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# Are the least included in the kingdom of heaven?: The meaning of Matthew 5:19

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David C Sim  
Australian Catholic University  
McAuley Campus, Brisbane  
Australia

## Abstract

*According to the normative interpretation of Matthew 5:19, this logion specifies that a strict hierarchy will exist in the consummated kingdom of God based upon observance of the Jewish law. The highest place in the kingdom is reserved for those Christians who uphold the law, while those who break or relax the law will find themselves at a lower level. Matthew 5:19 therefore makes the important point that even law-free or Pauline Christians would not be rejected from the kingdom. This study challenges this interpretation of Matthew 5:19 by arguing that it is appropriate neither for the Christian Jews who created it nor for the evangelist. Both Matthew and his Christian Jewish predecessors were highly critical of Paul and his gospel, and they expected law-free Christians to face eternal punishment. In the light of this, Matthew 5:19 must be taken as a reference to the exclusion of these Christians from the kingdom.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this study I wish to focus on the short but interesting text found in Mt 5:19. This logion is the third of the triad of sayings in 5:17-19 in which the Matthean Jesus delivers his views concerning the torah. These three logia form a progressive argument about the role of the law for those who believe in Jesus as the messiah, and I have recently stated in some detail the manner in which the argument unfolds (see Sim 1998). The conclusion of that discussion can be summarised here in the following manner. In the first saying (v 17), the Matthean Jesus pronounces that he has come not to abolish the law and the prophets; rather, he has come to fulfil them. The second logion in v 18 builds upon this, and makes the point that the whole torah, every jot and tittle, remains operative until the passing away of heaven and earth, a certain reference to the parousia (cf 24:35). Finally, the third saying (v 19) applies the earlier points about the torah to the life of the evangelist's community. Whoever relaxes or breaks

the least of the law's commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, while those who obey them and teach others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. In this final saying the evangelist is promoting the view that, in the period between the historical coming of the Christ and the eschatological parousia, followers of Jesus should observe all parts of the law and teach others accordingly. Those who obey this directive will receive a magnificent reward; they will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. As many scholars have noted, these three logia are the first statements by Matthew's Jesus concerning the law, and they therefore assume a paradigmatic role in the context of the Gospel. All later material which concerns the law must be read through the eyes of these initial sayings (see esp Davis & Allison 1988:501-502; Snodgrass 1996:113-114).

It is clear from Mt 5:17-19 (and other Matthean texts) that observance of the torah is an important component of Christian existence; in the current age the followers of Christ should obey all the demands of the Mosaic law, the least as well as the major, and they should teach other Christians to do likewise. Many scholars, however, do not leave the matter there. They argue that the evangelist makes a further important point in 5:19. This saying is concerned not merely with the eschatological fate of the ones who obey the teachings of Jesus and observe and teach the torah, but also with the fate of those who do not. It is claimed that Matthew here presents a rather enlightened attitude towards those who deliberately relax or break the law against the express wishes of Jesus. Rather than condemning these Christians outright and excluding them from the kingdom of heaven (see, e g, Davis & Allison 1988:497; Marguerat 1981:134-135; Guelich 1982:152; Betz 1985:50-51; 1995:188-189; Mohrlang 1984:18; Luz 1985:238-239; Gnilká 1986:146; Brooks 1987:29; Hagner 1993:108-109), the evangelist awards them a place in the heavenly realm. While it is true that they are not ranked as highly as those who observe the law, they will be called least in the kingdom while the others will be called great, they are none the less and despite their deficiencies still destined to share in the consummated kingdom of heaven. As an argument that this reading of 5:19 makes sense in the context of the Gospel, some of these scholars cite a number of Matthean passages which seem to suggest a hierarchy in heaven (eg 18:4; 20:23) and differing levels of eschatological reward (eg 5:12; 10:41-2).<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the origin of this material it is generally considered to be not an authentic utterance of the historical Jesus, but the product of (conservative) Jewish Christians who continued to uphold the demands of the Mosaic code. According to E Käsemann, the logion in Mt 5:19 was created by 'legalistic Jewish Christianity' in order to condemn the more liberal version of the Christian message which abrogated the torah in full or in part (the Hellenists, Paul and their followers). This conflict

