

...mhde; sabbatw
(...nor on a Sabbath – Mt. 24:20)

Ricardo M. Puno

Introduction

In his Olivet discourse, Mark urges those in Judea to flee to the mountains once they “see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be”¹ (Mk. 13:14). Since this flight should be done in haste, those in the “housetop must not go down to take anything away” and those in the “field must not turn back to get a coat...” (vv. 15-17). The synoptic writer even exhorts those in Judea that when the moment to flee comes, they should “pray that it may not be in winter” (v. 18).

In his parallel discourse, Matthew closely follows Mark. However, in his corresponding verse to Mk. 13:18, Matthew considerably modifies Mark with a series of redactional changes (Mt. 24:20; Mk. 13:18) just as he frequently does throughout his gospel. Thus, in his counterpart to Mark’s apocalyptic discourse where Jesus tells his disciples “pray (*proseucesqe*) that it may not be in winter” (*ceimwno~*), Matthew inserts “your flight” (*hifugh; umwin*) and “nor on a Sabbath” (*mhde; sabbatw*)². Matthew now comes up with a more precise new text that reads: “Pray that **your flight** may not be in winter **or on a Sabbath**.” Why does Matthew add these two phrases? What is their significance?

Some scholars and commentators on Matthew have glossed over this verse without noting the additions, let alone discuss the alterations.³ They probably think that the discourse has more important issues than these modifications. We shall argue, however, that these redactional changes are important insertions which clarify certain features of the first gospel. But certain issues which are crucial in explaining these insertions must be addressed first.

1. All English scriptural quotations are taken from Wayne Meeks, ed., *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

2. Greek New Testament citations are taken from J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, trans. Raymond Brown & Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990).

3. John P. Meier, *Matthew* (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1980); Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1981).

Vocabulary Analysis

Mt. 24:20 contains terminologies whose exegetical meaning are fundamental to the interpretation of the passage.

a. *hf fugh; umwn* (your flight)

Matthew sees the urgency of a hasty departure like Mark. Hence, despite his revisions of the Markan pericope, he retains the latter's ἡ φυγή ὑμῶν. However, keeping the phrase also raises the question of who the audience of Matthew was. While he does not designate the specific subject of this flight, it can be deduced from the immediate context of the text. In the opening section of the Olivet discourse, Mark designates Peter, James, John and Andrew, the first *quartemion* of the twelve,⁴ as the recipients of Jesus' end time teachings (Mk. 13:3). Matthew, however, expands the audience from the favored disciples to "the disciples as a group"⁵ (Mt. 24:3). With this redactional change, the disciples in general now serve as the addressees of the discourse – Christians in the evangelist's time.

b. *mhde; sabbatw* (or on a Sabbath)

In the New Testament, the word *sabbaton* (Sabbath) occurs 68 times. The term refers to the seventh day of each week which is a sacred festival when Israelites are required to abstain from all work.⁶ The Sabbath commandment, whose content changed in the course of the centuries, is found in all the sources of the Mosaic Law: Ex. 34:21 (J); Ex. 23:12 (E); Ex. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15 (Decalogue); Lev. 23:1-3; 19:3; 26:2 (H); Ex. 31:12-17; 35:1-3 (P).⁷

In the pre-exilic age, the Sabbath commandment absolutely prohibits all kinds of work. It is assumed that like other norms in the decalogue, this commandment was initially stated negatively. Later, however, the prohibition of work was changed into a positive sanctifying of the Sabbath. The underlying reasons for the change in emphasis are reflected in Ex. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15. Echoing Gen. 2:2ff., Ex. 20:8-11 argues that the Sabbath is a holy day since Yahweh rested on the seventh

4. Clifton C. Black, *The Rhetoric of the Gospel: Theological Artistry in the Gospels and Acts* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 49.

5. Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 362.

6. Wolfgang Beilner, "sabbaton," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 220.

7. Eduard Lohse, "sabbaton," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.7, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 2.

day after creating heaven and earth and everything therein in six days. Deut. 5:12-15, however, has a different perspective. It stresses the humanitarian element of Sabbath by insisting that slaves and domestic animals should have their day of rest. This text further teaches that this humanitarian dimension of Sabbath is rooted in the history of Israel herself. If Yahweh had liberated Israel from slavery, so slaves must also be freed from work on Sabbath. With such outlook, “duties to God and neighbour are thus fused together to form an indissoluble unity.”⁸

During the post-exilic period, the Sabbath assumed greater significance. To preclude syncretism and to distinguish Israel and people of other faiths, the Sabbath and circumcision served as the “distinguishing features”⁹ of the chosen people. It was thus impressed upon the Israelites that it was obligatory for them to observe the Sabbath day together with all its feasts. Consequently, strict prohibition to work on the Sabbath was imposed. Lohse offers a summary of the activities forbidden during Sabbath:

...Fires are not to be kindled (Ex. 35:3) nor burdens carried (Jer. 17:21ff., 24, 27) nor trade carried on (Neh. 10:32) nor the winepress trodden nor beasts laden nor markets held (Neh. 13:15-22) nor highways traversed nor business pursued (Is. 58:13) nor is the Sabbath to be desecrated in any other way (Is. 56:2). A warning example is given to underline the seriousness of the commandment; in the wilderness a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath was executed as Yahweh ruled.... What is needed on the Sabbath must be collected and prepared the day before (Ex. 16:22-26,29), for the Sabbath is Yahweh’s most holy day of rest (Ex. 35:2)....¹⁰

Seen thus, the Sabbath commandment has become the most important element of the divine law. Fidelity to Yahweh and his covenant consists in the scrupulous observance of the law and Sabbath.

