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Reading Matthew by the Dead Sea: Matthew 8:5–13 in Light of P. Yadin 11

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The archive of the Judean woman Babatha, with its 35 legal papyri in Aramaic and Greek (P. Yadin 1–35), which was hidden by her in a cave on the western side of the Dead Sea in 135 CE and rediscovered in 1961, offers unique insights into the social world of the region from 94–132 CE. This is because legal documents reflect significant opportunities and challenges in people's lives and frequently bring to the surface underlying social issues and pressures. Babatha's documents, which reflect lively interactions between Judeans, Nabateans and Romans across a wide range of situations, do precisely this. They allow us better to understand the context in which New Testament texts appeared and how they made sense to their original audiences. Matthew's Gospel, with its strong interest in Judean/non-Judean relationships, is particularly susceptible to such treatment. In this article, P. Yadin 11, a remarkable document in Greek from 124 CE recording a loan of 60 *denarii* from a Roman centurion stationed at En-gedi to Babatha's second husband, is analysed for what it reveals about likely understandings of centurions in that setting. The findings of this investigation are then applied to Matthew 8:5–13 in the interests of a socially realistic interpretation.

Reading Matthew by the Dead Sea

In 2009 Peter Oakes published an innovative book entitled *Reading Romans in Pompeii* that utilises an in-depth examination of the archaeological evidence for certain residences and their probable inhabitants in that city as a context for assessing the original meaning of Paul's letter, on the scenario that it had reached the city before its destruction by Vesuvius in August of 79 CE. The value of the exercise, which is really a kind of thought experiment, does not depend on whether Romans was ever read in Pompeii. For that circumstance is irrelevant to the light this process sheds on the original meaning of Paul's letter; by considering what message it may have conveyed to people in a context reasonably close in time and space to its intended addressees.

In this article I aim to adopt this *modus operandi*, admittedly on a much narrower front, in relation to the pericope on the centurion from Capernaum in Matthew 8:5–13. I will do so not by use of archaeological findings but through an analysis of a legal document written in Greek on papyrus that forms one of 35 such documents in Aramaic and Greek in the celebrated archive of Babatha. This archive was found by an Israeli team in 1961 in a cave in a wadi west of the Dead Sea, exactly where Babatha had carefully hidden it before she was killed or captured by the Romans in 135 CE (Yadin 1963:21). The earliest of these documents date to 94 CE, about the time when Matthew may have first appeared, and the latest to 132 CE. They concern people and events in the southern Dead Sea area, mainly in two towns: Maoza in Nabatea and En-gedi in Judea.¹

These documents are witness to a lively interaction between Judeans, Nabateans and Romans, with the kingdom of Nabatea becoming a Roman province in 106 CE (Bowersock 1983; Freeman 1996). They thus afford an appropriate context in which to read Matthew, given that where that Gospel stands in regard to ethnic relationships and tensions between Judeans and non-Judeans remains a central issue in its interpretation (cf. Bornkamm 1971; Esler 2013; Foster 2004; Luomanen 1998; Meier 1976; Stanton 1985, 1992; Overman 1990; Saldarini 1994; Sim 1998, 2011). My own particular view of the matter (the foundation for which is beyond the scope of this article but of which I will say a little more in what follows) is that Matthew's Gospel was written for a group, or similar groups, of Christ-followers who were composed predominantly of Judeans but who had admitted to their communities non-Judean members and were engaging in the mixed-table fellowship of the one loaf and the one cup of the Lord's Supper with them.²

1. For the Greek documents from the Babatha archive, see Lewis, Yadin and Greenfield (1989) and for the Aramaic ones, see Yadin *et al.* (2002). The Babatha documents are referred to as 'P. (sc. Papyri) Yadin 1–35.

2. For my first published expression of this view, see Esler (2013).



This article is my first published output in what will be a larger exercise of interpreting Matthew against a late first and early 2nd century CE Palestinian context illuminated by the corpus of the Dead Sea legal papyri. They consist of the 35 legal documents in the Babatha archive and the roughly similar number of such documents that are extant from other discoveries in the Dead Sea region in the second half of the 20th century.³

There is a particular reason why legal documents reveal social contexts. This is that people instruct lawyers (and this is what the scribes here were, to my ex-lawyer's eye very capable ones in fact, not just 'professional writers')⁴ to help them when they are facing an important opportunity or have encountered a major problem in their lives. These situations illuminate fundamental ways in which the society in question operates, culturally and economically, and also expose underlying pressures and tensions that surface in contested legal proceedings. These factors mean that legal documents allow us a very unusual insight into a particular social context. Nearly 50 years ago Bezalel Porten brilliantly brought to life the Judean community in Elephantine in the 5th century BCE by investigating their extant legal documents (Porten 1968). None of this is to downplay the importance of these documents for studies of ancient law (cf. Katsoff & Schaps 2005; Oudshoorn 2007).

In this article I will conduct a thought experiment of imagining that shortly after its publication the Matthean Gospel reached one of the towns around the southern shores of the Dead Sea peopled by a mixture of Judeans and Nabateans, and some Romans, and of considering how such an audience would have understood one particular Matthean pericope (the story of the centurion of Capernaum in 8:5–13) against one piece of evidence of that context: P. Yadin 11. Let us now consider that document.

P. Yadin 11, centurions and the local community

P. Yadin 11 is a document in Greek that records a loan in the sum of 60 *denarii* of Tyrian silver executed in En-gedi on 06 May 124 CE (Lewis, Yadin & Greenfield 1989:41–46). The debtor was a Judean, Judah son of Elazar Kthousion, of En-gedi, who around this time became Babatha's second husband. The loan was secured by a hypothec over a courtyard belonging to the debtor's father but which was under his control. The real surprise in the document is the identity of the lender: Magonius Valens, centurion of *Cohors I Miliaria Thracum*, an auxiliary unit in the Roman army then having had its headquarters in Hebron (Speidel 1979). Given that, like other cohorts, *Cohors I Miliaria Thracum* likely comprised one thousand men, En-gedi was thus an outpost probably manned by one or more centurion-led units of about 80 men each (Speidel 1979; cf. Lewis *et al.* 1989:44). I say