between the two Christian parties led the more conservative Jewish Christians to renounce all contact with their more liberal brethren, but they were seemingly less comfortable with assigning these fellow Christians to a place outside the kingdom; they therefore allotted them the least place within the hierarchy of the heavenly realm. In the words of Käsemann; 'Even if the most minute breach of the Torah prevents the transgressor from attaining anything more than the lowest place in the kingdom of heaven, yet no one dares to pronounce him deprived of this place at any rate. It is not permissible totally to deny the other man's right to the name and estate of Christian'. (Käsemann 1969:87). Käsemann's view of the origin and intent of this logion has found much support, and many scholars have argued that in reproducing 5:19 Matthew agrees with this tolerant point of view. While he happily criticises law-free (or Pauline) Christians, he balks at excluding them utterly from the kingdom of heaven. Like his conservative Jewish Christian predecessors, he includes them within the kingdom but he allots them the lowest position with the fewest rewards (Luz 1985:239; Hagner 1993:109; Mohrlang 1984:18-19; Betz 1985:50-51; 1995:188-189; Guelich 1982:152-153; Manson 1949:154). Despite the popularity of this understanding of Mt 5:19 and its pre-Matthean history, this view is not as certain as many of its proponents believe. It suffers in fact from a number of serious problems which need to be given due consideration.

Let us begin with Käsemann's reconstruction of the origin and purpose of this logion. Two points are of interest here. First, Käsemann posits that this material originated in a conservative Jewish Christian (or Christian Jewish)<sup>2</sup> group whose members criticised law-free Christians such as Paul, but who could not bring themselves to exclude them completely from the kingdom. Secondly, this group solved its dilemma by accepting that these 'liberal' Christians will have a share in the kingdom, though at the lowest level. These Christian Jews therefore adopted the view that followers of Jesus would be ranked in the kingdom of heaven according to the level of their obedience to the law. Neither of these two claims is very plausible.

With regard to the first point, it seems rather unlikely that those law-observant Christian Jews who opposed Paul would have considered that the apostle and his followers would find a place in the kingdom. We know from Paul's letters and other sources that the relationship between the law-free and law-observant factions of the Christian movement was not as cordial or courteous as this view suggests. On the contrary, it was fiercely combative and polemical with few quarters given on either side.<sup>3</sup> Paul himself describes his Christian Jewish opponents as mutilators (Phlp 3:2) who should mutilate themselves (Gl 5:12), dogs and workers of evil (Phlp 3:2), false brethren who spied on his freedom (Gl 2:4), deceivers (Gl 6:7) and perverters of the

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gospel of Christ who are to be accursed (Gl 1:6-9). The fact that Paul sees fit to curse these Christian Jews is a sure indication that he neither desired nor expected them to be granted salvation after the final judgement (see the discussion of Betz 1979:52-54). This harsh attitude is repeated in Galatians 5:10, which states that those opponents of Paul who are causing trouble in Galatia will be subject to judgement (and therefore eschatological punishment) (Betz 1979:267).

Let us now consider this conflict from the perspective of Paul's opponents. How did these Christian Jews react to Paul and his law-free gospel? Is there any evidence that they were more tolerant of Paul's position than he was of theirs? These questions cannot be answered with absolute certainty, since we have no direct knowledge of their views, but the likelihood is that their attitude towards the apostle was little different from his rather harsh assessment of them. It seems clear from Galatians that these Christian Jewish opponents denigrated the law-free gospel of Paul, denied his independent apostleship and maintained that he came under (or should have come under) the authority of the Jerusalem church (Lüdemann 1989:97-98).