Like their predecessors, the Palestinian and Greek-speaking Jews also believed that the Sabbath is a sign of divine election. However, an amplified notion of Sabbath is also to be detected among these Jews:

The wonderful power of the Sabbath is so great that on the seventh day even the ungodly in Gehenna may rest from their

8. *Ibid.*, 4.

9. Beilner, “sabbaton,” 220.

10. Lohse, “sabbaton,” 5.

18 ...mhde; sabbatw (...nor on a Sabbath – Mt. 24:20)

torment... the Sabbath commandment is as urgent as all the other commandments of the Torah put together... The reward for Sabbath is also especially great. If Israel would only keep two Sabbaths as ordained redemption would come.¹¹

To ensure strict observance of the Sabbath, the original list of prohibited work is further expanded in the Mishna.¹² Above all, the Sabbath is understood as a day of rest and worship for the Jews. And because of the required strict observance of its norms, it became the source of divisive religious behavior and custom in Israel.

The Context

To reach an accurate and meaningful understanding of a passage, it must be analyzed in the light of the whole text.¹³ Appropriated to our study, this implies that the meaning of v. 20 can only be understood in the light of the whole eschatological discourse. Conversely, the orientation and features of the discourse are only discernible by studying the intent of its individual sections and passages. If these two methods are undertaken, we are assured of a meaningful understanding of the text. Mindful of these exegetical norms, we now turn to the text and context of the verse before us.

Mt. 24:20 belongs to the section on the eschatological tribulations (vv. 9-21) together with the other pericopae (vv. 1-3; 4-8; 9-14; 15-28; 29-31) that frame the doctrinal part of Matthew's end time teachings.¹⁴ What is the *sitz-im-leben* of these tribulations that incite Jesus' disciples to escape?¹⁵ To this query, our evange-

11. Ibid.; See also Beilner, "sabbaton," 220.

12. Mishna refers to the "authoritative collection of rabbinic halakic (legal and procedural) material developed within the oral traditions of pharisaic and rabbinic Judaism, and arranged and revised by Judah ha-nasi in the first decades of the third century." Richard R. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 123. For a detailed discussion of the expanded list of prohibited works on Sabbath, consult Lohse, "sabbaton," 12-13.

13. Daniel Patte, *Structural Exegesis for New Testament Critics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 10.

14. Ben Meyer, *Five Speeches that Changed the World* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 104.

15. See Mt. 24:3. Eusebius claims that during the first revolt, the Jews fled to the mountain in Pella. Cf. Eusebius Caesariensis, *On the Letters of the Apostles in Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1980), 201. This view, however, is unlikely. Pella is not situated in the mountains but at the base of the low-lying foothills in the Transjordan valley. Moreover, Pella is also an unlikely destination for fleeing Christians due to the strong Hellenistic nature of this Decapolis city. See Vicky Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making: Mark, Matthew and Didache* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 119. Yang also doubts that there was any single organized immigration among Christians in Palestine. On the contrary, this flight that culminated in the years 64-66 C.E. was "rather spontaneous and gradual." Y. E. Yang, "Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supp.* 139 (1997): 236.

list offers a clue. In v. 15ff., the synoptic writer enjoins the disciples that once they see *to:bdelugma th~ ejrhmwsew~* standing in the holy place...those in Judea must flee to the mountains....” This phrase “likely means an abomination that leads to desolation.”¹⁶ In Daniel where it occurs thrice in various forms (9:27; 11:31; 12:11), the phrase refers to the sacrilege committed by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168-163 B.C.E. who set up an image of Zeus in the temple sanctuary (cf. Macc. 1:54, 59).¹⁷ To further defame Judaism, this tyrant also issued a directive to sacrifice swine and unclean animals (1Macc. 1:47) in the temple (2Macc. 6:1-11).¹⁸ This abomination effectively put an end to the temple worship for it prompted worshippers to abandon the house of God thereby making it desolate.¹⁹

This historical context is undoubtedly behind the admonition in v. 20. However, beyond the general consensus that the phrase alludes to Daniel, commentators have despaired identifying precisely the new profaner in this Matthean epithet.²⁰ Various opinions have been expressed on the issue. One conjecture holds that the abomination in v. 15 alludes to the desecration of the temple perpetuated by the rampaging Zealots during the Jewish wars (66-70 C.E.).²¹ This opinion is not persuasive. A major objection to this view is that it is devoid of historical support.²² Another view states that in the pre-Markan tradition the phrase pertains to the threat of Gaius Caligula (Gaius Caesar) in 40 B.C.E. to erect his own statue in the temple.²³ A group of exegetes, however, are not convinced. Drawing a hint from Luke’s Gospel,²⁴ they contend that the blasphemous-oppressor refers to the profanation committed in 70 C.E. by the rampaging Roman army who set up the stan-

16. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 345.