'probably' because some uncertainty now attends this view. The current scholarly position that there was an outpost of this *Cohors* at En-gedi depends on the presence of the word *praesidium* (a Greek form of *praesidium*) in lines 6 and 19 and the word 'tents' in lines 5 and 18. The existence of a Roman bath-house discovered in excavations at En-gedi and dated between the first and second Judean revolts has also formed part of the evidence for a Roman military outpost. Gwyn Davies and Jodi Magness have recently suggested (2013), however, that Magonius Valens may not have lived there or, if he did, may have been merely exercising supervisory functions in relation to En-gedi given its status as an imperial estate (Cotton 2001:139–146). They argue that a bath-house built by Roman engineers does not necessitate a Roman garrison, that *praesidium* could have a lesser role as a location for supervisory functions and that tents need not be military tents. The major problem with this argument is that the reference to *praesidium* in relation to tents in the description of the abutters to the courtyard subjected to the hypothec in the loan agreement does indeed suggest a Roman military encampment: the tents are very close to the *praesidium* and they must have been in that location for a reasonable period to justify including them in the boundary descriptions. Yet even if Davies and Magness were correct in their view, it would not affect the argument in this essay. We would still have Magonius Valens living in En-gedi or fairly nearby, in Hebron, about 12 miles away. But by April 128 CE the outpost, assuming its presence there as just argued, had left En-gedi, as we know from P. Yadin 19 and 20 that the sites that had been occupied by the soldiers had other uses (Cotton 1996:198; Isaac 1998:160; cf. Lewis *et al.* 1989:83, 90).⁵ Seeing as Magonius does not possess the *tria nomina* he was not a Roman citizen, but perhaps a Thracian.

The only other loan from the Dead Sea involving a soldier (almost certainly from *Legio X Fretensis* when it was based in the Murabba'at area) and a civilian that has survived is P. Mur 114. The editors suggest this document is to be dated to 171 CE. Whilst it is not stated in the papyrus (given its fragmentary state) who has lent to whom, most probably the soldier was the lender given that the time fixed for repayment was expressed in terms of the Roman calendar; the first day of the calends of September (Benoit *et al.* 1961:240–243). The amount borrowed was equivalent to 50 drachmas/*denarii* (Benoit *et al.* 1961:242).

In P. Yadin 11 Judah acknowledged that he had received the 60 *denarii* from Magonius and that he would repay the money on the forthcoming calends of January with interest (τόκος) at the rate of 1% per month, which interest he would deliver to Magonius monthly (most probably in the Roman camp). In the event of his failure to repay the amount owing on the specified date, Magonius would have the right to seize and sell the hypothecated property.

3. For the other two main collections of the Dead Sea legal papyri, see Benoit, Milik and Vaux (1961), which are referred to as 'P. Mur', and Cotton and Yardeni (1997), which are referred to as 'P. Hev/Se'.

4. For the repeated description of scribes as 'professional writers', see Schams (1998).

5. Lewis *et al.* (1989:83) notes that in P. Yadin 19 (of 16 April 128) what had been described as a military camp in P. Yadin 11 is now an empty lot (ἀνέλιχρον; line 18). In P. Yadin 20 (of 19 June 130) this empty lot has become a market (line 33; Lewis *et al.* 1989:90).



The document was witnessed first by Gaius Julius Procles, no doubt a Roman soldier and colleague of Magonius. He was also a Roman citizen as it was illegal for non-citizens to use the *tria nomina* (Alston 1999:179). The possession of such a name was a statement of one's ethnic identity (Alston 1999:180). The scribe was a man called Justinus (Lewis *et al.* 1989:46, note on line 30). Seeing as the papyrus shows that was the full extent of his name (with no *tria nomina* and no patronymic), the man was not a Roman citizen, although Justinus is a Roman name. It is a derived form of the Latin name Justus. Tal Ilan (2002:333) records a number of ancient Judeans who bore the name Justus, but none with the name of Justinus.⁶ Probably he was a slave or a freedman of Magonius who lived in the Roman camp. If the centurion in Matthew 8:9 owned a slave, why not Magonius? Six other people witnessed after Gaius, all of whom signed in Greek:

- Kallaios son of John
- Onesimus son of Ian ...
- John son of ...os
- Joseph son of Sai.os
- Simon son of Simon
- Theodore son of M...ios.

Of these witnesses, we know that Kallaios son of John was a Judean by virtue of the patronymic, given the huge popularity of John as a name amongst Judeans (Ilan 2002:134–143, 290). John (Ἰωάννης, a form of Yohanan), Joseph and Simon were Judeans, but also Theodore, given that this was a name often used by Judeans (Ilan 2002:286–287). Tal Ilan (2002:312) regards Onesimus as a Judean and this is probable given his presence in this group, although there is nothing about his name that necessitates this. In the result, a loan from a Roman centurion to a Judean borrower is witnessed by one Roman soldier/citizen and five Judeans.

There is one particular feature of the papyrus that requires comment. In line three the amount of the loan was first written as 'forty *denarii*'. A line was then ruled through this word and the word for 'sixty' was inserted interlinearly above. The editor, Naphtali Lewis (1989), comments on this alteration as follows:

This prompts the suspicion that in addition to the normal rate of interest, which is specified in lines 6–7=20–22, there is concealed here a usurious squeeze exerted upon the borrower: he was compelled to sign the note for sixty denarii but actually received only forty denarii in hand. If Judah did indeed submit to such extortion, his need must have been desperate indeed. (p. 41)

Benjamin Isaac bends to Lewis's view when he states that the loan was being advanced 'possibly at a usurious rate of interest' (Isaac 1998:160). Jacobine Oudshoorn (2007:160) also agrees with Lewis on this point. Whilst I will subject this suggestion to critical scrutiny in what follows, the loan itself and the possibility of its featuring a usurious rate of interest raise the spectre of a Roman centurion with considerable, possibly even extortionate power over a local Judean. If such behaviour was indeed typical of such a person, this circumstance would inevitably bear upon how an early

audience of the Matthean Gospel in the Dead Sea region would have understood Jesus' interaction with the centurion in 8:5–13.

Some support for the suspicion that Lewis expresses can be found in the way that certain literary texts of the imperial period present Roman soldiers as bullies (cf. Alston 1995:53). In Apuleius's novel, *Metamorphoses* (9.39), a soldier assaults a peasant farmer, beats him with a stick and seizes his ass. Rather unwisely, the peasant then attacks the soldier. He knocks him unconscious and escapes with his ass. But the peasant soon experiences the full weight of Roman power in turn. *Satire XVI* of Juvenal (55/60–127 CE) begins with a lengthy complaint about how difficult it is to gain redress following an assault by a soldier. At the end of this passage (lines 15–18) reference is made to the fact that the old law of the military camp and the rule of Camillus still held good that forbade a soldier from attending court outside the camp, and at a distance from the standards. This rule was formalised by Hadrian (emperor 117–138 CE).⁷ Campbell has written of 'the widespread oppression of civilians by soldiers' that 'was a symptom of the general inability of emperors to control any of their servants' (Campbell 1984:253). Similarly, Alston (1995) notes a widespread view in which:

The soldiers are seen as being beyond the normal workings of the law, a privileged group, protected by the emperor and their own political power. The swaggering, bullying soldier could do what he liked, confident that behind his actions was the power of the emperor. (p. 53)

Yet Alston (1995:54) asks whether such a view can be maintained when one moves from literary texts to examples of how soldiers, including centurions, actually behaved in local communities, with particular reference to Egypt and its exceptional evidence from the papyri.

