“From Covenantal Nomism to Universal Mission: Transformation of Conventional Jewish Soteriology in the Gospel of Matthew”

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Covenantal nomism is a theological concept proposed by E. P. Sanders in his influential book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, to describe the “pattern of religion” in Palestinian Judaism.¹ In an article that appeared shortly before the publication of the above mentioned book, Sanders said, “In the entire body of Palestinian Jewish literature between *Ben Sirah* and the redaction of the Mishnah, with only the exception of *IV Ezra*, membership in the covenant is considered salvation.”² Building on this observation, Sanders coined the new *terminus technicus*, covenantal nomism, to articulate the view that one’s salvific status is established on the basis of the covenant, which is by God’s initiative of election, and that the covenant requires obedience to the commandments of the Torah as the proper response to this grace and at the same time provides means of atonement for transgression.³ In other words, as a soteriological term it stipulates that “getting in” to the community of the saved people of God is purely by the grace of God, while “staying in” requires observation of the Torah in order to maintain one’s salvific

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³ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 236.
status. This means in Jewish soteriology one does not earn salvation by meritorious work. If that is the case, Judaism is not a legalistic religion that promotes work-righteousness or merit-based soteriology. That is, *sola gratia* is as much the foundation of salvation for Judaism as it is for Protestant theology. According to Sanders, this basic pattern of religion constitutes the essence of Jewish religion in terms of how that religion “works”. Sanders argues that this pattern of religion was common to all corpora of Jewish literature during the Second Temple period in Palestine.

Ever since it was proposed by Sanders in 1977, this concept has generated an almost unprecedented amount of discussion, affirmative as well as negative, in Pauline studies, NT scholarship in general, and in Jewish studies. Criticisms against covenantal nomism are diverse and multifaceted. However, there are several common threads that account for most, if not all, criticisms. One is that there is so much diversity in Judaism that it is impossible to talk about a common pattern such as covenantal nomism. Another thread is a charge that covenantal nomism

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4 Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75.

5 This “Common Judaism” is more clearly articulated by Sanders in his 1992 monograph. See Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), 47, “Within Palestine, ‘normal’ or ‘common’ Judaism was what the priests and the people agreed on. We shall see that in general Jews of the Greek-speaking Diaspora shared in this normal Judaism, although their participation in temple worship, which was an important ingredient, was restricted.” Sanders summarizes the common theology of this normative Judaism in terms of belief in monotheism, election, the law, and salvation based on the covenant, etc. (p.241) Then he gives a fuller account of the covenant nomism as part of this shared belief (pp.262-75).

6 This is the position that Neusner has consistently advocated against Sanders. See Jacob Neusner, *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Midnah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). Neusner calls Sanders’ covenantal nomism a conception he finds “valid but systematically trivial” (p.9). He also criticizes Sanders for imposing a Protestant theological category on Jewish texts without interpreting them on their own terms. See Neusner, review of E. P. Sanders, *Paul
is not actually attested in Jewish literature as pervasively and widely as Sanders says. Closely related to this is the argument that there are various other Jewish texts that support legalism, work-righteousness, merit based soteriology, or at least, a synergistic soteriology. In this line of critique, many Jewish texts that talk about the rewards and punishments, especially the eschatological ones, to be meted out by God to individuals according to one’s obedience, or lack thereof, are highlighted as evidence against the pattern of covenantal nomism.

Three decades after the publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Sanders wrote an autobiographical essay, in which he summarized the main points of this book among others and reaffirmed their correctness. Then shortly thereafter, he also published an academic article, in which he summarized the criticisms against covenantal nomism and responded to them. In this

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article, Sanders still adamantly defends the validity of covenantal nomism as the common soteriological understanding in all the main bodies of Palestinian Jewish literature between 200 BCE and 200 CE. One of the main points of his argument in this article is that covenantal nomism is an underlying principle in Judaism and therefore it may not necessarily be stated explicitly in every Jewish text. It is rather presupposed and taken for granted. On the other hand, Sanders argues that there are indicators in Jewish literature that reveal the presence of covenantal nomism even when the actual words do not appear: 1. the precedence of God’s grace to any requirements laid on humans, 2. the ubiquity of the view that atonement is possible for all transgressions, 3. the importance of group identity and cohesiveness. All these have a cumulative effect to make covenantal nomism as an all pervasive, common denominator of Jewish soteriology. He also points out that the reward and punishment do not correspond with salvation and damnation and that reward and punishment in Jewish literature should be understood in a larger context, i.e. “that of the love of God who reaches out to people and who will save those whom he punishes.” In that regard, Sanders says, “The idea that God is just and rewards correct behavior while punishing bad behavior does not oppose the idea that he saves by grace, since punishment is efficacious and results in atonement.”

