Gospel, and perhaps

2. Matt 6:10.

3. See, e.g., Anders Runesson, “Judgment,” in *NIDB* (vol. 3; Nashville: Abingdon press, 2008) 457–66, for an overview and discussion of the theme of judgment in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, as well as in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

counterintuitively, considering the rather orderly nature of its theo-ritual⁴ pattern, the diverse reception history of the First Gospel in both church and academy suggests that this text is in need of special attention, particularly with regard to nuances that would have been apparent to its first-century audiences, but which may since have been forgotten. There is one peculiarity, though, that stands out in the midst of this interpretive heterogeneity due to its remarkable historical consistency, from late antiquity until very recently. Regardless of whatever diversity human creativity has produced in its search for divine requirements of salvation, there is, in Christian interpretations of Matthew, one group of people that has been singled out for divine—and human—condemnation more often than not: the Jewish people. One does not have to engage in more than a cursory investigation into the reception of Matt 27:25 to become horrified at the ingenuity of humans as interpretive beings when it comes to developing divinely ordained pretexts for violence—textual as well as physical and psychological—against this, from a Christian perspective, specific “other.”⁵

In light of the fact that Matthew’s narrative, more than the other Gospels, seems to place the reader in a Jewish world in order to communicate the meaning of Jesus, this interpretive consistency in which the Jews *as a people* are theologically destined for eradication appears to disrupt the fundamental stability of the plotline. In this regard, Matthew’s intriguing reception history triggered early on in

4. By “theo-ritual,” I mean to refer to a pattern of practice and thought in which what we term “theology” and “ritual” cannot be understood as separate issues, with the implication that they need to be analyzed in conjunction with each other. The nature of the text is such that “theology,” as this term is often defined in academic discourses, seems to reduce what really is an expression of a ritually determined Second-Temple Jewish worldview to an attempt at systematizing religious thought as disentangled from cultic praxis.

5. For recent discussion, see Anders Runesson, “Judging the Theological Tree by its Fruit: The Use of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew in Official Church Documents on Jewish-Christian Relations,” in *Mark and Matthew. Comparative Readings II: Hermeneutics, Reception History, Theology* (edited by Eve-Marie Becker and Anders Runesson; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 189–228, and literature referred to there. For a comprehensive study of the reception of this verse in the west until the fifth century, see Rainer Kampling, *Das Blut Christi und die Juden: Mt 27,25 bei den lateinischsprachigen christlichen Autoren bis zu Leo dem Großen* (Münster: Aschendorf, 1984). See also John Nolland, “The Gospel of Matthew and Anti-Semitism,” in *Built Upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (edited by Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 154–69, here 163–69.

my studies a curiosity about basic thematic structures in the text. This, in turn, led to a focus on how the identity of “the other” is construed, since answers to such questions seemed to me to be a key to a first-century understanding of the notion of divine judgment in the Gospel. How would those who first read the Gospel have pictured “the other,” and how is divine judgment construed in relation to them? From such considerations follows what is perhaps an even more important issue: Who are the insiders? Are they so easily identified, as is usually assumed? Are they all considered “saved” (and if so, on the basis of which criteria?), or is the threat of condemnation or punishment directed also, or even primarily, against the insider? Why?

Such questions lead to further interpretive problems related to the judgment of collectivities in the text: What is the role in this narrative of “Israel,” an entity which is allowed to identify not only the land in which the story takes place (2:20–21; 10:23), but also the people among whom the Messiah carries out his mission (2:6; 10:6), and the God whose Spirit establishes the kingdom through the Christ (15:31)? If “Israel” is, as is so often assumed, condemned and superseded as God’s people, what are the criteria on the basis of which such punishment is meted out? Or is “Israel” rather referring to the people at whose center the saved are found, a nation into which even non-Jews are invited for protection as the final judgment is fast approaching, the time when justice and divine rule will be established globally?