A familiarity with centurions such as this influences interpretation in two particular respects: firstly, it leads one to ask whether the Dead Sea audience would have regarded the centurion who approached Jesus in Capernaum as having too benign a disposition to be realistic, both in his solicitous concern for his servant and in his humility in relation to Jesus. Secondly, it can also be asked whether Jesus' showing mercy to a non-Judean of this calibre minimised the difficulties of the inclusion of non-Judeans in the community. For, to reach some view of the character of Jesus' healing the centurion's servant, a relevant consideration is how centurions were regarded in the local context. Were they actually regarded as extortionate bullies, the local manifestation of an oppressive imperial power that would make Jesus' response here all the more extraordinary, or were they something else, something more positively regarded, which would not entirely undermine what Jesus does but would certainly lessen its shock value and suggest that forming a trans-ethnic community (of Judeans and non-Judeans) might not be as difficult as it would be on the former view.

7. *Testes non temere evocandi sunt per longum iter et multo minus milites avocandi sunt a signis vel muneribus perhibendi testimonii causa, idque divinus Hadrianus rescipit* (Digest 22.5.3.6).

6. Justin Martyr bore the same in the 2nd century CE.



The broad issue here is the impact of the Roman Empire on local life. In recent years a considerable amount of scholarship (far too much in my view!) has been devoted to the examination of the extent to which the status and claims of ancient empires, especially the Seleucid, Ptolemaic and Roman empires, are subverted in Judean and Christ-movement literature. This scholarship is rarely accompanied by any serious attempt to model what is meant by 'empire' in this context (a problem apparent in Horsley 2010 and Portier-Young 2011). Whereas classicists in the past had been enthusiastic to praise the positive aspects of the Roman Empire, seeing 'Romanisation' as a civilising force across the Mediterranean, and some still take this line, we have seen more recently a strong insistence on the negative aspects of empire. David Mattingly represents a powerful voice in this regard and his recent monograph on the subject not only offers an important theoretical discussion of 'empire,' especially within the framework of postcolonial studies, but also provides a series of detailed examples of the pernicious effects of empire in particular areas (Mattingly 2011:3–42). He takes the view that there 'is still too much of a tendency in writing on the Roman Empire to ignore the sinister side of its power and to assume that the best motivations lay behind its operation' (Mattingly 2011:20).

Mattingly (2011:27) rightly suggests that we need to pay more attention to the subject peoples of the empire, to their lives and experiences, and in this area postcolonial studies can be of great assistance, as they valorise giving the subaltern a voice.⁸ It is unfortunate, therefore, that Mattingly himself has overlooked a particularly rich source of information on this subject, in the form of the papyri from Egypt that relate to interactions between the population and the government and Roman army. The latter issue has received close attention from Richard Alston (1995, 1999), although his research is not cited by Mattingly, even though it provides counter evidence to his position. Alston brings into the discussion a number of late 1st and 2nd century CE archives from the Fayum in Egypt, the village of Karanis in particular and elsewhere, including Oxyrhynchus (Alston 1995, 1999: *passim*). Some of the data relied on by Alston concern centurions and this evidence is relevant to P. Yadin 11 because of the similar way the Roman army was administered across the empire. Absent unusual circumstances, it is likely that the centurions in Egypt had a role and activities similar to those who served in Nabatea and Judaea at roughly the same period.

Because of the high degree of independence of local governments within the framework of the Roman imperial government, Alston understands the empire as 'a series of (sometimes overlapping) sub-polities, loosely bound together by the imperial polity.' Yet the interaction between imperial polity and local sub-polities was complex, because 'neither their structure nor their boundaries were fixed' (Alston 1999:177). The relationship between the two was dynamic and the ways in which local societies and individuals

responded within those societies were complex and varied. He argues that 'soldiers tended to integrate into their local sub-polities' (Alston 1999:178). This overall picture is borne out for Egypt by his detailed analysis of the papyri. There is no reason to assume it was different in other places where the evidence does not survive.

Roman soldiers on service were subject to three modifications of the usual legal position that need mentioning here, especially as the second and third are directly relevant to the centurion in P. Yadin 11: they were not allowed to contract marriages with local women (see Phang 2001 on Roman soldiers and marriage); they were not able to hold land in the province in which they were serving and the *patria potestas* of their father over them was restricted. The expression 'to hold land' comes from Alston (1995:60). When one looks at the Latin sources he cites, however, the word used is *comparare*, a word meaning 'to procure what one does not yet possess ... get, purchase, obtain' (Lewis & Short 1879:387):

Digest 49 16.9: MARCIANUS libro tertio institutum Milites prohibentur praedia comparare in his provinciis, in quibus militant.

Digest 49 16.13: Milites agrum comparare prohibentur in ea provincia, in qua bellica opera peragunt, scilicet ne studio culturae militia sua avocentur, et ideo domum comparare non prohibentur. Sed agros in alia provincia comparare possunt.

Moreover, rather than 'land', it would be more accurate to say 'farms' (*praedia*) and 'fields' (*agri*); real estate in villages or towns does not fall under the ban.

The interference with the *patria potestas* of the father over a soldier was very significant. The usual rule was that the property of a son whose father was still alive technically belonged to the father. This meant that the son could not accumulate property, bequeath it or dispose of it in any way (Alston 1995:57). Restriction of his father's *patria potestas*, however, meant that during the course of his years of service a soldier was able to accumulate property, called his *peculium castrense*, which he was free to do with as he wished. The annual pay for a Roman legionary in the ranks during this period was 300 *denarii* and although much of this was spent on food and clothing, most legionaries still managed to save and to build up their *peculium* (Alston 1995:102). A 2nd century CE text lists the deposits (sc. in their *peculium castrense*) of members of an auxiliary unit in Egypt. One cavalryman had 1459 *denarii* on deposit. The average deposit was perhaps as high as 622 *denarii* (approx. equal to 2 years' pay) (Alston 1995:105). Given, as we will see in what follows, that a centurion was paid several times the salary of an ordinary soldier, his *peculium* was potentially far larger.