17. Krister Stendahl, “Commentary on Matthew”, in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black, (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), 793; W. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 473.

18. Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew: A Good News Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 231.

19. Marie Noonan Sabin, *Reopening the Word Reading Mark as Theology in the Context of Early Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65.

20. Black, *The Rhetoric of the Gospel*, 69; Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Eschatological Discourse of Mark 13,” in *The Four Gospels: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, vol. 2, eds. F. Van Segbroeck, C. M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle and J. Verheyden (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 1136.

21. David Wenham, *The Rediscovery of Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse Gospel Perspectives* vol. 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 185-186; Collins, “The Eschatological Discourse,” 1134.

22. According to Josephus, the Zealots’ murderous acts did not strictly involve idolatrous acts. Josephus Flavius, *The Wars of the Jews in The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 674. Hereafter cited as *Jewish Wars*.

23. Stendahl, *Commentary on Matthew*, 793; Donald Senior, *Invitation to Matthew* (Garden City: Image Books, 1977), 233; *Jewish Wars*, 609; Philo Judaeus, *On the Embassy to Gaius: The First Part of the Treatise on Virtue in The Works of Philo*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 774, 776.

24. “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near”. (Lk. 21:20).

20 ...mhde; sabbatw (...nor on a Sabbath – Mt. 24:20)

dards of the Roman legions in the temple, sacrificed to them,²⁵ and acclaimed Titus as *imperator*.²⁶ This view, however, is purely speculative. Nothing explicit is mentioned in Mt. 24:15 and Mk. 13:14 about military interventions.

Indeed, the verse that evokes this past event refers to Daniel but it does not exhaust its referent. This conclusion is supported by a particular divergence in the construction of the phrase in Mathew and Mark. In Mark the masculine participle *esthkoita* (standing) is used with a neuter noun.²⁷ This could suggest “someone rather than something.”²⁸ For Mark therefore, it was a person (probably Titus) who caused the temple to be desecrated and abandoned – not the insignias or the heathen altar.²⁹ In contrast, our evangelist uses the neuter perfect participle *estoi-* (having stood). Accordingly, for Matthew the cryptic “desolating sacrilege” does not necessarily refer to a person³⁰ but it can refer to a future unspecified key event.³¹

That Matthew considers the allusion to Daniel as a prophecy of some future eschatological defilement or destruction³² is consistent with the evangelist’s constant reference to the Old Testament and the application of the idea of fulfillment.³³ In these “fulfillment quotations,” Matthew often introduces Old Testament prophecy by the stereotyped formula “in order to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophets” (Mt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 21:4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9-10).³⁴ Like the preceding texts, v.15 has all the important elements of the formula except for an explicit reference to any fulfillment of the Daniel’s text. Hence, given “the actualiz-

25. The religion of the Roman legion consisted in worshipping and swearing by the ensigns and in preferring ensigns before all the gods. Cf. *Jewish Wars*, 743.

26. *Jewish Wars*, 743; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1981), 794; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 199; Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew’s Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 227-228.

27. Werner Foerster, “bdel ussomai,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.1, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1991): 600.

28. Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 345

29. Sabin, *Reopening the Word*, 65; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 313-315.

30. Wenham, *Rediscovery*, 177-178.

31. Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 332; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 473.

32. It has been suggested that on the basis of 2Thes 2:3, the “desolating sacrilege” refers to a personal anti-Christ who would rule Jerusalem until he is destroyed by Christ. Cf. Wenham, *Rediscovery*, 177; Collins, *The Eschatological Discourse*, 1134.

33. Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 220.

34. J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 74.

ing tendency of the fulfillment texts in the First Gospel,³⁵ it is unlikely that Matthew will allude to “the desolating sacrilege” spoken by the prophet Daniel if he regards it to be a past event. Therefore, the most likely conclusion is that the prophecy in v.15 is yet unfulfilled.³⁶

Indeed, this abomination seems to be a future event for our synoptic writer. Nevertheless, Matthew presents it within the context of an accomplished historical event. Although he composed his parallel discourse long after the dust has settled in Judea,³⁷ he still retains Mark’s historical setting since he is interested in preserving, reinterpreting and transmitting to his community Jesus’ prediction regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, the memory of which is still “fresh for Matthew’s

35. Krister Stendahl, *The School of Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Copenhagen: Villaadsen & Christensen, 1968), 200-201

36. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 473; Hare, *Matthew’s Interpretation*, 277; Collins, *The Eschatological Discourse*, 1136; Fred W. Burnette, *The Testament of Jesus Sophia* (New York: University Press of America, 1981), 307-308.