If this is so, what, then, is the role of the other nations in this story, whose customs and politics are deplorable (5:47; 6:7, 32; 20:25–26), whose representatives torture and crucify the Messiah (20:19), and who, as a general category, are said to hate Jesus’s followers (24:9), but among whom are also found heroes of compassion who will be welcomed into the eschatological kingdom quite apart from any consideration of their “faith” (25:31–46)? Do we find in Matthew that divisions are made not only, or even primarily, between individuals who are approved or not for life in the kingdom, but, on a basic level, between “Israel” and “the nations”? If so, we would have identified here a fundamental challenge as we aim to understand what a first-

century reading of the text may have looked like, as opposed to its later reception in (Christian) settings. If the reception of Matthew, in both church and academy, concludes that “Israel” as an ethno-religious collectivity has ceased to carry within it any theological or salvific meaning, divine judgment can, after it has dissolved the (Abrahamic) covenant which brought “Israel” into being, only be concerned with individuals, whatever their background might be.⁶ But such an approach to judgment seems to be at odds with how the text is actually formulated, from basic matters (such as the terminology used) to larger issues concerned with narrative progression.

An analysis of the notion of divine wrath and salvation thus leads us deeper into the nature of the text than the topic might at first have caused us to believe. As we aim to answer questions about judgment, we are pulled into and forced to deal with key issues concerning the fundamental theo-ritual structure of the text, which carries within it implications for the identification of the Gospel as an expression of first-century Judaism.

For the historian, the results of the present study point to a need to re-categorize the Gospel of Matthew as a text that belongs among other (diverse) Jewish texts from around the turn of the era, such as the Psalms of Solomon, the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and the Tannaitic literature, rather than placing it along interpretive trajectories leading into what is properly understood as (mainstream, i.e., non-Jewish) Christianity. Indeed, while the churches have favored Matthew more than most other texts in the New Testament, historically the basic patterns of thought and practice revealed in the Gospel follow a rather different trajectory, one which moves in a direction similar to that of later rabbinic Judaism, the mother of all

6. While scholars who argue that “Israel” or “the Jewish people” have been abolished in Matthew’s Gospel often point to individual salvation beyond any ethno-religious categories as its replacement, it is rare to see in such studies any discussion of the fact that this would also, by theo-logical necessity, imply the abolishment of the covenant of Abraham. The reason for this is simply that it is with this covenant, not the Mosaic covenant, that the Jewish people were brought into being; if the peoplehood of the Jews is abolished that implies the end of the Abrahamic covenant. One may suspect that the importance of Abraham in Christian tradition, and in Paul’s letters, has contributed to the reluctance of many interpreters to follow their argument through to its logical conclusion in this particular case.

mainstream forms of Judaism today. Even if Matthew's main character, Jesus, connects the narrative with later forms of Christianity on what, in this context, is best called a superficial level, rather than with modern mainstream forms of Judaism, it is somewhat misleading to conceptualize the study of this Gospel within the framework of 'Christian origins,' and speak about Matthew as a Christian text.⁷ After all, in antiquity, belief in Jesus as the Messiah in no way defined "Christianity" as something other than "Judaism"; the term "Christianity" was not even invented until the second century, decades after the completion of Matthew's Gospel.⁸ The study of Matthew's importance for the church belongs, arguably, to the reception history of the text, not its inception history.⁹ Matthew's inception history, which includes pre-textual traditions, the process of textualization, as well as the final form of the text,¹⁰ should, in my opinion, primarily be conceptualized within the study of Second-Temple Judaism, just as much as the study of the historical Jesus should.¹¹ Indeed, in the case of Matthew one may even go further; based on Matthew's hermeneutical techniques and fundamental focus on the interpretation of Jewish law as salvifically significant, interests which this text shares with later