The apostle vehemently denies these charges by arguing for the truth of his gospel (*passim*), by claiming that his version of the Christian message derives from a divine revelation and not from a human agency (1:1, 11-12, 17-20), and by maintaining that his independence from Jerusalem was accepted by the leaders of the Jerusalem church (2:1-10). We may suspect that these attacks upon Paul and his gospel were highly polemical and personal, since only this type of attack would have generated the fierce and emotive response of the apostle. If this is correct, then it follows that these Christian Jewish opponents of Paul would hardly have anticipated or wished for Paul's inclusion in the kingdom. From their perspective his law-free gospel was contrary to the gospel of the Jerusalem church, and Paul himself was perverting the true Christian message by preaching a message about Christ which dispensed with the necessity of the law. Käsemann's claim that Paul's law-observant opponents could not bring themselves to exclude him from final salvation is therefore a dubious one. The relevant evidence suggests that both sides in this inner-Christian dispute would have had little compunction in assigning the opposition to an eschatological fate outside the kingdom of heaven.

This conclusion leads on directly to Käsemann's second point. With the sole exception of the ambiguous text in Matthew 5:19, there is no evidence whatsoever for the view that the Christian Jews who criticised and opposed Paul accepted a hierarchy in the kingdom based upon the extent of obedience to the torah. In no early Christian document do we find the claim attributed to Christian Judaism that those who fully keep the law will receive the greatest rewards, while those who relax or break the law

will be relegated to the least position within the kingdom. What evidence there is regarding this issue actually speaks against this possibility. The book of Acts, for example, makes clear that the Christian Jewish faction argued that salvation (or entry to the kingdom) was dependent upon, amongst other things, full observance of the law. Their attitude towards the eschatological fate of law-free (or Pauline) Christians is represented in Acts 15:1, where they tell the Gentile Christians of Antioch in unequivocal terms that, unless they are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they cannot be saved. This point is reiterated in 15:5, where further representatives of this group claim that Gentile Christians should be circumcised and be charged to observe the law of Moses. There is no suggestion in either of these texts that those believers in Jesus who fail to fulfil the law completely have a place in the kingdom; on the contrary, these passages specify that salvation or entry to the kingdom is not possible without complete commitment to the law. In other words the Christian Jewish position was that salvation is dependent upon two major criteria, belief in Jesus as the prophesied messiah who died and rose from the dead and observance of the torah according to the ancient covenant between God and the people of Israel. This picture in Acts receives indirect confirmation from the Pauline epistles. The evidence of (at least) Galatians and Philippians suggests that Paul's Christian Jewish opponents entered the apostle's communities with the express intention of persuading his Gentile converts to undergo circumcision (Gl 5:2, 12; 6:12; Phlp 3:2) and to observe the whole torah as a necessary obligation of their Christian existence (Gl 5:2-3). Why would they bother to dog the footsteps of Paul and impose the full weight of the law on his Gentile converts, if they held the prior belief that these law-free Christians were destined to share in the kingdom, albeit at a lowly point? It seems to involve too much effort for too little result. Their relentless and tireless efforts are better understood on the assumption that they believed, as Acts tells us, that law-free Gentile Christians had no hope of salvation unless they supplemented their Christian beliefs and practices with the full observance of the torah.

The argument presented above has raised serious concerns about Kiserann's thesis concerning the original intention of Matthew 5:19. While he is almost certainly correct that this logion was formulated by Christian Jews in response to the law-free gospel of Paul (and others), there is no external evidence to support his further claims that these opponents of Paul accepted that law-free Christians would inherit a minor place in the kingdom of heaven. On the contrary, the evidence of Acts and the Pauline epistles strongly indicates that these Christians Jews would have excluded outright any law-free Christians from the kingdom unless they changed their ways and fully observed the law. This means that we should probably seek another interpretation of Matthew 5:19

at the pre-Matthean stage, an interpretation which is more consistent with the theological position of Christian Judaism. We shall return to this point shortly.