Covenantal nomism is a heuristic concept in the form of an academic abstraction. Therefore, even if it had been proven absolutely right, which is not the case, it should not be imposed on any text a priori. When it is tested against an actual text, there should always be some adjustments in its definitions and connotations according to the particular literary or

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11 Sanders, “Covenantal Nomism Revisited,” 47.
historical contexts of the given text. This paper is an attempt to apply the notion of covenantal nomism to the text of the Gospel of Matthew as a way to understand the soteriology of Matthew as a Jewish thinker who would have shared much of whatever common denominators there were in Jewish theology with his contemporaries in Judaism. The question whether or not covenantal nomism is indeed the all pervasive pattern of religion for the common Judaism per se lies beyond the scope of this paper. The key question of this paper is whether the text of the Gospel of Matthew is conducive to the covenantal nomism as part of its soteriological foundation or not and how the application of this concept would shed new light on the interpretation of Matthew’s soteriology, which might otherwise have been overlooked.

I. Covenant in the Gospel of Matthew

The word διαθήκη is a ἀπαξ λεγόμενον in the Gospel of Matthew. It appears in Matt 26:28 (τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυνόμενον εἰς ἀφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν), which is part of the tradition of the Lord’s Supper. In this Dominical saying, Matthew preserves Mark 14:24 verbatim except for the addition of the phrase εἰς ἀφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν at the end. Another version of the Lord’s Supper has the phrase καὶνὴ διαθήκη for the cup (Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25). This suggests an allusion to the same phrase in Jer 31 (38 in LXX):31 (הָדַע הָנַה;)

13 To discuss the meaning of διαθήκη in the NT in general lies outside of the scope of this paper. For a recent and broad survey of the concept of covenant in the OT and NT, see Scott Hahn, “Covenant in the Old and New Testaments: Some Current Research (1994-2004)” CBR 3.2 (2005): 263-92.

14 The word διαθήκη is also a ἀπαξ λεγόμενον in Mark.

15 Apart from this verse, the only other occurrence of the word διαθήκη in Luke is in the song of Zechariah (Luke 1:72), which does refer to the original covenant that God made with the ancestors of Israel.
which is the only place in the OT that has a reference to a new covenant. In this oracle of Jeremiah, the return from the exile becomes a critical salvific event that invites a new covenant between God and the people of Israel. It is not clear whether the Jeremiah oracle implies the abrogation of the earlier covenant or not, and therefore scholarly opinions have been divided on this issue. It seems that in this case the burden of proof lies with those who argue for the abrogation of the original covenant. In the absence of textual evidence, it should be assumed that the new covenant is built up on the earlier one, renewing it and re-affirming it, rather than nullifying it. Read from that perspective, the text does seem to suggest both continuity and discontinuity between the earlier covenant and the new one. As the utterance of God in v.33 demonstrates, the Torah will be a key point of continuity between them, which is another indication that the new covenant does not obviate the original Sinai covenant. More importantly, Jer 31:31 makes it clear that the beneficiaries of this new covenant will be the entire Israel, both Israel and Judah. Both the earlier and the new covenant are part

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16 It is debated among scholars whether this oracle of the new covenant came from Jeremiah or from a Deuteronomistic author.

17 Terence E. Fretheim, Jeremiah (Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 442.


19 Fretheim, Jeremiah, 443.

20 Lundbom, Jeremiah 21-36, “There is nothing to suggest that this new covenant will be made with an expanded Israel, including Gentiles.” (p.466)
and parcel of Jewish soteriology in this Jeremiah passage. Later on, two communities will claim that they are the heir to this new covenant, that is, the Qumran community and early Christianity.