7. As most scholars, and Christians, do. See, e.g., Douglas R. A. Hare, "How Jewish is the Gospel of Matthew?" *CBQ* 62 (2000), 264–77, as he aims to refute the Jewish readings of Matthew by Anthony Saldarini, Andrew Overman, and Amy-Jill Levine.
8. For discussion of this point and the so-called parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, see Anders Runesson, "Inventing Christian Identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I," in *Exploring Early Christian Identity* (edited by Bengt Holmberg; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 59–92. For the relationship between later forms of Jesus-centered Judaism and rabbinic Judaism, see also most recently Karin Hedner Zetterholm, "Alternative Visions of Judaism and Their Impact on the Formation of Rabbinic Judaism," *JJMJS* 1 (2014), 127–53 [<http://www.jjmjs.org/>].
9. The distinction is similar to what most would agree would be the case with texts included in the Hebrew Bible; the fact that (non-Jewish) Christians included this collection in their canon does not mean that the texts themselves are to be labeled "Christian" when we consider them in their original historical settings.
10. If such a form can indeed be found. As the continuously (more or less) revised versions of the Greek text still today indicate, a "final form" of the text has never existed in any absolute sense of that word. There is a point in history, however, when we can talk about Matthew as a text containing a full narrative with certain characteristics. While some scholars (legitimately) prefer to work on extant full manuscripts, which are then quite late, for access to this narrative, it is, in my view, both as legitimate and necessary (and interesting) to engage in the task of reconstructing earlier forms of the text, which have since been lost. The present study is based on such a reconstruction, which aims at restoring the earliest form of Matthew's Gospel, namely the 28th edition of Nestle–Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2nd corrected printing, 2013).
11. Again, as with the Hebrew Bible texts, few, if any, would identify Jesus as a Christian.

forms of rabbinic Judaism,¹² the study of Matthew may be best thought of as a topic in Jewish origins.¹³

From a historical point of view, the present analysis of the notion of divine wrath and salvation thus aims at revealing an ancient pattern of thought and practice, a theo-ritual perspective, that has been silenced by centuries of later reception taking place in religio-cultural and political settings that, while connected in many ways with Christianity as we know it today, have been radically different from the first-century context in which the text came into being. In other words, the book seeks to tell a story rarely told, and in this way engage contemporary historical claims about Matthew that are, seen from the perspective of the present study, tainted both by anachronism and anatopism, reading into the text assumptions from the wrong time and the wrong place.¹⁴ As with all history, the present analysis emerges from within our own world, the place where our questions

12. One may note here Ulrich Luz's brief comparison between Matthew and Yohanan Ben Zakkai (*Matthew*, 1.55–56); cf. also David C. Sim, "Introduction," in *Matthew and His Christian Contemporaries* (edited by David C. Sim and Boris Repschinski; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 1–10, here 1–3. While there are some problems in Luz's overview, not least with regard to his use of "synagogue" and "church" as two separate entities at this time, comparisons such as these are instructive, and should be further explored, as Sim also notes. As in the case of Matthew and Yohanan ben Zakkai, what is interesting is not the question of a direct (genetic) relationship between the different corpora of texts, but rather the similarities in the thematic deep structures of the texts, which originated, in all likelihood, in similar cultural contexts. On the latter point, see also Serge Ruzer, *Mapping the New Testament: Early Christian Writings as a Witness for Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
13. As Rebecca Runesson succinctly puts it on her blog, *The Angry Theologian*: "[I]f you pick up the New Testament looking for a sugar-coated fairy tale about a nice Jewish-yet-not-too-Jewish man and his faithful friends road-tripping through Galilee, you've come to the wrong place." (<https://theangrytheologian.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/diet-jesus-is-not-a-thing/>). This could certainly be said about Matthew's Gospel and the way it presents Jesus.
14. Looking at the history of interpretation over the centuries, it seems clear, as others have also noted (See, e.g., Tord Fornberg, "Matthew and his Readers: Some Examples from the History of Interpretation," *Religio* 48 [1997]: 25–39 [in Swedish], here 32; referring to Gerhard Ebeling, *Wort Gottes und Tradition* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964]: 9–27), that the reception of Matthew has, by and large, mirrored church history. I would venture to say that, in some ways, this is true also of some modern academic studies of the First Gospel, as these have often been linked to the churches not only institutionally but also through individual interpreters. Some scholars have suggested that interpretations of Matthew as a first-century Jewish text is a concession to post-holocaust sensitivities, implying or stating explicitly that such readings have negotiated the strict historical rules of academia. I would suggest, though, that the short time span of a few decades since the horrifying events of World War II, while important as a time for asking new kinds of historical questions, are dwarfed in comparison with centuries of pre-critical interpretation in church settings, the influence of which is still felt in academia today. In the end, though, such rhetoric is less meaningful; what matters are the arguments put forward and how well they can be defended using sound historical-critical tools.