Alston summons evidence to show that with the aid of, or in spite of, their unique legal position Roman soldiers in the Fayum behaved like other members of society, 'marrying, setting up families, inheriting property and developing strong ties to their local communities' (Alston 1995:67). Many of them lived on in the area in which they had served after

8. On this matter Mattingly (2011:27) cites the work of Spivak (1995) and Chakrabarty (2000) as examples.



retirement. The position of centurions is somewhat different in this respect, given that they tended to be rotated around various postings every few years. Alston suggests that we need to temper the literary picture of the soldier-bully in Juvenal's *Satire XVI* and Apuleius with the evidence of the integration of Roman soldiers into local communities and also with other evidence that shows that imperial authorities often took action against soldiers who had behaved oppressively (Alston 1995:67).

A particular aspect of the experience of centurions attested in the Egyptian papyri, but probably widespread in the empire, requires consideration before we return to P. Yadin 11. This is the circumstance that they were petitioned for assistance by local civilians who were experiencing a wide range of problems. In 198 CE, for example, a certain Gemellus, also known as Horion, a blind man who, with his mother, had been attacked in his house by one Kastor, a local tax collector's assistant, who had also damaged the house, petitioned the prefect to have the centurion stationed in his nome send Kastor to him for examination (P. Mich. Inv. 2979). Alston (1995) comments on this case as follows:

The intervention of the centurion to deal with such a minor local difficulty comes as something of a surprise. There was no apparent military interest at stake nor any apparent prior military involvement. We would have expected the matter to be referred to civilian administrators, the *strategos* or perhaps the *epistrategos*, but not a centurion. The involvement of a centurion at this level of Egyptian society suggests an intimate involvement of the Roman military in the everyday administration and life of the province and points to Roman military power being a very real presence in the villages of the *chora*. (pp. 86–87)

There are many such petitions to centurions extant and although we do not know for sure if they acted on them, it is unlikely that people would have continued to make them if they were not acted upon. Alston lists 40 petitions to centurions in the period 20 BCE – 255 CE (and two more undated ones), plus eight petitions to decurions in the same period (and one more undated) (Alston 1995:88–89). About half of the cases where the cause is clear involved assault. Military or administrative misdemeanours comprised about 25% of cases. About a third of the cases involved violence against property, including theft which led to about 15% of all cases (Alston 1995:91). The centurions seem to have been petitioned particularly in crimes that related to the maintenance of law in society, yet they were clearly interested in many aspects of life and conflict in the villages (Alston 1995:92). All this in spite of the fact that it was not the responsibility of centurions to supervise the administration of the nomes, nor did they have authority over the *stratego*i nor the *stratego*i over them. Alston (1995) sums up the position as follows:

.... For the villagers, these Romans (sc. centurions) with high social status and a good deal of political power provided an alternative means of redress to the local administrative network, especially useful for villagers who were, for some reason, unable to mobilise that network. The centurions were people of power who could get things done and this alone accounts for the large number and disparate nature of the petitions submitted to the centurions. (p. 94)

How does this material help us understand the likely social realities pertaining to Magonius and his loan to Judah son of Elazar Kthousion of En-gedi? Let us begin with Lewis' suggestion, noted above, that Magonius may have been practising 'a usurious squeeze' by only lending him 40 *denarii* and having him repay 60 plus interest. Is this an example of the oppressive Roman soldier known from literary sources such as Apuleius and Juvenal's *Satire XVI*? There is, in fact, no foundation whatever for this suspicion. 'Forty' was a scribal error for 'sixty' and was duly corrected. This document was of the 'double' kind where there were actually two copies of the agreement (both written on the one piece of papyrus): the 'upper' one which was rolled up and tied and sealed (hence also the 'inner' copy) and the 'lower' (or 'outer') copy that was left unsealed and hence easily accessible.⁹ The correction was made on the inner text. The relevant section reads as follows: ἐν δάνει ἄργυρίου Τυρίου δηνάρια [τεσσαράκοντα] ἐξήκοντα οἱ εἰσιν στατήρες δεκαπέντε ('in loan sixty *denarii* of Tyrian silver which are fifteen staters'). Initially τεσσαράκοντα was written and then a line was ruled through it and ἐξήκοντα was written interlinearly above it. In the lower or outer version, this section just read: ἐν δάνει ἄργυρίου Τυρίου δηνάρια ἐξήκοντα οἱ εἰσιν στατήρες δεκαπέντε. The document itself in both places specifies the amount as fifteen staters, and as at this time there were 4 *denarii* to a stater (Yadin *et al.* 2002:10), it is clear that there was never any intention on Magonius's part to lend 40 and require repayment of 60. If such was his intent, the sum in staters would have required alteration too. Moreover, 'forty' was only written on the inner copy, and inner copies were actually written after the outer copies (Lewis *et al.* 1989:9). This means that the only explanation is an error by a scribe who was probably hurrying to finish the document. As Lewis himself notes, '[a] common characteristic of double documents is that the inner text is produced by the same scribe in smaller, less careful writing than the outer text' (Lewis *et al.* 1989:9)

From the previous discussion of the legal position of Roman soldiers, we can see how it was that Magonius came to be lending Judah son of Elazar Kthousion money in the first place. Absent the reduction of the *patria potestas* with respect to soldiers, Magonius would not have been able to accumulate his own money in his *peculium castrense* in the first place, nor have been able to alienate it in any way, such as by a loan (admittedly one secured over real estate in a village) to a villager. Given the infinitesimally small fraction of the evidence of 1st and 2nd century CE legal transactions that have survived from Palestine (about 70 in all, as noted above),¹⁰ it is unlikely that this was the only loan that Magonius made. How much capital did he have?

Here we enter the difficult question of the pay of centurions *vis-à-vis* ordinary legionaries.¹¹ Whereas in the mid-2nd century

9. On this type of legal document, see Koffmann (1968) and Lewis *et al.* (1989:7–10).

10. If we make the modest assumption that there were at the turn of the 2nd century CE, 5000 Judean families in the region as wealthy as Babatha and she retained an average number of legal documents in her possession, there would have been 175 000 in existence in the region at that time.

11. In this area I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the very helpful advice received



BCE centurions received twice the pay of legionaries (see Brunt 1950:50, 67¹²; Rathbone 2007:159); this multiple increased over the centuries. By the time of the Philippi campaign (42 BCE) they probably received five times legionaries' pay (see Brunt 1950:67).¹³ When Augustus increased Praetorian pay in 27 BCE (as we know he did), he must also have increased the pay of centurions beyond the multiple of five just mentioned to preserve their comparative position *vis-à-vis* the Praetorians (Brunt 1950:55, 67).¹⁴ According to Dominic Rathbone (2007), during the Principate:

The pay rates of centurions and officers are uncertain. Legionary centurions probably received fifteen times basic pay, 3,375 *denarii* per annum, centurions of the first cohort perhaps twice as much, and *primi pili* 13,500 *denarii*, sixty times basic pay ... It is normally assumed that these rates were increased proportionately in AD 84, 197 and so on, but this is not proven. (p. 71)¹⁵

We should note, in addition, that *Cohors I Miliaria Thracum* was an auxiliary unit (Bowersock 1983:107). Those serving in such units probably received the same basic pay (*stipendium*) as legionaries, but were less well rewarded in other ways, such as in lower discharge pay (Rathbone 2007:160–161).