37. Since no extant dated manuscript of the Gospel exists, its date of composition is also a debated matter.

(I.) Several commentators claim that the Gospel was the first Gospel to be written. Cf. Harold Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), 7; D. G. Murray, “New Light on St. Matthew’s Gospel,” *Downside Review* 112 (1994): 34. They argue that Matthew’s Gospel was written probably between 50 and 60 C.E. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 8. “Although an early dating of the Gospel is rarely advocated, there are good reasons for seeing it as appearing before C.E. 70.” Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 92; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 11. For instance, Matthew refers to the Sadducees eight times while Mark and Luke each used the term only once. This reflects the time before 70 C.E. since after that date the Sadducees are hardly mentioned [cf. Mt. 10-11]. Cf. Donald A. Hagner, “The Sitz-im-Leben of the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, eds. D. R. Bauer & M.A. Powell (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 62.

(II.) As opposed to the foregoing, most scholars hold the opinion that the Gospel was composed after 70 C.E., probably between 80 and 90 C.E. Cf. John P. Meier, *Matthew* (Pasay City: Daughters St. Paul, 1980), xi; Benedict Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland Edmund Murphy, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 631. This position is supported by a number of arguments. For instance, it is contended that Matthew depended on Mark in composing his gospel. And since the latter’s gospel is thought to have been written between 65-67, or 60-70, if not after 70 C.E., it follows that the “first gospel” was composed later. Herman Hendrickx, *From One Jesus to Four Gospels* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1991), 70; John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew’s Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 7. Moreover, among the synoptic gospels, it is only Matthew who makes explicit reference to the “Church” (Mt 16:18; 18:17). This indicates a later composition for the gospel since Matthew betrays an interest in Church order that developed only much later. While scholars are scarcely definite on the date of the gospel’s composition, most exegetes are inclined to date it somewhere between 80-110 C. E. and within this period earlier rather than later. Cf. Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 380; Hagner, “Sitz-Im-Leben,” 61-62.

22 ...*mhde; sabbatw* (...*nor on a Sabbath* – Mt. 24:20)

audience.”³⁸ If Matthew’s intention is simply to preserve Jesus’ prediction, why did he insert *mhde; sabbatw* (or on a Sabbath)?

Various Perspectives on *mhde; sabbatw*

There is a continuing debate on the verse before us. Scholars are not only sharply divided on the historical considerations behind the text; they are also at disagreement regarding the author’s redactional intention in v. 20.³⁹ This is evidenced by the wide range of opinions on *mhde; sabbatw*

H. Weiss and G. Stanton claim that Matthew’s redaction in v. 20 simply proves that the evangelist’s community still kept the Sabbath,⁴⁰ “just as they still sacrifice (5:23) and pay the Temple tax” (17:27).⁴¹ D. J. Harrington thinks similarly. He contends that the Matthean *mhde; sabbatw* indicates that the “Sabbath observance remained important, and he feared the crisis of conscience that might develop for pious Jews forced to travel on the Sabbath.”⁴² However, it is difficult to defend this view in the light of Mt. 12:1-14.⁴³

A. Schlatter believes that Mt. 24:20 reflects the fears of the Palestinian followers of Jesus who had already severed their ties with Judaism and no longer kept the Sabbath. Thus, escape on a Sabbath would be especially dangerous because every fugitive would be immediately recognized.⁴⁴ “They would have been as recognizable in Palestine as a spotted dog.”⁴⁵ This view is perceptive but only so

38. Craig C. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 581.

39. Herold Weiss, “The Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (1990):13.

40. Weiss contends that the synoptic reports of the burial of Jesus (Mk. 15:42; 16:1; Mt. 27:62; 28:1; Lk. 23:54, 56) show no awareness of any Sabbath controversies. “They reflect a community unaware that Sabbath observance is being questioned. It would seem that the Christian communities saw no problem with Sabbath observance.” *Ibid.*, 16.

41. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 198.

42. Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 341.

43. This pericope shows Jesus’ progressive conflict with the religious leaders. The two controversy stories (vv.1-8 and 9-14) clearly suggest that the Matthean Jesus is not anti-Torah or anti-Sabbath, but against the Pharisaic over-development of the Sabbath legislation. See Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 653-654.

44. Sabbath is the day when Jews do not travel. See John F. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128, no.512 (1971): 317.

45. Quoted by Y. E. Yang, “Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supp.*139 (1997): 231. On a Sabbath, Jews are permitted to travel only 2,000 cubits (3,000 feet) away from their home or city. Cf. George W. Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew. The Mellen Biblical Commentary: New Testament Series* vol. 2 (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1996), 910.

if the persecution comes from the Jews. But as Matthew himself attests, Christians will also suffer persecution from the hands of the Gentiles (cf. v.9). Consequently, both Jews and Christians will have to flee even on a Sabbath. Thus, there is no possibility that the fleeing Christians would be “as recognizable as a spotted dog.”