are necessarily born (we cannot inhabit, by definition, any other place than the here and now). It aims, though, to the degree that it is at all possible, at visiting the past, bringing back for the reader, in as non-technical language as possible, a translation into Western academic idiom of an intellectual and ritual culture that is not our own, but which we desire to understand.¹⁵

Now, as focus is put on the theme of judgment and salvation in Matthew, there will emerge what for many who are immersed in Christian and Jewish traditions, respectively, will be unexpected and perhaps even unwelcome news. Traditional boundaries between the saved and the lost may be re-drawn; sometimes they may even dissolve, and this for reasons unfamiliar to those who are not used to reading Gospels within their ancient Jewish settings. I am not going to pretend that the academic study of texts included in the New Testament takes place in a vacuum, as if its results would be unrelated to discourses nurtured by those 2.18 billion people, one-third of the world's population, who identify themselves as Christians and the Gospels as normative narratives.¹⁶ Matthew's Gospel, as much as other texts of the New Testament, "has become a classic text, one that has transcended the historical circumstances of its original composition."¹⁷ A few words on the relationship between the academic historical study of canonical texts, truly a minority mode of reading both historically and in the world today, and contemporary normative discourses may therefore be permissible in order to clarify what the present study

15. As with all translation, the terminology used is of crucial importance, as it may carry within it anachronistic ideas that threaten to mislead both writer and reader in their attempts to understand the historical other. While some such anachronistic terms have been avoided here altogether (e.g., "Christian" and "church"), I have signaled the significance of some ancient notions through (terminological) references to discourses common in Matthew's later reception history. Examples of this type of "translation" include the use of words/concepts such as "works" (of law), or "works righteousness," as well as "grace." Using these words and phrases, I do not mean to say, however, that the theology that usually comes with them is applicable to the first century. Rather the opposite; I have aimed at drawing attention to how such themes and issues, often discussed in contemporary scholarship using this type of terminology, are in need of nuanced elaboration if we seek historical understanding.

16. The estimate of the number of Christians in the world today is taken from a report by *Pew Research Center*, published in 2011: <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

17. Daniel J. Harrington, *Meeting St. Matthew Today: Understanding the Man, His Mission, and His Message* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 99.

does and does not intend to do, and what it may achieve beyond its immediate historical concerns; transparency is a virtue, after all, though celebrated more often than acted upon.¹⁸

It is my opinion that reconstructed meanings of a text belong, ultimately, to history, not to us, even if we mold such meanings through the very language we use as we translate a message from one culture to another. What I mean by this is that we should not mistake our urge to understand the other—and historical texts and subjects are always representations of the other—with a will to domesticate the ancients, forcing them to serve us within systems of beliefs and practices that are fundamentally foreign to them, and into which they never spoke. History is, by definition, always active in both concealed and discernible ways in the present, as much as the present is the

18. As the historical study of Matthew has increasingly come to the realization that conclusions drawn about the patterns of thought and practice in the First Gospel are truly alien to later forms of mainstream Christianity, scholars concerned also with the interpretation of Matthew outside the academic scene have begun to suggest ways to deal with what they have found in the contemporary contexts in which they live. See, e.g., Wolfgang Reinbold, “Das Matthäusevangelium, die Pharisäer und die Tora,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 50:1 (2006), 51–73, here 70–73; “Für christliche Theologie heute birgt dieses Ergebnis ein Problem, das nicht verschwiegen sei. Die Vorstellung des Matthäus von der rechten christgläubigen Praxis hat wenig mit dem zu tun, was in unseren Gemeinde gang und gäbe ist. Wir verzehten nicht nur nicht nach den Regeln der Rabbinischen Weisen, wir verzehten überhaupt nicht, obwohl es in der Torah des Mose ausdrücklich angeordnet wird. Unsere Kirche ist in einer Weise eine Kirche der Heiden geworden, die sich Matthäus vermutlich kaum hätte vorstellen können. Hätte er nur anderthalb Jahrhunderte später gelebt, wäre er Gefahr gelaufen, als Häretiker bezeichnet zu Verden” (71). See also Harrington, *Meeting St. Matthew Today*, esp. chs. 8 and 9, entitled “A Jewish Book” and “A Christian Gospel,” respectively. As Harrington notes, “[w]e can be enlightened by reading Matthew’s Gospel as a historical document of late first-century Judaism and Early Jewish Christianity. But Christian believers cannot simply leave it in the past” (99). This type of discussion goes beyond more common attempts at making the Gospel accessible to modern readers, such as, e.g., Mark Allan Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Powell structures his texts using five key words—mission, worship, teaching, stewardship, and social justice—all of which require serious hermeneutical work to be applicable outside the world of the text in modern non-Jewish settings. Cf., from a different perspective, Lloyd Gaston, “The Messiah of Israel as Teacher of the Gentiles,” *Interpretation* 29:1 (1975), 24–40, who calls on redaction criticism for hermeneutical assistance: “The redaction of the Gospel is not itself kerygma but it shows us how the kerygma can be transmitted and applied” (40). See also the recent two-volume commentary edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis, and E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). These volumes approach the interpretive task by structuring the commentary in four distinct parts for every passage: theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical. In the end, the very definition of “exegesis” can be stated to be, according to the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, “the process of careful analytical study of biblical passages undertaken to produce useful interpretations of those passages” (Douglas Stuart, “Exegesis,” *ABD*, vol. 2, 682–88, here 682; my emphasis). What counts as “useful” is, obviously, dependent on the socio-academic or religio-political location of the reader, regardless of his or her personal religious or non-religious convictions.