It is appropriate now to consider the Gospel of Matthew. How did the evangelist interpret the tradition in 5:19? Whatever the original intention of this logion at the pre-Matthean stage, it is still possible that the evangelist interpreted it in the manner which scholars attribute to him. That is to say, Matthew might have taken this pericope in the sense that law-free Christians will earn a lowly place in the kingdom of heaven. There are, however, some substantial difficulties associated with this hypothesis. First of all and as noted above, Matthew has placed 5:19 in a certain context, and any interpretation of this particular logion must be consistent within that context. If, as the scholarly consensus claims, Matthew in 5:19 was making the point that those Christians who break or relax the torah still have a place in the kingdom of heaven, then it must be said that this point of view comes as something of a surprise in the light of the preceding verses. The evangelist takes pains in 5:17-18 to establish the validity of the torah in the current age down to its last stroke, and it should not be forgotten that it is no less an authority than Jesus himself (or the Matthean Jesus) who provides this teaching. For this Jesus then to state that those who deliberately break this law and teach others to do so will still be rewarded by sharing in the kingdom seems somewhat out of character to say the least. It means essentially that (the Matthean) Jesus rewards those who disobey him by deliberately disregarding his teachings on the validity of the torah.

This anomaly between 5:17-18 and 5:19 is not unknown to commentators. A number of scholars who follow the usual interpretation of Matthew 5:19 have expressed surprise that Matthew actually argues in this fashion. R Mohrlang, for example, describes as 'remarkable' Matthew's viewpoint that those who deny the validity of the whole law are not excluded from the kingdom, but are in fact included in it. In echoing the position of Käsemann, Mohrlang (1984:18) continues;

Might it be that the evangelist feels compelled to recognize that there are some in the Christian community who deny the validity of the law, yet must be considered authentic disciples of Christ; and that, although regarded as second-rate citizens, they cannot be denied entrance to the kingdom on the basis of their antinomian position alone? Could it be that, although wanting to affirm the full validity of the law for his own community, he is none the less reluctant to insist on every jot and tittle as a prerequisite for entering the kingdom in view of the number of Christians who adhere to a more Pauline position — some of whom may be within the circle of his own community?

Mohrlang admits that these statements are sheer speculation, and he reinforces the great anomaly of 5:19 (as he understands it) by concluding that for Matthew ...'the law in its entirety remains a valid and authoritative expression of the will of God for the Christian community; and all of life is viewed from this perspective' (Mohrlang 1984:19). A similar position is reached by H D Betz (1985:50-51; see also 1995:188-189), who writes;

A remarkable contradiction results from this evaluation, for contrary to what one would expect, a place in the kingdom of God is not denied even to the disloyal teacher who seeks to discredit Jesus' teaching ... such a teacher receives no more than the disparaging title 'least' ... in the coming kingdom .... If, as we also believe, this passage also alludes to the name of Paul, it is all the more remarkable that he is not absolutely denied entrance into the kingdom of God, but that only the better places remain barred to him.

It is to the credit of Mohrlang and Betz that they, unlike many other scholars, have recognised the difficulty in their understanding of Matthew 5:19. As they say, it is rather remarkable and completely contrary to our expectations that Matthew would in vv 17-18 present Jesus affirming the law to the last jot and tittle, and then in v 19 include those within the kingdom of heaven who not only fail to uphold it, but who teach others to disobey it. But rather than questioning their interpretation of 5:19 and trying to find an alternative understanding more in keeping with the Matthean context, both of them are happy to note the anomaly and to let it stand.