G. Strecker claims that the Jewish elements in Matthew are the result of Jewish community tradition and should not be taken as characteristic of the redactor. Thus, the Matthean *mhde; sabbatwll* possibly reflects the original form of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition or community tradition.⁴⁶ This contention is hardly convincing. There is a consensus that “Matthew has basically reworked the Markan account by means of detailed modifications, by major abbreviations and new formulations, but especially by inserting extensive material.”⁴⁷ Thus, it seems arbitrary to attribute redactional changes to community tradition simply because they do not conform to the interpreter’s particular understanding of Matthew’s distinctive perspective. Moreover, it is also totally unconvincing that a “skillful and imaginative writer”⁴⁸ like Matthew carelessly added materials like the one in question which does not fit his viewpoint.

G. Barth points out that prior to the writing of the first gospel, the older view that it was better to allow oneself to be killed rather than desecrate the Sabbath by fighting,⁴⁹ was already relaxed.⁵⁰ In the light of this evidence, Barth argues that it is unlikely that Matthew considers flight on a Sabbath as a serious offense because that will imply that the evangelist has adopted a stricter view than that of Judaism.⁵¹ He further contends that Matthew only appends the phrase *mhde; sabbatwll* so that his community will not give offense against current Judaism.⁵² This conclusion, however, is flawed. If indeed during Matthew’s time flight on a Sabbath was already countenanced whenever there were serious threats to life, there is no reason why Matthew’s community would offend the Jewish sensibilities by fleeing on a Sabbath.

46. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 194.

47. Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 106; Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 23.

48. Richard T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 16.

49. See 1Macc 2:32 ff.; Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* in *The Works of Josephus*, 325.

50. Gerhard Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, eds. Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth & H. J. Held (London: SCM Press, 1963), 91-92.

51. *Ibid.*, 92.

52. *Ibid.*

24 ...mhde; sabbatw (...nor on a Sabbath – Mt. 24:20)

E. Lohse is another scholar who declares that “Mt. 24:20 offers an example of the keeping of the Sabbath by Jewish Christian congregations.”⁵³ Like Barth, this expositor also notes that contemporary Judaism regarded flight on the Sabbath as legitimate when there was danger to life.⁵⁴ Thus, proposing an alternative explanation to this Matthean redaction, he opines that “if desecration of the Sabbath was required in the face of the terrors of the last time, this could only mean an escalation of the catastrophe.”⁵⁵ Though his suggestion is incisive, Lohse does not offer any evidence from contemporary Jewish literature to support such explanation.

E. K. Wong thinks that this Matthean passage illustrates that some members of the Matthean community (probably some of the conservative Jewish Christians who still behave according to their tradition) hesitate to flee on a Sabbath even though their lives are thus in increased danger. Matthew therefore, affixes the phrase “to keep the community intact by taking care of the weak ones (who might hesitate to flee even at the critical time).”⁵⁶ Though this view is interesting, it does not fit the evangelist’s view in Mt. 12:1-14.

All these conjectures are insightful but they do not offer satisfactory explanation for the Matthean redaction in v. 20. An elucidation of this difficult passage has to be sought elsewhere.

Preferred Solution

The explanation to Matthew’s *mhde; sabbatw* lies in the *sitz-im-leben* or social setting of the gospel. Reconstructing this life setting is a challenging task that confronts the gospel’s interpreters.⁵⁷ However, when one understands something about the life setting of the Matthean community, much else about the Gospel becomes clearer. Unfortunately, Matthew provides limited clues on the religious thinking of the early Christians. This difficulty is further compounded by the dearth of evidence about the Matthean community outside the gospel. Consequently, expositors are constrained to go back to the New Testament. In this task, they have to “eavesdrop” on the New Testament authors. This means that to

53. E. Lohse, “sabbaton,” 29; See also Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew Believer’s Church Bible Commentary* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1991), 346.

54. Lohse, “sabbaton,” 14.

55. *Ibid.*, 29-30.

56. E. K. Wong, “The Matthean Understanding of the Sabbath: A Response to G.N. Stanton,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (1991): 15. Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 910.

57. Meyer, *Five Speeches That Changed the World*, 138.

uncover traces of the life and beliefs of the first Christian communities, interpreters must be attentive to things that the authors reveal only in passing or even unintentionally.⁵⁸

Regarding the life setting of Matthew's gospel, it is generally held that it was written after the unsuccessful Jewish revolts against Rome in 67-70 C.E. that resulted in the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. Despite this holocaust, the pharisees, a lay reform movement and one of the many groups within Judaism prior to the revolt, survived and emerged as the leaders of Judaism. They undertook a reconstruction of Judaism under the leadership of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai in order to offset fragmentation within Judaism. This allegedly happened at Jamnia between 70-100 C.E. Although evidence for the latter is sketchy, the consolidation efforts resulted in radical changes in Judaism. Thus, the village synagogues became the center of religious power; the rabbis emerged as the sole interpreters of the law and regulators of Jewish life; strict observance of the law replaced the central role that the liturgical life of the temple had played in Judaism; and the Jewish law was eventually codified and the canon of scriptures formalized.⁵⁹ Jamnia also established defenses against external threats to Jewish life. Thus, it set up strict norms to ward off influences of other groups considered heretical.⁶⁰

Prior to the revolt, Jewish Christians were situated within the broad parameters of Judaism. But in view of the consolidation efforts of the pharisees, this was no longer permissible. The outcome was obvious: the Matthean Christians together with other groups considered as heretical, were excluded from the synagogues.⁶¹ As a result of their expulsion, Matthew and his community became resentful of the Jewish leaders. Cut off from his Jewish roots, Matthew attempted to define Christian identity over and against the reconstruction efforts of pharisaical Judaism. Thus seen, Matthew's Gospel is considered as a kind of "Christian response to Jamnia."⁶²

58. Raymond E. Brown, *The Origins of Christianity: A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: University Press, 1993), 13.

59. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon of the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 286.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 275. Davies claims that the expulsion of the Matthean Christians was realized when the *Birkat HaMinim*-(a prayer against heretics) was introduced to the liturgy of the synagogue. The prayer is as follows: "For persecutors let there be no hope, and the dominion of arrogance do Thou speedily root out in our days; and let Christians and *minim* (probably meaning 'heretics') perish in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of the living and let them not be written with the righteous." If anyone hesitated to read that prayer or to say "Amen" to it, s/he is liable to expulsion from the synagogues. However, more recent research shows that the *Birkat HaMinim* was not especially directed against the Jewish Christians. Therefore, one should not overestimate its importance. See Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, n.167, 88.

62. Davies, *Setting*, 315

26 ...mhde; sabbatw (...nor on a Sabbath – Mt. 24:20)

That Matthew and his community were at odds with rabbinic Judaism is patently evident in the gospel itself. “Matthew’s consistent attitude toward the religious leaders is one of reprobation.”⁶³ His diatribes against the scribes and the pharisees especially in chapter 23 that “concludes the series of parables of judgment and controversies with the Jewish leaders”⁶⁴ are more scathing and sustained than in the other gospels. So striking is Matthew’s inimical attitude against the Jewish authorities that it “appears to be the central theme of the Gospel.”⁶⁵ Thus, if Mark refers to the pharisees only once (7:6) and Luke none at all, Matthew has twelve such references, six of which are in chapter 23 (vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).⁶⁶

Further indication that Matthew’s community was at odds with the Jewish religious leaders is also unmistakably evident in the evangelist’s use of the expression “their [your] synagogue(s).”⁶⁷ Five times Matthew uses the phrase “in their synagogue” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54) while in 23:34 he employs the phrase “in your synagogue.” By regularly appending the genitive “your” or “their” to the noun “synagogue(s),” the evangelist attests to the alienation of his community from Judaism.⁶⁸ Moreover, Matthew also uses “synagogue” in only three instances (6:2,5; 23:6). In each of these texts, the phrase implies negative connotation, that is, the disciples of Jesus are not to follow the examples of scribes and pharisees in the synagogues. These passages, according to Brooks, “suggest that Matthew wrote after the emergence of the new rabbinic institutions at Jamnia and that the Christian communities or groups that he was addressing were no longer part of the Jewish community.”⁶⁹ Therefore, the “fissure between the community and synagogue is final. Any attempt to situate the Matthean community within the Jewish synagogue system must be considered a failure.”⁷⁰

This impression is further confirmed by other Matthean texts. Over against the “synagogue” stands the “church” established by Jesus (16:18). Unlike other synoptic writers, Matthew is the only evangelist to use “church.”⁷¹ He employs it three

63. Peter F. Ellis, *Matthew: His Mind and His Message* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1974), 15.

64. Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 666.

65. Jack D. Kingsbury, “The Plot of Matthew’s Story,” *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 347.

66. Stanton, *A Gospel For New People*, 129.

67. Jack. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 155.

68. Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Henrickson Publishers, 1996), 81.

69. Stephenson H. Brooks, “Matthew’s Community: The Evidence of the Special Saying Materials”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* Sup 16 (1987):55.

70. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 88.

71. Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying About Matthew* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 88.

times (once in 16:18 and twice in 18:17). As depicted in the gospel, this “church” seems to have developed its own discipline and organizational structures which are independent of the synagogue.⁷² It had its own entrance rite, i.e., baptism which is done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:19). In Mt. 16:19; 18:19, the “church” exercised “the authority to admit and exclude people from the community.”⁷³ Besides developing its own patterns of community life, it seemed to have developed its own rules of piety (Mt. 6:9-13; 26:26 ff.)⁷⁴ and distinctive central acts of worship.⁷⁵ These developments are only possible after the breach between the church and synagogue.⁷⁶

The gospel also contains passages that speak about the transference of the Kingdom from the disbelieving Jewish authorities to a worthy people producing fruit who comprise the church.⁷⁷ Thus, Matthew no longer considers the pharisees in 15:13 as “a plant of the heavenly father’s planting.” By implication, their place will be taken over by another people. This insight is further affirmed in the story of the wicked husbandmen (Mt. 21:41, 43). These texts clearly indicate that apparently the Jews’ special “privileged role as chosen people may be regarded as ended.”⁷⁸

Indeed, Matthew devotes considerable material in his controversy with the Jewish leaders. His gospel is peppered with polemics against Jewish authorities that this theme “runs like a scarlet thread through all twenty eight chapters.”⁷⁹ Hence, on the basis of Matthew’s controversy with the pharisees and scribes, some scholars conclude that at the time of the gospel’s composition, Matthew’s community had already parted ways with rabbinic Judaism.⁸⁰ This position, however, is not shared by a number of scholars.⁸¹ They contend that Matthew’s anti-pharisaic views simply attest to an internal dispute within Judaism.