matrix within which we communicate and thus form the past. But the way the present is imagined and continuously reinvented and acted upon is not to be constrained by images of the past, just as the present moments of the past never were snapshots of their own histories; the past, as we reconstruct it, must not be made prisoner of and slave to the present and vice versa.

History, academically defined, is, then, best understood as a conversation between the past and the present. As such, the first-century voice of Matthew's Gospel can never be more than one voice in contemporary religious, theological, and scholarly conversations. Original meanings, as much as we can talk about such, are never the only meanings carried by a text, since meaning is triggered in the contextually defined space between text and reader, but they constitute a contribution, nevertheless, to modern reflection on the past in relation to contemporary issues, political, theological, or otherwise. In other words, a historical reconstruction of a religious text cannot, in my opinion, be understood as religiously authoritative in and of itself, just as reconstructions of the historical Jesus can never be normative from a Christian perspective; after all, that which is created by human hands must not be worshiped, lest roles are reversed and humans emerge as rulers of the universe.¹⁹

Neither the worshipper nor the theologian lives by history alone. The Christian may relate to the divine as he or she would engage someone with whom they live; there is a dependency between the parties, based on daily contact in the here and now. The historical interactions of the other person in such a relationship are one part of the link that nurtures both, but it cannot define exhaustively the bond between them, since God is the God not of the dead, but of the living.²⁰ In a corresponding way, the theologian needs his or her thinking to be nurtured by insights from a wider spectrum of human experience than can be provided by the historian.²¹ The present reconstruction of

19. Cf. Exod 20:4–6; 32:23; Deut 9:12. On the historical Jesus as non-normative, cf. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Re-Thinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday) 197: “[T]he Jesus of history is not and cannot be the object of Christian faith.”

20. Matt 22:32.

a specific first-century understanding of divine judgment does not aim, therefore, to provide ready-made normative material to be applied in contemporary theology; it simply attempts to translate a specific aspect of the theo-ritual pattern of an ancient text into modern academic idiom. Indeed, it has been important for this entire investigation precisely to disregard any normative reception of Matthew in cultures foreign to the context in which the traditions behind the text, as well as the text itself, were born.

Having said this, as noted in the introductory paragraphs above, the very impulse to write the book came from personal experiences of and theological reflection on the flagrant injustices indisputably inherent in the current “world order.” The turning to biblical, and more specifically New Testament texts for illumination and theological elaboration of the basic insights that experience and preliminary contemplation had provided is, in and of itself, a move that reveals aspects of the ethos within which the initial steps of the analysis were undertaken. While ultimately, the historical conclusions of the study were, to me, unanticipated as I launched the first stages in this investigation many years ago, the end result may nevertheless speak to some issues that may be of relevance to people for whom Matthew’s Gospel or the New Testament texts more generally carry significance in their personal and/or communal projects of making (religio-ethical) sense of human (co-)existence.