The phrase “the new covenant (הברית חדשה)” appears in CD VI, 19, VIII, 21, & XX, 12 and in 1QpHab II, 3. In both documents, the phrase is used as a reference to the new covenant that God made with the present community and as such it functions as evidence of legitimization of their existence as a separate community. The Damascus Document, especially CD XX, 12, clearly talks about the judgment against those who despise the new covenant established in the land of Damascus. Also, CD III, 12-13 mentions “(with) those who remained faithful in the commandments of God (המחוקקים múmûhû כשא) and “those who were left from them (אשה נותר ממה),” with whom God makes his covenant (ברית) for Israel for ever.\(^{21}\) It is not clear if the community behind the Damascus Document is the same as the Qumran community or a different community with a link to Damascus either as an actual geographic name or a metaphor. However, regardless of the exact identity of its community, the CD implies that its members no longer participate in the Jerusalem Temple cult and that the new covenant applies exclusively to the members of this separate community so that it may imply that this newly constituted covenant community replaces the old Israel.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) Even though the word הברית is not qualified by the adjective חדש in CD III, 13, it is clear that the concept is implied in the text.

\(^{22}\) Maxine L. Grossman, Reading for History in the Damascus Document: A Methodological Method (Brill, 2002), 163, “In addition to presenting the community as a structural equivalent of the nation of Israel, the text goes a step further, by providing images of the covenant community as Israel’s full-scale replacement.”
“traitors (חוטרים)” of the new covenant, who do not believe in the words of the Teacher of Righteousness (משה הצדקה) that are coming from the mouth of God. These statements in the Dead Sea Scrolls imply that the new covenant may not nullify or obviate the original covenant but that salvation requires embracing the new covenant that confirms and fulfils the original covenant.\(^{23}\)

Within the New Testament, there are four places that contain the phrase καινὴ διαθήκη:

Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25, 2 Cor 3:5-14, Heb 8:8-12, 9:15-22, (10:16-17). Among them, the Hebrews passages most clearly advocate the abrogation of the old covenant and the Christological interpretation of the new covenant that will replace the old one.\(^{24}\) In 2 Cor 3:5-7 Paul seems to juxtapose the earlier covenant written in letters on stone tablets and the new covenant written in spirit. The portrayal of the old covenant in this passage is demonstrably negative as if it is salvifically invalid, even though there is no specific declaration that the old is abrogated.\(^{25}\) However, the use of the phrase καινὴ διαθήκη in 1 Cor 11:25 should not be taken to mean the same as it does in the above mentioned passages in Heb 8 & 9 and 2 Cor 3.

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\(^{25}\) Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People (London: SCM, 1983), 138. Commenting on 2 Cor 3:4-18, Sanders says, “The simplest explanation of this dual form of contrast seems to be that he came to relegate the Mosaic
Neither the Markan-Matthean version of the Lord’s Supper tradition nor its Corinthian-Lukan counterpart seems to use the word διαθήκη in a specific sense of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. In fact, it is not even clear who exactly are the parties concerned in the covenant that Jesus mentions in relation to his blood. In one version, his blood is said to be shed “for many” (περι πολλῶν in Matt 26:28/ὑπὲρ πολλῶν in Mark 14:24), and in another, it is “for you” (ὑπὲρ υἱῶν in Luke 22:20).26 The covenant could be between God and those who are present there with or without Jesus included. Or it could be between Jesus and those who are present there. There is a typological allusion in this passage to Exod 24:8, in which Moses takes the blood, dashes it on the people and says, “See the blood of the covenant (λακανις) that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” This typology has been used by scholars to interpret Jesus as a second Moses, especially in Matthew.27 This may or may not be the case. However, it should be noted that the Matthean text itself does not explicitly make that connection.28 More importantly, there is no indication in the Matthean version of the Lord’s Supper that the covenant in Jesus’ blood would nullify the Sinai covenant of Moses and replace it. For Matthew, the original covenant remains valid to its full intent (Matt 5:17-19) regardless of the specific meaning of the covenant in the blood of Jesus. So, if this covenant in Matt 26:28,

dispensation to a less glorious place because he found something more glorious and that he then, thinking in black-and-white terms, developed the death/life contrast.” (Italics his)

26 Ulrich Luz, Matthew 21-28. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 381, says that these two different references, i.e., “for many” and “for you”, are in fact the same.


28 Luz, Matthew 21-28, 380.
which is not designated as a new covenant, has an allusion to Exod 24:8 at all as part of the authorial intent, it would be more in line with the new covenant in Jer 31:31 that would renew and fulfill but not negate the earlier one.