72. David Hill, *Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew* (London: Oliphants, 1972), 39.

73. Meier, *Matthew*, 183.

74. John P. Meier, *Law And History in Matthew's Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 11.

75. Stanton, *A Gospel for New people*, 129-130

76. Robert H. Gundry, *Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 167.

77. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 218.

78. Hill, *An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew*, 43.

79. David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 228.

80. Cf. Davies, *The Setting*, 332; Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 666; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 88-89.

81. Raymond E. Brown, *Origins of Christianity. A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: University Press, 1993), 3.

The scholarly debate on the matter is ongoing. Our concern here is not to determine from the anti-pharisaic sentiment of the Gospel whether or not Matthew and his community had already separated from pharisaic Judaism. We believe that the underlying cause of this dispute can shed light on the redactional motive for the Matthean *mhde; sabbatw*. We now turn to this concern.

The gospel manifests that one of the key issues in the dispute between Jesus and the Jewish authorities is the interpretation of the law. Since this contentious issue is at the core of the controversy, it is necessary to clarify the word *nomo~* (law). Etymologically, the term is derived from *nemw* “assign.”⁸² *Nomo~* was therefore originally that which has been assigned “to a group of creatures and in force among them... something objective, therefore, which stands over them.”⁸³ As a life order, *nomo~* was also understood as existing mores.

In rabbinic Judaism, the Septuagintal *nomo~* is denoted by the term *tôrâ* (Torah), a word which connotes a wide spectrum of meaning. In the narrower sense, *tôrâ* stands for the Mosaic Law or the Pentateuch. In the broader sense, however, the term is used to designate the whole Old Testament scriptures. In other instances, it can mean valid teaching or tradition other than the scriptures.⁸⁴

Materially, the rabbinic understanding of the Torah may be summed up in two related principles. First, God has definitively and exclusively revealed himself in the Torah. Consequently, its extensions, i.e., authoritative rabbinic teachings and recognized doctrines, are considered to be of divine origin. Second, a person’s relationship with God is determined by his relationship with the Torah. For a person to attain righteousness before God, s/he must abide by the Torah. The fact that there is only life by keeping the Torah leads to a keen interest to the development in the law. Thus the Decalogue given at Mount Sinai was eventually interpreted in terms of specific duty or conduct, e.g., ceremonial and purity laws and sabbatarian norms.

In the New Testament, *nomo~* occurs 194 times.⁸⁵ In Matthew, however, the word is only found in eight instances (5:17, 18; 7:12; 11:13; 12:5; 22:36, 40; 23:23).⁸⁶

82. Hans Hübner, “*nomo~*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, eds. Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 1991): 473.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid. In spite of these distinctions, it is difficult to differentiate between the Torah as the law and the Torah as the Pentateuch. Consequently, the Pentateuch is often called Torah even if the referent is to contents which have no legal character.

85. John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodricks and James A. Swanson, eds., *The Greek English Concordance to the New Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 3795.

86. Ibid.

In the few verses where *nomō-* is found, it is noteworthy that the evangelist retains the traditional meanings of *nomō-*. Hence, for Matthew the law refers to the Pentateuch or the scriptures.⁸⁷ But although the evangelist preserves the double meaning of the term, he seems to have a contrasting perspective of the law. He portrays Jesus as both affirming and negating the law.⁸⁸

Several passages in the gospel indicate that Jesus upholds the authority of the law. A key text is to be found at the beginning of the sermon in the mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:17-19).

Aside from strongly affirming the enduring validity of the *nomō-*, Matthew shows that Jesus himself also keeps the law. This is summarized for us by one expositor:

...He obviously wears the clothing prescribed by the Law (Mt. 9:20; 14:36). ...Indeed, the very goal of the Messianic work of Jesus is: *ew- ah panta genhtai* (Mt. 5:18). His own coming is the fulfillment of the Law, and the crucifixion is understood as the uniting of perfect obedience to God's will as this is stated in Scripture with love for the brethren in the act of self-sacrifice. The Synoptists, of course, do not say directly that they see here the fulfillment of the Law by Jesus, but this is in line with their depiction (cf. Mt. 3:15).⁸⁹

Although in these texts Matthew shows that Jesus upholds the sanctity of the law, in other parts of his gospel the evangelist seems to move in a different direction. For instance, Matthew never mentions circumcision which is one of the distinctive traits of Judaism. In the Sermon of the Mount, the Matthean Jesus

87. G. Gutbrod "nomō-," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990): 1059.

88. Ibid., 1060.

89. Ibid., 1062.

30 ...mhde; sabbatw (...nor on a Sabbath – Mt. 24:20)

prohibits his disciples from taking oaths (5:33-37); he abrogates the *lex talionis*; prohibits divorce (5:38 ff.); and summarizes the law in what has come to be known as the golden rule (7:12). Furthermore, the Matthean Jesus also seems to treat the laws on purity with indifference. He did not hesitate to touch a leper (8:14). He opposes the hand-washing tradition of the elders and repudiates the idea of unclean food (15:1-12). These and other similar texts tend to suggest that for the Matthean Jesus, *nomo*- was no longer binding to his community. How are we to explain this “ambiguous” stance of Matthew?