First, I think it wise to remind oneself that a theological theme such as that of divine judgment may be a dangerous tool with which ideologies of death, destruction, and persecution may be forged, as surely has been done in all too many religio-politically charged settings throughout history and across continents. For some, this fact alone would lead to the hermeneutical verdict that all such notions of judgment are to be viewed as (embarrassing) remains from an unenlightened dark past of human existence that should be relegated

21. I have suggested a way to conceptualize the process of constructing theology in Anders Runesson, *O That You Would Tear Open the Heavens and Come Down! On the Historical Jesus, Jonas Gardell, and the Breath of God* (Örebro and Skellefteå: Libris and Artos, 2011 [in Swedish]) 131–65; see esp. 150–58 and the charts there.

to whatever museums would be interested in displaying how far human progress has reached since these texts were authored. I believe that this would be a theological mistake, however. The notion of divine judgment is so intertwined with Matthew's Gospel that any attempt at untangling it from the fabric of the text would tear apart the entire narrative and leave us only unintelligible disjointed and incoherent fragments of lettering with little interpretive value. Further, billions of people, both within and outside Christian communities, have been and are still, for good and for bad, influenced or affected in one way or another by interpretations of Matthew's notion of judgment. It would mean little to them, in the bigger scheme of things, to attempt to excise this all-pervasive theme from the text. Better, it seems to me, in terms of identifying the sense-making and problem-solving power of the study of the New Testament in the life of real people (rather than in abstract intellectual conversation rooms) would be to work on hermeneutical strategies that may be applied to the canonical texts in general, and then the judgment theme in particular. As Elna Mouton writes:

We have seen that the authority of the sacred texts we study lies in their referential power, in their ability to point beyond themselves to an ultimate reality which they could only describe in limited and provisional ways. Their authority for subsequent readers *likewise* resides in the continuing encounter with the God mediated and stimulated by them. Ethically responsible interpretation of these texts therefore calls for a continuous wrestling, for imaginative, Spirit-filled, *faith*-full and rigorously critical reflection on the radically active presence and will of God in ever changing times and circumstances.²²

She suggests as a way forward a hermeneutic and theology of listening:

A hermeneutic of listening will pay attention to all the voices represented in the epicentre of New Testament interpretation, refusing mentally to block out the voices that have not been considered important in the past, including the silenced voices within the biblical texts themselves. "Such openness does not eliminate a hermeneutics of suspicion and elevation,

22. Elna Mouton, *The Pathos of New Testament Studies: Of What Use Are We to the Church?* (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2005), 17.

but it does eliminate a hermeneutic of arrogance and of accusation and a presumption that prejudices and presumes the ancient world should look like the modern or that we already have the truth. Humility is part of a hermeneutics of hearing; it seeks to know rather than profess to know.”²³

A basic insight that may be gained from such radical listening to voices silenced is that the very otherness which is restored to the Gospel through historical study is from a theological perspective sacred, as it is part of canonized scripture. For what John P. Meier writes about Jesus is true also of Matthew: “The more we appreciate what Jesus meant in his own time and place, the more ‘alien’ he will seem to us.”²⁴ Regardless of how we choose to hermeneutically interact with this “other,” theological use of historical reconstructions should remind us on a fundamental level that respect for the sacred means respect for the other. Indeed, any interpretive practices that mold the (historical) other in our own image are perhaps best described as an act of hubris in which we attempt to appropriate divine prerogatives.²⁵

Second, accepting the basic approach above would mean that readers of Matthew as a normative text should consider theologically the fact that this narrative endorses a life as a follower of Jesus *within* Judaism, with strict law observance in specific Second-Temple period format as its main focus. Again, this does not mean that mainstream Christianity today, which has moved in other directions, should adopt a Matthean way of life. However, if history is to be part of theology at all,²⁶ it does provide a hermeneutical opportunity for theological

23. Mouton, *Pathos*, 18. The quote within the quote is taken from Klyne Snodgrass, “Reading to Hear: A Hermeneutics of Hearing,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002), 1–32, here 28.

24. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.200. Albert Schweitzer wrote in a similar vein: “There is a deep significance in the fact that whenever we hear the sayings of Jesus we have to enter a realm of thought which is not ours” (*Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography. Postscript 1932-1949* by Everett Skillings [translated by C.T. Campion; New York: Mentor Books, 1953], 47–48). Cf. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 334: “I am a liberal, modern, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by low christology and the social gospel. I am proud of the things that that religious tradition stands for. I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it, or that he died for the sake of its principles.”