Putting all this together, a modest and reasonable assumption is that Magonius, in 124 CE, was receiving at least fifteen times the pay of ordinary soldiers. Seeing as the average deposit that the members of an auxiliary unit in Egypt in the 2nd century CE had in their *peculium* was 622 *denarii*, as noted previously, his deposit is likely to have been roughly 9000 *denarii*. This was a very large sum in the local context where, admittedly 30 years earlier, a date palm orchard could be bought by a villager for 168 sela's (= 672 *denarii*), as it was in P. Yadin 3 (from 98 CE). If someone like Magonius decided to risk 50% of his *peculium* on loans to local people, and the prospect of earning 12% per annum interest on loans secured over real estate must have been a powerful stimulus to do so, there could have been another 75 or so indebted to him in the same amount as Judah. A centurion like Magonius would have been, in effect, operating like a small bank.

Let us consider this transaction a little more to see what it might reveal. Magonius was subject to Roman law, which had a long history of capping interest rates. Thus, a maximum interest rate on loans was fixed at Rome as early as the Laws of the Twelve Tables from 443 BCE, which prescribed (in Table 3, Law 2) a maximum of what was probably 8.33% (Homer & Sylla 1996:52). This changed over time, however:

(Footnote 11 continues ...) in a personal communication from Professor Richard Alston of Royal Holloway, the University of London.

12. Based on Polybius (writing c. mid-2nd century BCE), *Histories*, 6.39.12

13. Both sides promised a donative to centurions five times greater than they did to the private soldiers and this was almost certainly directly proportionate to their pay differential; Appian, *Civil Wars*, 4.100 and 120.

14. For the doubling of Praetorian pay in 27 BCE, see Dio 53.11.5

15. Some of the data consists of references to once-off payments to soldiers where on one occasion centurions got twice the payment of enlisted men (Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 2.102), on another occasion five times (Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 100) and on another occasion, where the donor (Mithridates) may have made a mistake about centurions' pay, twenty times (Appian, *The Mithridatic Wars*, 104).

Nonetheless, Roman law did, in the *Lex Uniciaria* of 88 B.C., recognize an interest rate of up to 12%. Made the maximum rate in 50 B.C. by a decree of the Senate, the *centesima usura* stood until Justinian lowered the rates in 533 A.D., creating a sliding scale with 12% only applying to the *foenus nauticum*, 8% to business loans, 6% to those not in business, and 4% to distinguished persons and farmers. (cf. Jones 2008)

The rate that Magonius was charging was the maximum permitted under Roman law, but how did it compare with local rates in Judea and Nabatea. Was an interest rate of 12% per annum oppressively high? There is no loan document or promissory note amongst the Dead Sea legal papyri for which a stipulated interest rate survives. P. Yadin 1 (from 94 CE) provides that the husband who borrowed money from his wife would repay the principal (150 sela's, or 600 *denarii*) and interest 'according to the custom' (line 17),¹⁶ but without, unfortunately specifying what the customary rate was (Yadin *et al.* 2002:179).¹⁷

There is, however, conclusive evidence concerning local interest rates from another document in the Babatha archive that indicates that a 12% interest rate was not unduly high or oppressive. P. Yadin 15 is a deposition made by Babatha in October 125 CE (so only about eighteen months after the loan from Magonius) in a legal proceeding in which she is complaining about how the guardians of her son, one a Judean and one a Nabatean, are treating him. At one point, Lewis *et al.* (1989) indicates, she complains in relation to:

[Y]our not having given my orphan son generous(?) maintenance money commensurate with the income from the interest on his money and the rest of his property, and commensurate in particular with the style of life which befits(?) him, and you contribute for him as interest on the money only one half-denarius per hundred *denarii* [per month]. (p. 61)

Thus Babatha is complaining that an interest rate of 6% per annum on her son's property is niggardly. This carries the necessary implication that her son's guardians could get a higher interest rate than this. She then re-iterates an earlier offer, that seeing as she has property equivalent in value to her son's, if the guardians give her control of her son's money (but secured over her property), she will combine the two principal sums and give her son all the interest. She says she will contribute interest on the money at the rate of a denarius and a half per hundred *denarii* (per month), or 18% per annum, 'wherewith my son may be raised in splendid style' (Lewis *et al.* 1989:61). This means Babatha confidently expects to earn interest of 9% on the combined sum, but given that she will give all the interest to her son it will be the same as his principal earning interest at a rate of 18%. Perhaps by 125 CE, 9% had become the customary rate, something which P. Yadin 1 indicates existed 30 years previously (although without saying what that rate was). If a Judean widow in 125

16. See the Nabatean Araamic text and translation in Yadin *et al.* (2002:178–179).

17. P. Hev/Se 66 is a loan with a hypothec that appears to provide for interest in an unknown amount (This view is based on the reasonable reconstructions of Cotton & Yardeni [1997:241]). In Hev/Se 49, the promissory note from one Judean to another of 133 CE for one sela (= 4 *denarii*), there is no interest required, but this is for a fairly small sum (also see what follows on whether Judeans charged other Judeans interest).



CE considered that 6% interest was unreasonably low and that she could earn 9% interest, a Roman centurion charging 12% might have been charging a premium on the usual local or 'customary' rate, but only a fairly small one. Clearly, the villagers lacked sufficient capital to satisfy all loan requests that arose amongst themselves (for which they presumably would have charged 9% interest). In these circumstances of unsatisfied demand, the local centurion was willing to increase supply, but only if he earned a premium over the local rate. An interesting example of market economics perhaps, but hardly usurious or oppressive.

In another document in her legal proceeding against her son's two guardians, P. Yadin 13 (line 23), a petition to the provincial governor, Babatha mentions that the amount of money that they have been providing her son per month is 2 *denarii* (Lewis *et al.* 1989:52). Given that we know the interest rate producing this sum was 6% per annum, the total amount of her son's principal was 400 *denarii*. Babatha has the same amount of property, so the total amount on which she says she could earn 9% is 800 *denarii*. It is unclear why the two guardians are only obtaining 6%. Babatha accuses them of making a profit (κέρδος) at the expense of her son in her deposition (P. Yadin 15, line 30) 'by giving (εἰ δίδόντες) ... [lacuna in text].' Are they deliberately providing cheap money to their friends to secure or maintain their favour? Or are they skimming one third of the interest off the top to pay themselves? One or the other, but it is not clear which. Yet there is no obvious sign here of any ethnic tension or of ethnic identity being an issue. As noted above, one of the guardians is a Judean and one a Nabatean. Indeed, of the two guardians, it is the Judean that Babatha summons to court, although her complaint covers the behaviour of both of them. Perhaps it was simply a matter of procedure that Babatha summonsed one of them (Lewis *et al.* 1989:54). If there was an ethnic dimension, in a situation where Babatha may have been required to summons one guardian and chose the Judean, it may lie in the sentiment, 'You are a Judean like me and I expected better from you.'

