

ISRAEL AND THE UNIVERSAL MISSION IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW¹

Tae Sub Kim

The present study investigates the relationship between Israel and the universal mission in the Gospel of Matthew. The previous views of scholars deal with this relationship unilaterally proceeding ‘from Israel to the Gentile (or the universal) mission’ alone, but the relationship in the other direction has not yet been discussed. Thus, while introducing new perspectives aiming for a fuller understanding of the reciprocal relationship between Israel and the universal mission in the First Gospel, this study attempts to demonstrate how the completion of the universal mission is associated with the re-establishment of Israel in the Gospel of Matthew.

The first main chapter (chapter 2) probes the purpose of Jesus’ earthly ministry to Israel and its outcome, in order to lay the groundwork for the ensuing two main chapters. In Matthew, Jesus is depicted as Israel’s Messiah, who has come in order to reverse the nation’s predicament of sinfulness (1:21) and lostness (10:6), not least by calling for national repentance (4:17) and attempting to reassemble the twelve tribes of Israel (2:6; 4:25; 10:6; 15:24). Thus, if the people of Israel receive Jesus as their Messiah, the long-standing hope for restoration will come to fruition. However, Jesus is confronted by outright opposition from Israel from the time of his birth. Not only does he meet with hostility from the leadership groups, he is also rejected by the people of his hometown (13:54-58) and eventually the whole people of Israel (23:36; 27:25). Owing to Israel’s failure, she has to suffer divine punishments at a national level. In particular, the evangelist connects Israel’s rejection of Jesus and the withdrawal of the divine presence from the temple (23:29-38; 27:3-10), as well as the destruction of this sanctum itself (27:25). As a result, Israel’s

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predicament has become even worse after rejecting Jesus than it was before he came, as declared in 12:43-45.

Chapter 3 is devoted to investigating the relationship between Israel's rejection of Jesus and the universal mission, in order to answer the question about the impetus for the missionary expansion in the First Gospel. To address this issue, it first explores the theological message of Jesus' death in the Gospel, especially in terms of cause and effect. Jesus' death in Matthew bears the message that, ironically, Israel's rejection of Jesus by putting him to death broadens the opportunity of forgiveness, offered initially to Israel alone (1:21), to all humanity (26:28). As the opportunity to hear the gospel is expanded from Israel (10:5-6) to all nations (28:19-20), the opportunity to be forgiven is also broadened from Israel to all humanity. Given this parallelism, the role played by Israel's failure in the latter strongly suggests that there is also a close connection between Israel's rejection of Jesus and the missionary expansion to all nations in the Gospel. This idea is confirmed by Matthew 12:1-21. Here, the Pharisees' conspiracy to kill Jesus (12:14) along with the following OT quotation (esp. vv. 18 and 21) reveals that ironically, the failure of Israel leads to the fulfilment of the divine plan to extend the opportunity of salvation to the entire world. A similar view is also implied in the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-46). That the vineyard is taken away from the rebellious tenants and given to an ἔθνος bearing fruits for the kingdom of God reveals that while Israel has lost her privileged status as the people of God (due to her rebellion against him by rejecting Jesus), the kingdom of God is henceforth transferred to the ἔθνος, namely, the faithful Christians of the church. Since such a trans-ethnic body of faithful Christians can only emerge as a result of the universal mission, the underlying idea of this parable is that Israel's rejection of Jesus by murdering him eventually gives rise to the universal proclamation of the gospel, through which faithful believers of all nations will be gathered into the kingdom of God. Therefore, Israel's rejection of Jesus ultimately broadens the gospel proclamation from Israel to all nations.

Chapter 4 considers the relationship between the completion of the universal mission and the re-establishment of Israel in the eschatological kingdom of God. In Matthew's view, the mission to Israel has not been successful, nor does it look promising. Though Jesus foretells that Israel will recognise his significance at his return (23:39), this prophecy implies that a significant change in Israel's

disposition is not expected until the parousia. Nonetheless, this is not the end of Israel's story. Although not all Israel but rather faithful Jewish Christians and the righteous Israelites before the time of Jesus will be saved at the end, these saved ones will eventually constitute the re-established Israel. This re-constituted Israel will be ruled by proper leadership, the Son of Man and his disciples, in God's eschatological kingdom (19:28). For Matthew, then, while Israel's restoration through the salvation of all Israel is unattainable, the nation is expected to be established anew at the end of the age. This being so, it needs to be stressed that according to Matthew's end-time scenario, the precursor with unparalleled significance in heralding the eschaton is the completion of the universal mission (24:14). It is not until the gospel has been preached to all nations that the end of the age will come. Since Israel is expected to be re-established not within history but in the eschatological age, unless the universal mission is completed, there would be no end, no return of the Son of Man and no re-establishment of the nation in the eschatological kingdom of God. Thus, the completion of the universal mission becomes the key condition for hastening the eschaton, the time for the revealing of the new Israel.

In the course of these investigations, therefore, this study reaches the conclusion that according to Matthew's mission perspective, the relationship between Israel and the universal mission is reciprocal: while Israel's failure brings about the missionary expansion to all nations, the completion of the universal mission itself becomes the necessary condition for inaugurating the eschaton, at which Israel is expected to be established anew in the eschatological kingdom of God.