25. Gen 1:27; 5:1–2. Considering human history and sacred scripture in tandem, diversity seems inscribed in the nature of the divine.

26. This, of course, has been part of the protestant project from its very beginnings, and it is also the official Catholic approach to the study of the Bible; see, e.g., *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993 (as published in *Origins*, January 6, 1994): “[The Bible’s] proper understanding not only admits the

efforts to reconsider the concept of “heretic,” as well as the exclusion mechanisms and forms of violence that have accompanied it since the time of the church fathers. Just as the canon includes diverse, even contradictory, approaches to Jewish law and religio-ethnic identities, a Christianity that professes to embrace the canon as normative should be able to move beyond attempts at harmonization that ultimately erode the richness of the texts, as well as what, from this perspective, may arguably be understood as God’s intentions with them. Such theological procedures, however, require of us the courage to de-center ourselves and our hierarchies, renegotiating our position as the ultimate defenders of the faith in favor of a willingness to share responsibility for truth with those who are not like us. Just as the canon does.

Third, if the story of Jesus is a story about love, as Christianity often insists, then it is also, in Matthew, a story about passionate anger. This pattern of wrath runs through the narrative from beginning to end, and results in a focus on divine judgment. From a theological point of view, it might be of some interest to note the direction of this anger, since its target, if de-individualized, may be understood as transcending the ethno-religiously and culturally specific, whereas the criteria of judgment, based on strict observance of Jewish law, are more firmly rooted in context. Time and again, Matthew’s Jesus defines his purpose as not only saving his people (1:21), but more specifically as tending to the crowds, the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the people abused by their leaders (4:23; 9:36; 10:6; 15:24). Divine wrath is, then, primarily unleashed in this story against people embodying various forms of authority in the communities within which we also find the crowds, the victims of what is presented as maladministration (23:1–3); against policy-makers and administrators with both indirect and direct religio-political power, these who are accused of misleading the people (15:14; 23:15–22), judging the innocents (12:7), and even

use of this [historical-critical] method but actually requires it.” Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 12. Again, this, of course, does not mean that history is, can, or should be the only component as theology is formed.

plotting to eliminate the one whom God had sent to set things right for the oppressed (16:21; 21:38, 45–46; 26:3–5).

Due to this mismanagement of religious and political affairs by characters identified as leaders, confusion is caused among the people, which leads to suffering for all as the land comes under foreign powers (and their gods). As a consequence, the temple, the place where heaven and earth meet, becomes defiled, later to be destroyed. If there is anything that seems theologically applicable in this classic text, which transcends its original setting, it would seem to have to do with a critique of leadership as well as with the divine will to save the people through a process of judgment. From a canonical perspective, this aligns Matthew's message with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and forms a bridge between the initial theological questions that triggered this study and the historical analysis undertaken to gain insight into the fundamental problem of oppression as a plight of human societies that transcends the historically particular.

Matthew's story aims ultimately to provide a solution to this problem, through a narrative written for the defeated, those who lack access to positions of power. It is not a text for those in control, for those who run daily business, wherever they may be in society. In God's judgment, the author claims, apparently fixed realities will be reversed, so that the first will be last, and the last will be first (19:30). While such statements surely refer to the final verdict that immediately precedes the new Spirit-infused world order called the kingdom of heaven, things will change already in the here and now as soon as people, regardless of their status, start seeking the righteousness that includes but also reaches beyond the mundane (6:33; 25:34–40). Like the covenant with Abraham, then, and in ways Matthew could not possibly have foreseen, the First Gospel cuts through the boundaries of its own narrative and points beyond itself as salvation, like a seed hidden within the wrath of God, is unleashed and reaches beyond the people of God. The forms this process has taken and will take as it comes to fruition are as contextually circumscribed as Matthew's Gospel itself; there is no theological—or historical—

reason to pretend otherwise. If anything, this may indicate to historian and theologian alike the value of studying each other's work.