There is, in addition, no obvious sign of any differing ethnic sensibilities on the matter of lending at these interest rates, with Babatha herself, a Judean woman after all, clearly willing to lend money to her neighbours at 9% per annum. But is the question of interest one that did differ on the basis on ethnic identity, with Nabateans ready to charge interest to anyone else, but Judeans not willing to charge interest to other Judeans? That the former was the case with Nabateans is shown by P. Yadin 1, referred to previously, where a Nabatean husband who borrows from his Nabatean wife agrees to pay interest to her at the customary rate. But in relation to Judeans, Exodus 23:25 forbade them charging interest to any Israelite who was poor. Deuteronomy 23:19–20 was stricter, providing that an Israelite could not lend money on interest to a fellow-Israelite (a prohibition also found in Lv 25:36), but could charge interest on money lent to a non-Israelite. Israelite laws against charging interest may have been intended to protect people from slipping into irrecoverable

poverty and the slavery; possibly they were not regarded as applying to strictly commercial relations between Israelites (Brin 1994:86). Further research on the Dead Sea legal papyri may help clarify these issues, but it is a pity that in P. Hev/Se 66, mentioned previously, a loan with a hypothec that appears to provide for interest in an unknown amount, there is no part of the text extant indicating the identity or ethnicity of the parties. On the other hand, Hev/Se 49, noted previously, records a loan, admittedly for a fairly small, sum but between two Judeans where no interest is charged.

For my part, I cannot see any sign of sensitivity on Babatha's part towards charging interest on loans to Judeans. Gordon McConville (2002:352)¹⁸ notes that amongst other peoples interest could be levied on money and a wide range of other goods at rates of between 20% and 50%. But examples of such a sky-high interest rate amongst Judeans can be seen amongst the Elephantine papyri. On 13 December 456 BCE a document was signed recording a loan of the small amount of four shekels of silver from Meshullam the son of Zaccur to Jehohen daughter of Meshullach, secured over real and personal property at a rate of 5% per month, with any unpaid interest to be capitalised and bear interest like the principal! It is likely that the loan was not repaid and property of Jehohen seized and that this document formed part of the Ananiah archive that subsequently passed to Jehoishma as part of her dowry to prove her title to the items.¹⁹ There is another document recording a loan of silver from Elephantine, circa 455 BCE, with the same interest rate (it had no hypothec but the interest could increase if payment was not made by a certain time!) (Cowley 1923:32–35; Porten *et al.* 2011:256–257).

Returning now to the loan of 60 *denarii* by Magonius to Judah son of Elazar Kthousion, we have seen that the interest rate was rather higher than the local rate but not oppressively so. Other aspects of the transaction also suggest that there was nothing untoward about it, indeed that it appears to have been rather routine in character. There is only one Roman witness and the other six are Judeans. If Magonius had behaved in an overbearing way towards the local population in his loans to them we would have expected the Roman proportion to have been higher than this. Magonius has used Justinus, probably his slave or freedman, as scribe. Yet this too is not a sign of Roman oppressiveness. Given the likelihood that Magonius extended a large number of these loans each year, considerable scribal time and expertise was needed and he would probably have preferred working with someone he could trust, either someone employed by the Roman army in the camp or directly by him. This is another sign of the extent to which the whole process had become routine.

P. Yadin 11, like most leases, allowed foreclosure against specified assets in the event of default (in this case the assets

18. I am grateful to Professor McConville, my colleague at the University of Gloucestershire, for alerting me to important aspects of ancient attitudes to charging interest on loans.

19. For the Aramaic text, see Cowley (1923:29–30); for translation and comment, including the previous point about its inclusion in the Ananiah archive, see Porten *et al.* (2011:203–205).



of Judah's father over which he had control). If Judah failed to repay the loan, Magonius would have been entitled under the hypothec to seize real estate in the form of a courtyard owned by his father Elazar Kthousion. A courtyard could also include rooms (as with this very courtyard, as we see in a later transaction, P. Yadin 19, line 15). Presumably, a hypothec over real estate in the village was a means to get round the law, previously quoted, against Roman soldiers acquiring farms and fields in the province in which they served. Seeing as Magonius was stationed in En-gedi and the courtyard was located in En-gedi (just next to the Roman camp in fact), he may have needed to be careful about this. Given that Babatha has kept this loan record in her archive, it is probably as proof (although there is no such acknowledgement by Magonius on the document) that Judah had repaid the loan and there was no cloud hanging over the family's title to that particular courtyard. It does raise the spectre, however, of other borrowers from Magonius who were not able to repay their debts to him and whose property he seized in satisfaction thereof. Did he and other centurions like him end up owning a portfolio of properties in the towns in which they were based or in others nearby? What happened when they were rotated to a new garrison, as Magonius must have been, together with the rest of the cohort, since it had left En-gedi by 128 CE? Did they sell their holdings or leave them to be administered by others on their behalf?

One final point needs to be made about the loan by Magonius to Judah and the wider practice of his lending activities for which it provides very secure evidence. It was executed only 8 years after the conclusion of a serious revolt by Judeans in Egypt in the years 115–117 (Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1989; Pucci Ben Zeev 2005). That revolt had ended with some of the Judeans fleeing to the city of Lydda, where they were besieged by the Romans and killed when the city was taken. Even those events proved to be no dampener on a Roman centurion in nearby Judea extending a loan to a Judean in the routine way that has been described above.

Centurions and Matthew 8:5–13

This brings us to the Matthean passage. In what respects does this analysis of P. Yadin 11 aid us in investigating how Matthew 8:5–13 might have been understood in En-gedi or Maoza or other villages on the western and southern shores of the Dead Sea around the time that Matthew's Gospel appeared, probably around the 90s of the 1st century CE?