As previously pointed out, rabbinic Judaism holds that a person’s relationship with God requires conformity with the law with all its prescription and expressions. In the first gospel, however, Matthew proposes a radically different understanding of the law. Unlike the rabbinic rendition, the evangelist interprets *nomo*- from a position of mediation. For him, “what determines man’s relation to God is no longer the Law and man’s relation to it. This decisive position is now occupied by the Word of Jesus.”⁹⁰ And in his teachings, the Matthean Jesus asserts that a person’s definitive relationship with God is not determined by one’s affirmation of the law which is not disputed or in transgression which is not condoned; relationship with God as shown in the parable of the two sons consists in conversion and doing God’s will (21:28-31).

This radical interpretation of the law does not mean that the Matthean Jesus is annulling the law or lessening its importance. As pointed out earlier Jesus himself affirms the enduring validity of the law and keeps it demands. However, his understanding of the law also requires a person not to build righteousness merely on the basis of his/her conformity with the law nor on its many systematized commandments (19:16-22). In clear and certain terms, the Matthean Jesus teaches that true obedience to the law is expressed through discipleship that demands self-emptying love for God and neighbor (22:34-40; 7:12; 24:12). Consequently, he rejects an appeal to the letter of the law when it conflicts with the claim of neighbor (12:1-8f.).

This radical explication of the law will undoubtedly not gain the approval of the Jewish religious leaders. For them such interpretation is perilous for several reasons. It puts into question the whole understanding of the law on which pharisaical Judaism is anchored. More importantly, such interpretation mitigates the required strict observance of the law which is a key to the success of the consolidation efforts of the rabbinic leaders. Consequently, the Jewish leaders oppose the Matthean Jesus with a virulence that would eventually lead to his death.

90. Ibid., 1060.

The foregoing discussion is relevant to the problem before us. We hold that such *sitz-im-leben* sheds light on the Matthean *sabbatw*. Matthew is aware that if the Pharisees insist that each demand of the law must be observed the Sabbath commandment must be observed even more. As the source of decisive religious behavior and customs in Israel, the Pharisees demand scrupulous observance of the sabbatarian norms. Thus, Jewish society was virtually on a standstill on Sabbath: city gates were closed, getting provisions as well as securing animals for transport were difficult to obtain, etc.⁹¹ Obviously, any hasty flight in such a condition is certainly difficult. Hence, this exhortation.

The view that practical consideration is behind this redaction is further confirmed by Matthew's retention of the Markan *ceimwn* ("winter"). One of the two things that Matthew directs his community to pray for in v.20 is for the flight not to occur on a winter, "a season of bad weather."⁹² In such a condition traveling and certainly getting away are significantly more difficult. R. Gundry describes the complexities involved:

In much of the Mediterranean world, winter was the rainy season, the cold of which kept men from their fieldwork. Winter's cold limited both land and sea travel; even armies stopped traveling campaigns during this season, and some soldiers who nevertheless marched in 'wintry' mountain regions (colder than the Judean hills) reportedly lost their hands and feet. Further, cold winter rains could flood the roads and bury them deep in mud, and the usually dry creek beds (wadis) were filled with water and difficult to cross.⁹³

In retaining this Markan term, one thing is clear: Matthew is emphasizing an aggravating circumstance to the flight. Pairing *sabbatw* with *ceimwn* leads to the conclusion that Matthew's concern in this verse is the "external circumstances which will make the flight difficult, although not impossible."⁹⁴

91. Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 580; Lohse, "sabbaton," 11-14; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 483.

92. Walter Bauer, William Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick Danker, eds. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 879.

93. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 580-581.

94. Meier, *Matthew*, 284.

Conclusion

In the introduction to the study, we noted how Matthew's redactional; (Mt 24:20) is often ignored in many studies of the eschatological discourse. Some scholars may have considered this modification as a trifle insertion in the understanding of the last major teaching block in the first gospel. Our investigation, however, has shown that the redactional is an essential modification. It gives us a glimpse of the social conditions of the Matthean community. Moreover, it also reveals Matthew's pastoral concern for his community. Mindful of the difficulties that a rigid application of the law would bring to his community, the Matthean Jesus exhorts his community to pray that their "flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath." While such consideration is behind this admonition, Matthew does not in any way impugn the Sabbath. As a Christian with Jewish heritage, he certainly recognizes the humanitarian and religious dimensions of the Sabbath. What he opposes is the excessive and literal observances which denigrate the Sabbath.

Ricardo M. Puno

Theology and Religious Education Department
De La Salle University
2401 Taft Ave., Manila
Philippines