* * *

No book is an island; all text is a part of the main, a piece of the continent, made to stand by itself only superficially through the illusion created by the covers of the artifact. Below the surface, signaled only partially by footnotes and other allusions to works consulted and discussions had, the present study is, as much as any, indebted to untold discourses and encounters nurturing its arguments and conclusions. A note, thus, on the context of the book is in order, beginning with my discussion partners as found in published form.

I have aimed at avoiding intellectual ageism, attempting to draw on and integrate insights regardless of whether they were put in writing last year or last century. Spending time, I find, with works whose copyright has long since vanished at least partially circumvents the wheel-inventing industry, destabilizes paradigms of unidimensional interpretive evolution, and inspires humility. To some degree, I have also pursued interaction with research in languages which are less commonly quoted in English scholarship, such as the Scandinavian languages. This reflects, of course, the context of my own academic socialization in Sweden, but I am hoping, too, in this way to widen the conversation and point to shared concerns and connections between continents.

Considering the time during which the research presented in this book has been in the making, it is, with regard to non-published formal and informal conversations, impossible to mention all individuals who have, in different ways, contributed to its argument. Still, aware that any list would necessarily be incomplete, I would be remiss not to mention some of the colleagues and friends that, in special ways, have generously shared with me their time and expertise. I have learned from all, perhaps most from those with whom I disagree.

From Lund University and the early phases of the work I am especially grateful to Birger Olsson, whose encouragement and persistent emphasis on the importance of methodology, sharp eye for

textual detail, and interpretive courage have been and continue to be an inspiration. In many ways, Birger embodies the classic academic ideal, in which intellectual curiosity, hermeneutical sensitivity, and simply a wide-ranging knowledge of all things philological, historical, and theological are brought together, creating a space where wisdom is nurtured. Thank you, Birger.

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From this period in the making of the book, I would also like to

mention the late Krister Stendahl, who unexpectedly called me after I had defended my licentiate in 1997 to discuss my interpretation of Matthew and encouraged me to continue on the path I had taken. Subsequently, our conversations extended into other fields as well, and I am grateful to him for generously sharing his insights with a junior scholar. I regret that he never got to see how this particular (reconstructed) story ended, and that we will not be able to continue discussions of the school of Matthew in light of this story and recent developments in synagogue and association studies.

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I arrived at the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oslo in July 2015 just in time to teach a course on Matthew while finalizing the last revisions and conclusions before submitting the manuscript. I am grateful for the very warm welcome I have received from colleagues, students, and administrators here, and I look forward to continuing exploring not only Matthew but Christian and Jewish origins more

widely and from a variety of perspectives in this dynamic research and teaching setting.

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Last but not least my greatest appreciation goes to my wife Anna

and to our children Rebecca, Noah, and Rachel, who were all born subsequent to the launch of this research project and have literally spent all their lives with this mysterious fourth sibling “Matthew.” Ironically—or not—all four will have flown the nest by September 2016. I am glad, though, that it took me so long to finish the book, since this has allowed me to benefit from their insights as we have discussed difficult Matthean passages and exegeted life together doing so. The book is dedicated to my beloved Anna, who was there from the beginning and is still here. As it happens, her commentary on the Gospel of Mark will be published synchronously with the present study.²⁷ I have greatly appreciated and learnt from our many discussions of these two earliest portraits of Jesus. My gratefulness, though, goes deeper than theological and historical deliberations, even as they grow from reading texts that lead beyond themselves. Indeed, Anna, *μετὰ τὸν θεὸν ἡ σωτηρία μου εἶ σύ.*

While I hope the reader will find on the pages to follow analyses that constructively challenge previous scholarship, and perhaps even be convinced by some of the arguments made, I am very much aware of the difficulties involved in a historical endeavor like the present. The problem, I believe, in the reconstruction of a world of ideas and practices that has long been lost lies as much in our own entanglement with our personal and other histories and concerns, conscious and/or subconscious, as it does in complications in the text itself. In the end, after more than two decades of reflection on this Matthean theme, it is clearer to me than ever that “I must ask for my writing the indulgence of the kindly, since it is beyond my capacity to promise a complete and perfect work.”²⁸

Oslo, St. Lucia’s Day, 2015

27. Anna Runesson, *The Kingdom of God has Come Near! The Gospel of Mark* (Örebro: Libris, 2016 [in Swedish]).

28. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.3.