To bring the Gospel into contact with P. Yadin 11 two other assumptions must be made. It is, firstly, reasonable to assume that the way in which Magonius conducted himself in 124 CE was similar to how other centurions, with whom the Matthean audience in these parts were familiar in the 90s CE, would have conducted themselves. The possibility of a centurion earning a very healthy rate of return on one's *peculium castrense* would have seen to that. The Judean revolt of 66–73 CE, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the long siege of nearby Masada, would have occurred

within the living memory of many Judeans encountering this Gospel, although those events were further in the past than the Judean revolt of 115–117 CE in Egypt was for Judah when he borrowed money from Magonius. Secondly, it is a reasonable assumption that the practice of petitioning centurions for help in local difficulties was also a feature of Judea and Nabatea (after the latter became a Roman province in 106 CE at any rate). Although the centurion who appears in Matthew 8:5–13 may have been in the employ, historically speaking, of Herod Antipas, hearers or readers of Matthew's Gospel by the Dead Sea, even if they were aware of that circumstance, would have interpreted the passage in the light of the local Roman centurions with whom they were familiar.

The opening of the passage must have come as a shock: 'As he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, beseeching him and saying, "Lord ..."' (Mt 8:5–6, RSV). The Christ-followers who might have encountered Matthew's Gospel around the Dead Sea soon after its appearance were familiar with Roman centurions who had the military might of Rome at their disposal, which had been deployed to devastating effect only two decades earlier, who were the richest people in their locality and probably those of the highest status, regularly lending money to them at high, yet not oppressively high, interest rates, and owning properties in their village when borrowers had defaulted on repayment. They were, moreover, willing to be petitioned to help them in the event of difficulties such as felonious and violent neighbours, harsh tax-collectors and so on. And yet here we see a centurion seeking help from Jesus! The use of the word *παρακαλῶν*, meaning 'beseeching', in relation to his approach to Jesus carries quite a punch in this context. In a major reversal of the usual social roles, it is the rich, powerful and influential Roman who petitions help from a Judean lacking property and without any defined status in the Judean social system. The centurion even addresses Jesus with the very respectful salutation, *κύριε*. He is affording respect to the Judean Jesus who only a little earlier in the Gospel had himself been expressing derogatory remarks about *ἐθνικοί* (5:47; 6:7). Thus we encounter a non-Judean giving the Matthean Jesus a lesson on inter-ethnic courtesy.

To the Christ-followers hearing or reading this, the object of the centurion's request would also have occasioned surprise: 'Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress' (Mt 8:6, RSV). Here we have centurion, a non-Judean, with a deep sense of compassion, in other words, with a heart. A man who has led or would lead men into battle professionally and ruthlessly, who no doubt administers his command efficiently in peace time, who will lend money on robust business terms and foreclose on loans when he needs to, who is well connected in the provincial and imperial networks and patron-client relationships and who can get things done for people when he wants, is deeply troubled by a young male servant of his who is ill and in great pain. Whilst acknowledging that sometimes hardened military men can show a very different character to their



personal staff, it is not just the man's compassion that leaps from the text; it is also the fact that he does not ask Jesus to do anything. He plainly has such trust in Jesus that he considers merely setting out the circumstances of the case will prompt Jesus to do what is necessary.

In the Matthean scheme of things, initially Jesus may not automatically deserve this trust. His response to the centurion is either a statement, or a question: 'And he said to him, "Will I come and heal him?"' (Mt 8:7). Not a great deal turns on which option is correct. That it is a question, however, is suggested by the fact that words meaning 'There's no need for you to do that, Lord' (= the effect of Mt 8:8) are a more natural reply to the question 'Shall I come and heal him' (with its implied hesitation) than to a statement 'I am coming ...' to which the likely answer is something like 'Wonderful.' France (2007:312–313) is probably right in insisting that the Greek word order requires a question, because of the pronoun *ἐγώ*. If this interpretation is correct, Jesus is revealing an ethnocentric doubt about engaging with non-Judeans, or he may be indicating his conviction (which appears a little later in the Gospel; Matthew 15:24) that his mission is only to Judeans, or both. If it is a statement, Jesus puts aside such considerations and reveals the same concern to offer immediate help that he has just displayed in cleansing a Judean of his leprosy (Mt 8:1–4).

The words of the centurion's reply would only compound the surprise for the Christ-followers exposed to this passage:

But the centurion answered him, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and he does it.' (Mt 8:8–9, RSV)

The reversal of roles is continued here, in the centurion's suggestion that he is not worthy for Jesus to come into his home. In part this is a question of differentiated ethnic identities, as I have argued in my essay in Gerd Theissen's *Festschrift* (2013):

In particular, the centurion imagines himself as affected by the same context of sharp ethnic division between Judeans on the one hand and other peoples on the other to which Jesus himself has already borne witness. He is imagining how he appears in Judean eyes, as a negatively regarded foreigner with whom Judeans would reframe from social intercourse, just as Peter says to the centurion Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:28, 'You yourselves know how unlawful (ἄθεμιτον) it is for a Judean (Ἰουδαῖος) to associate with or to visit a foreigner (ἀλλόφυλος)'. (p. 202)

In addition, he is also expressly overturning the expected social evaluation of himself *vis-à-vis* Jesus. He does this by expressing the view that Jesus has the power to give effective, unquestioned commands just as surely as *he* does to the soldiers under him. He appears to be interpreting Jesus as having the power to make a command relating to his servant's illness that will be effective, probably telling it to 'go', as this produces a close analogy to the one of the orders

he gives his men. The centurion must consider that Jesus' status is so far above his own that it would be discrepant, socially or ontologically or both, for Jesus even to enter his house. Again, given the power, wealth, honour and influence of centurions that we have discussed above, this is a quite remarkable reversal.

Jesus is astonished at the centurion's response and brings to the surface the ethnic tensions that have been swirling around underneath by making the following observation:

Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Mt 8:10–12, RSV)

The strength of the non-Judean's faith has forced Jesus to confront his own ethnocentricity. Rather than immediately proceeding to announce a cure for the man's servant (which he does in v. 13), Jesus includes two statements about the future, beyond his earthly ministry, of great moment in the Gospel. In the first he speaks of the banquet in the kingdom of heaven. Whilst doubted by some, the logic of the narrative requires that those who will come from east and west and dine with the three patriarchs are non-Judeans, given that these people belong to the same broad ethnic category as the centurion.²⁰ In other words, the Matthean Jesus is adumbrating a scene in which the progenitors of Judean ethnic identity, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, no less, with their role appearing as early as the genealogy (Mt 1:2) and confirmed in the statement of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, '[w]e have Abraham as our father' (Mt 3:9), will be sharing a meal with non-Judeans. Thus Jesus legitimates, that is, explains and justifies the Judean/non-Judean table-fellowship that will characterise the Christ-movement in the future, in Matthew's case, within the audiences for whom he was writing or for any community who received a copy of his Gospel shortly after its publication where this table-fellowship occurred.

The sons of the kingdom, whom Jesus predicts in Matthew 8:12 will be cast out, must include some Judeans but not all, seeing as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will certainly be there. Presumably mainly in view are the Judean leaders severely criticised in Matthew 23.