Let us move from the immediate context of Matthew 5:17-19 and consider the wider evidence of the Gospel as a whole. Are there any indications elsewhere in the Gospel that the evangelist held the generous view that those Christians who consciously abrogated the law still had a share in the kingdom of heaven? The short answer to this question must be an unequivocal no. Of all the evangelists it is Matthew who is least tolerant of those who disagreed with him. Moreover, Matthew is quite forthright in his opinion that those who oppose his views will find themselves at the eschaton not in the kingdom of heaven, but in the eternal fires of Gehenna. This theme of eternal punishment by fire in Gehenna is a prominent Matthean theme, which is unparalleled in the early Christian texts, with the possible exception of the Christian Apocalypse (see Sim 1996:129-140). Before we consider his views concerning his fellow Christians, let us examine his attitude towards his fellow Jews, in particular the scribes and Pharisees.

It is well known that the Matthean community was in conflict with formative Judaism, and that the evangelist places this dispute into the time of Jesus; the conflict between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees basically represents the dispute between the Christian Jewish Matthean community and the leaders of formative Judaism in the period following the Jewish war.<sup>4</sup> This conflict was primarily christological, the scribes and the Pharisees refused to accept the messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth, but this disagreement led to serious disputes over other matters. One such matter was the proper understanding and the correct observance of the torah.<sup>5</sup> The scribes and Pharisees followed the torah according to the traditions of the elders, which included both exegesis of biblical commandments and peculiar Pharisaic rules not found in the Mosaic law, while the Matthean community interpreted the law according to the messianic interpretation of Jesus. For the evangelist and his Christian Jewish group all the demands of the law are binding (5:17-19), which clearly includes the ritual commandments, but the two greatest commandments are love of God and love of neighbour (22:34-40; 19:18-19), and these are the guiding principles in the application of the law. True fulfilment of the law involves doing to others what you would have them do to you (7:12), and in going beyond the letter of the Mosaic code (5:21-48). Matthew charges the scribes and Pharisees with misunderstanding and so misapplying the demands of the torah. While they correctly observe the ritual laws with regard to tithing, they neglect the weightier matters of the law — justice, mercy and faith (23:23). Their blindness (according to Matthew) concerning the most important aspects of the torah leads them to keep the laws of sabbath observance at the expense of the greater demand of mercy (12:1-14). Moreover, their emphasis on non-biblical traditions, such as ritual handwashing prior to eating, is completely misguided (15:1-20). In failing to observe the law correctly, the scribes and Pharisees (and those who follow their understanding of the torah) can be categorised as lawless (23:28).

Do these lawless members of formative Judaism have a share in the kingdom of heaven? Matthew makes it quite clear that they do not. Their exclusion from the kingdom is specified in 5:20, the verse which immediately follows the problematic logion in 5:19. Here the Matthean Jesus states explicitly that entry to the kingdom is dependent upon a righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees; the implication is that the scribes and Pharisees, by virtue of their lesser righteousness, will not enter the kingdom. This point is brought home in other Matthean texts which relate that, as punishment for their rejection of the messiah and for their failure to uphold his messianic exegesis of the law, these leaders of formative Judaism will be consigned to the eternal fires of Gehenna (3:7-12; 23:15, 33; cf 12:22-37) (Sim 1996:228). Exclusion from the kingdom therefore entails everlasting punishment.



We may now turn to Matthew's views concerning his fellow Christians and their eschatological fate. Does he believe that followers of Jesus, who have an advantage over the scribes and Pharisees in that they at least recognise the importance of Jesus and have faith in him as messiah and Son of God, have done sufficient to earn a place in the kingdom? Once again the Gospel evidence is crystal clear on this point. According to the evangelist's ecclesiology, the general Christian community is not composed of the wholly righteous; it is rather a mixed community comprising both the good and the wicked (cf 22:10) and nominal Christians who fall short of Matthew's high standards will have no place at all in the heavenly realm. Like the scribes and Pharisees, they too will be excluded from the kingdom and sent for their sins to the eternal fires of Gehenna. Those Christians singled out by Matthew for this fate include community leaders who fail to exercise proper leadership (24:45-51; cf 25:14-30), those who fail to prepare for the coming of the Lord (25:1-12), those who fail to practise forgiveness within the community (18:23-35), those who call another community member a fool (5:22), those who commit unspecified sins (18:8-9; cf 5:29-30) and those missionaries who deny Jesus because of persecution (10:32-3) (Sim 1996:236-239).