My broad position on Matthew's audience, although I cannot provide a detailed argument here, is that it contained a mixture of Judeans (with these probably in the majority) and non-Judeans, sharing the one loaf and the one cup of the Lord's Supper, but without the latter needing to observe the Mosaic law, including the requirement of circumcision. The strongest evidence that can be summoned against this position is that Matthew regarded the Mosaic law as still

²⁰The argument of Davies and Allison (1991:28) that those from east and west are 'unprivileged Jews' is quite implausible given that Jesus is talking about a non-Judean's faith in contrast to that of Judeans. It is likely, however, that the reference to those who would come from the east and west did resonate with Israelite end-time speculation (as in 1 Enoch 57). But some Israelite traditions also portrayed non-Judeans returning at the End, not only Judeans (cf. Isaiah 60 and 1 Enoch 90:37–38).



binding on all members of his target audience. David Sim (1998:123) is the most prominent advocate of this position: 'The evidence of the Gospel is clear that this Christian Jewish group both accepted without question the validity of the Torah and attempted to observe it in its entirety.' Those who support this view, especially Sim, tend to rely especially on Matthew 5:17–20 (RSV) that on its face may appear to support this position:

17. Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. 18. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, nor a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

After this comes the passage on the six antitheses (on murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retribution and love; Mt 5:21–48). In brief, my view is that in Matthew 5:17–20 the Matthean Jesus is protesting too much. As Paul Foster (whose approach to these verses I find largely persuasive) has noted, this passage suggests that Matthew's community was being accused by other Judeans of breach of certain *halakhic* requirements (I would suggest in relation to mixed table-fellowship) and 'it is difficult to imagine why this charge would be levelled if the community had not deviated from the law in perceptible ways in the eyes of synagogue based opponents' (Foster 2004:164). Even on its face, Matthew 5:19 is rather feeble: those who relax the Mosaic law and teach others to do so will still make it into the kingdom of heaven! Although the antitheses are often viewed as an intensification of the law, in at least one case, that of oaths (Mt 5:33–37), Jesus' position represents an abrogation of the law, for Jesus rejects an institution that in a number of places the Mosaic law specifically required (Ex 22:6–7, 10; Nm 19:22; Dt 6:13 and 10:20) (Foster 2004:115). At a more general level, however, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the continuing validity of the Mosaic law in all its parts with the continuing role of Jesus in the life of the Christ-movement. After his resurrection, Jesus said to his eleven disciples on the mountain in Galilee, in the closing and climactic words of this Gospel:

All authority (ἐξουσία) in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all the peoples (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Mt 28:16–20)

In commenting on this commission John Meier (1976) aptly asks:

How can we say that Mt conceives Jesus as one who gives the Mosaic Law a new interpretation, and that Matthew wishes the church to be faithful to the substance, or even the letter (5.18–19?) of the Mosaic Law, when he portrays the risen Lord as giving a mandate that strikes at the very heart of the Mosaic Law? (p. 29)

Scholars often mention, as if it were strange, that there is no reference to circumcision in Matthew's Gospel. Yet

to assess the significance of this we need to recognise that circumcision was not a problem, but rather an answer to the 'problem' of mixed Judean/non-Judean table-fellowship in the Christ-movement advocated by Judean Christ-followers opposed to that practice (such as the emissaries of James who came along in Paul's footsteps seeking to impose this practice on his non-Judean Christ-followers in Antioch [Gl 2:11–14]). The legitimization of such mixed ethnic table-fellowship by Jesus in Matthew 8:11 rendered any reference to circumcision redundant. Matthew's community had accepted the Pauline position on this issue. On this latter point I must therefore disagree with Sim who argues that Matthew was 'anti-Pauline' (Sim 2002, 2008), a view closely tied to his interpretation of Matthew 5:17–20 that, as just noted, I consider unpersuasive.

The process of the Matthean Jesus moving away from ethnocentric attitudes towards non-Judeans to his acceptance of them in the movement after him during the course of his interaction with the centurion in Matthew 8:5–13 continues when he meets the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 (cf. Esler 2013:205–206).

Conclusion

In my view, the Matthean Jesus served as a prototype (in social identity terms) for how Judeans also needed to move on from ethnocentric disregard for or dislike of non-Judeans to acceptance of them as full members of the Christ-movement not required to adhere to the Mosaic law, but certainly required to live by Jesus' commandments and in his presence.²¹ The journey he had undertaken in relation to non-Judeans must be or become their journey, and in this they would be assisted by the various ways in which Matthew has him predict the future inclusion of non-Judeans in the movement. We are now in a position to round up our assessment of how Christ-believers by the Dead Sea in the 90s CE would have received this message in relation to the centurion depicted in Matthew 8:5–13.

The picture of the centurion in Matthew 8:5–13 would have overturned nearly all their assumptions of how centurions behaved and of their social status *vis-à-vis* Judeans. Probably the most prominent type of non-Judean in their locality, a man who could, in the event of Judean revolt, cause them more death and destruction than anyone else, is portrayed as feeling deep compassion for a young servant-boy and acting on that compassion. A type of man who probably had more wealth than anyone else in their immediate setting, someone at the centre of an extensive operation of providing credit that was rather expensive and accompanied by threat of foreclosure on their village properties for non-payment of the loan, yet still much-needed, someone well networked and who could help them out of difficult situations, is shown as humbly requesting help from a Judean with no apparent wealth or status. Not only that, but asserting that he is so much less than Jesus that he is not worthy that Jesus should

21. This is the thesis of Esler (2013).



enter his house. If Jesus foretold that even a non-Judean such as this would eventually dine with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, *is there any non-Judean* who is not a candidate for inclusion into the community? Certainly not the Nabateans amongst whom they lived in reasonable harmony yet with occasional points of friction.

True it was that someone who had been accepted into the community could, by virtue of his or her misbehaviour, be expelled. This is precisely the situation described in Matthew 18:15–17, a passage that focuses on the life of the community, expressly the ἐκκλησία in verse 17, in the present as Matthew writes his Gospel. Look what happens if a person is expelled: he becomes to them as a ἔθνικός or a tax collector. In other words, the boundaries that had been dropped when such people were admitted to the community are reinstated in the process of their expulsion from it. It is difficult to imagine more compelling evidence than this for the mixed ethnic nature of the community. Yet although the possibility of expulsion existed, its character was predicated on accepting people such as non-Judeans in the first place. If a centurion could live and act so contrary to their cultural expectations for such a person, Judeans amongst the Christ-followers by the Dead Sea should be willing to accept that any non-Judean could. For their part, non-Judean Christ-followers would have found in the centurion of Capernaum a remarkable exemplar to help them understand and value their position and status in the new community living on until the End in the presence of Jesus.

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