In addition and of more importance for our purposes are the evangelist's views concerning the nature of the law-free (or Pauline) stream of thought within the Christian movement and the eschatological fate of those who belong to this circle. I have argued extensively elsewhere that Matthew presents a vigorous polemic against Paul and his law-free gospel, and that he expects these false Christians who reject the torah to burn forever in the fires of Gehenna (see Sim 1998 and literature cited there). All that is required here is a restatement of that discussion. The anti-Pauline polemic is plainly evident in Matthew 16:17-18, where Matthew emphasises the claims and authority of Peter as the rock upon which the Christian church is built. In his epistles Paul had seemingly challenged the authoritative position of Peter by affirming that Christ is the rock (1 Cor 10:4) and the true foundation of the church (1 Cor 3:11). The tradition in Matthew 16:18 counters this claim by arguing that Jesus himself selected Peter as the rock upon which he would build his church. An anti-Pauline perspective is also found in 16:17. The statement of Jesus that Peter's confession of him as the Christ was revealed by his heavenly father and not by flesh and blood serves to usurp the prior claim of Paul that his (law-free) gospel came through a divine revelation and not from flesh and blood (Gl 1:12, 16-17). The clear implication of these Matthean verses is that the evangelist and his community stood in the Petrine tradition and absolutely opposed the alternative Christian gospel espoused by Paul. The same can be said of Matthew 5:17-19. Leaving aside the contentious 5:19, there is little doubt that the two

other verses have a specifically anti-Pauline intention. In saying that Christians should not think that he has come to abolish the law, the Matthean Jesus is doubtless responding to an earlier claim that he had come for this very purpose. Since Paul himself had affirmed that Christ is the end of the law in Romans 10:4, it is probable that this logion was created by Paul's Christian Jewish opponents to counter this type of claim. The following verse, which states that the torah remains binding until the eschaton, also acts to refute the Pauline position that the law has now been rendered obsolete by the coming of the Christ.

Further passages in the Gospel specify the eschatological fate of those who follow the law-free gospel of Paul. In the interpretation of the parable of the tares in 13:36-43, Matthew makes the point that at the eschaton the Son of Man (Jesus) will have all doers of lawlessness (*ἀνομία*) removed from his kingdom (the Christian movement) and thrown into the furnace of fire (Gehenna). Given that the Matthean community was a Christian Jewish group which accepted that true Christian existence is marked by full observance of the torah (cf 5:17-19), the lawless Christians referred to here can only be those who stood in the law-free tradition of Paul. Precisely the same point is made in 7:13-27, the final section of the sermon on the mount. The first pericope (vv 13-14) spells out the two ways which lead to different gates. One gate is wide, the way to it is easy and many will enter this gate and find destruction. The other gate is narrow and difficult to enter, but those who do so will find eternal life. The next passage identifies the two ways of following Jesus. Matthew 7:15-20 refers to false prophets who can be identified by their fruits; a good tree bears good fruit, while an evil tree bears evil fruit and is thrown into the fire. This is followed immediately in vv 21-23 by the statement that not everyone who makes the Christian proclamation of 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of God will do so. Despite their clear Christian allegiance and the fact that they perform mighty works, they will ultimately be denounced as workers of lawlessness by Jesus at the final judgement. Matthew here makes the same point as he did in 13:36-43. Those Christians who are lawless in so far as they refuse to follow the torah will be rejected from the kingdom of God and assigned to the eternal fire. The final pericope in this section, the parable of the two houses (vv 21-7), reinforces this point. The Matthean Jesus spells out that he who hears and obeys the words of Jesus will be like the wise man who built his house upon the rock. This house will survive the storm (the final judgement). Conversely, he who hears but does not obey the words of Jesus is compared to the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. This house will not survive the coming storm. The meaning of this pericope becomes clear once we take into account the identification of Peter with the rock in Matthew 16:17-19. The way of fol-

lowing Jesus which is built upon the foundation of Peter, Christian Judaism, will escape the punishment at the final judgement. On the other hand, the way of following Jesus which has no foundation at all is the law-free stream of thought. This Christian tradition, which has its origin in the baseless revelations of Paul, will be severely dealt with at the final judgement.

We may at this point draw some provisional conclusions. The full weight of the relevant evidence, both the immediate context of 5:19 and the attitude of the evangelist to his Christian opponents as expressed in the remainder of the Gospel, speaks very clearly against the common understanding of 5:19. That is to say, the interpretation of this saying along the lines that law-free (or Pauline) Christians would be included in the kingdom of heaven in some shape or form simply cannot be attributed to Matthew if he is to be in any way consistent. Such a reading of this text is completely unexpected in the light of the sentiments of 5:17-18, and it simply does not cohere with the evangelist's harsh but consistent view elsewhere in the Gospel that law-free or Pauline Christians will be excluded from the kingdom and sent to Gehenna where they will burn forever. Matthew's position on this matter thus stands firmly in the tradition of Christian Judaism. Those who will inherit the kingdom must accept both Jesus as the prophesied messiah and the validity of the whole Jewish law. The scribes and Pharisees, despite attempting to fulfil the torah, will receive eternal punishment because they have rejected Jesus as messiah and fail to observe the law according to his interpretation. On the other hand, law-free Christians have the advantage of belief in Jesus but they too are earmarked for destruction because they fail to recognise that this must be supplemented by law-observance as demanded by the messiah himself. Only those who combine belief in Jesus with the proper observance of the torah will receive salvation at the eschaton. It is probable, in the light of the Gospel references to a hierarchy in the kingdom and the differing levels of eschatological reward, that these people will be ranked in the consummated kingdom of heaven, though Matthew never clearly spells out the criteria which determine an individual's ranking. What is clear from the eschatological material of the Gospel, however, is that Pauline or law-free Christians are excluded from all levels of the kingdom and destined for the fires of Gehenna. This conclusion raises, of course, an inevitable question. If Matthew could not have intended 5:19 to specify that those within the law-free stream of the Christian movement were to gain entry to the kingdom of heaven, not even at a lowly level, then how are we to interpret this particular saying of Jesus which he inherited from the tradition of Christian Judaism?

Given the immediate context of this logion and the evangelist's general attitude towards law-free Christians, we should expect that it refers to their complete exclusion

from the kingdom of heaven. In other words, Matthew presumably intended 5:19 to mean that the great who obey the law and teach others to do so will find a place in the kingdom of heaven, while the least who relax or reject the law and teach this policy to other Christians will be, as they are in 7:21-3, excluded from the kingdom. This alternative interpretation of the saying, which makes 5:19 consistent with the rest of the Gospel, is not new, but it is comparatively rare; in the past few decades only a very few Matthean scholars have opted for it.<sup>6</sup> The major problem, of course, for this reading of Matthew 5:19 is that it seems to run against the plain sense of the text. The wording of this logion does seem to include both the great and the least within the kingdom of heaven. This difficulty, however, is not insurmountable. E Schweizer has plausibly suggested that the saying might have been worded in this way merely for the purpose of parallelism. He explains, 'The threat that anyone who breaks "the least" commandment "will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" is probably formulated this way only for the sake of parallelism; what is meant is probably not a place, however lowly, in the kingdom of heaven, but in fact exclusion from it' (Schweizer 1976:105). Given the weight of evidence against the usual interpretation of this Matthean logion, Schweizer's explanation deserves greater attention than it has heretofore been given.

On the basis of our earlier discussion, it must be assumed that those Christian Jewish opponents of Paul intended this logion, despite its unclear wording, to exclude from the kingdom and not include within it those Christians who rejected the torah. It must be further supposed that the intended meaning of this saying was well-known in the Christian Jewish circles which transmitted it, and that it was correctly understood by the Christian Jewish and anti-Pauline evangelist and his intended readers. This interpretation, however, was probably lost or even suppressed at a very early stage in the Gospel's history. In the early second century, the Gospel of Matthew moved from its original Christian Jewish context and was adopted by Gentile Christianity, where it was completely reinterpreted according to the theology of its new law-free owners.<sup>7</sup> At some point in time a more literal and less anti-Pauline understanding of Matthew 5:19 was embraced, and modern scholarship has inherited this reinterpretation of this Matthean verse.

It is the conclusion of this study that Matthew 5:19 does not reflect a tolerant attitude on the part of the evangelist towards Paul and those Christians who followed his lawfree gospel. Despite the weight of modern Matthean scholarship which argues to the contrary, this logion does not suggest that these law-free Christians will inherit a minor share within the consummated kingdom of heaven. On the contrary and despite first appearances, this Matthean text, at both the Gospel and pre-Gospel stages, must be

understood as a reference to their exclusion from the end-time heavenly realm. This interpretation is consistent with the theology of Paul's Christian Jewish opponents who created this tradition and with the Christian Jewish perspective of the evangelist. As Matthew makes clear throughout the Gospel, those law-free Christians who disobey Jesus by rejecting the Mosaic law will be denounced by Jesus at the judgement, excluded from the kingdom and sent to the fires of Gehenna where they will burn for eternity. Such a harsh reading of Matthew 5:19 is also demanded by the immediate context of this logion. We should expect that once the Matthean Jesus has affirmed the validity of the whole torah in the current age (5:17-18) that those who do not observe it, either correctly or at all, would meet with such a dire eschatological fate. This conclusion may be considered unthinkable and unpalatable to many modern readers of the Gospel. An anti-Pauline Matthew who hoped for the eternal punishment of those Christians who failed to observe the torah does not square with the persistent view of Matthew as a caring pastor who composed his work for the benefit of the whole Christian church. Moreover, this understanding of Matthew doubtless raises a number of important theological questions which cannot be ignored. But as critical historians and interpreters of the Christian canon, we must face rather than repress the difficult issues which the study of these ancient texts uncovers. As we continue to rediscover and appreciate the Christian Jewish environment of the Gospel of Matthew, including its anti-Pauline perspective, we must be prepared for the inevitable challenges which arise as a result.

#### End notes

<sup>1</sup> So, most clearly, Davies & Allison 1988:497. See too Betz 1995:188; Luz 1985:239; Hagner 1993:108-109; Marguerat 1981:135 note 98. This notion of a hierarchy in heaven is thoroughly Jewish. For rabbinic references, see Strack & Billerbeck 1951-1956: I, 249-50; IV, 1138-1143.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'Jewish Christian' and 'Jewish Christianity' are neither appropriate nor helpful, and should be avoided when referring to those followers of Jesus who continued to observe the law. Since these people were still Jews whose religion was Judaism, it is preferable to use the labels 'Christian Jews' and 'Christian Judaism'. See the discussion in Sim 1998.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed treatment of this subject, see Lüdemann 1989.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussion of this subject, see Overman 1990; Stanton 1992:85-107, 113-206, 232-81; Saldarin 1994. See too Sim 1998.

<sup>5</sup> For further detail, see Sim 1998 and literature cited there.

<sup>6</sup> So, most recently, Snodgrass 1996:116. For earlier statements of this view, see Bonnard 1963:62 and Schweizer 1976:105-106.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on this process, see *Sim* 1998.

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