Through this examination, it is made clear that the word διαθήκη does not feature prominently in the sayings of Jesus in the New Testament except for the Last Supper. This could imply that the notion of covenant is not important for Jesus, or it could mean that it is so foundational for all Jews and therefore it is presupposed rather than stated, as Sanders suggests. If applied to the historical Jesus, this issue could only be highly speculative. As for the gospel writers, this question can only be adequately answered when the identity of the addressees of each gospel is taken into consideration. If the audience is predominantly gentile, the absence of the covenant language may indeed indicate lack of strong interest in the covenantal theology on the part of the author of the given gospel. However, if the audience is Jewish (or Jewish Christian, for that matter), which is the case with Matthew, the ambiguity of the meaning of the scarcity of the covenant language remains. Then, other indicators, such as the ones that Sanders

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30 Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 337, “Since he (Jesus) did not spend his time discussing the covenant historically . . ., nor discussing the fine points of obedience, but rather preparing his followers and hearers for the coming redemption, I have managed to write virtually an entire book without the phrase ‘covenantal nomism.’” By this statement, Sanders implied that Jesus assumed the covenantal nomism. This point is criticized by Dale Allison, “Jesus and the Covenant: A Response to E. P. Sanders” JSNT 29 (1987): 57-78. Here Allison assumes that Jesus had a Christocentric view of things, considering himself to be the destined king of Israel and that je redefined salvation with reference to his own person.” (p.72) Allison’s criticism against Sanders holds true only when his assumption of Jesus’ own Christocentric self identity is proven correct, which is of course very difficult.
suggested, should be searched in Matthew to determine if covenantal theology is indeed presumed in the text even if it is not stated.

II. Election and Jewish identity in the Gospel of Matthew

It goes without saying that the notion of election is foundational in the covenantal theology in Jewish tradition and it is a critical component in Sanders’ construction of the covenantal nomism. That is, election of Israel is purely by the grace of God and being born into the covenant community is also by the grace of God. The Gospel of Matthew seems to take this notion of election for granted and therefore the idea that the election is by God’s grace could be presumed as implied in the Gospel of Matthew, even though the word χάρις itself does not appear in the text of Matthew. As for the concept of election, Matthew has a few passages that explicitly mention “elected ones (ἐκλεκτοί),” and it also has other passages in which the notion of election can be assumed to be embedded in the text, even though it is not stated, such as passages that characterize gentiles as outsiders. We will examine the latter first in this section.

1. Passages that refer to gentiles

Matthew’s treatment of the gentiles is very complex and the attitude toward the gentiles in Matthew’s text is highly ambiguous. This has puzzled Matthean scholars for a long time.

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31 See footnote 10.

Generally, the majority opinion tended to emphasize those passages in Matt that portray gentiles in a positive light and therefore to see Matthew as basically pro-gentile. However, the more recent trend has been to see the Matthean community primarily as a Jewish (Christian) sect within Judaism, and in that line of thought there has been a call, especially by David Sim, for revising this position, taking into serious consideration the ambiguity of evidence in the text. Sim examines both positive accounts and negative remarks about gentiles in Matt and puts them in a bigger perspective on the Matthean Community as a sect within formative Judaism and comes to a conclusion that the attitude of the Matthean community towards the Gentile world is consistent with the law-observant Petrine church. Sim does recognize the aspect in certain Matthean texts that invites gentiles into the community but he argues that it does not necessarily prove that the Matthean community was actively engaged in gentile mission. Instead, Sim says, “It (the Matthean community) did, however, accept Gentiles into the community provided they underwent circumcision (if male) and upheld the requirements of the Torah.”

Another possibility is that the Matthean community embraced gentiles into their mix, either by active gentile mission or by passive acceptance, without necessarily making them formal converts into Judaism. It is doubtful that the Matthean community had a rigid definition for the requirements for membership. Given the complexity of the ways different Jews

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35 Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community*, 79, “(T)he definition of who was within and who outside the Jewish community was far less clear in the first century than it became in later centuries after the development of more precise and elaborate talmudic categories. Numerous gentiles had a variety of relationships with the Jewish community, and what was required to be a member of the community varies in time and place.”
regarded gentiles during and after the Second Temple period, it is more likely that there were more than one way for gentile persons to be drawn to and associated with the Matthean community. Some may “have come forward” as formal converts (προσήλυτοι); some may have just become “God-fearers (θεοφοβούµενοι)”. With that caveat, it is more important to recognize that the Matthean language about the gentiles, with all the ambiguities duly noted, should be put in the larger picture in the Gospel of Matthew, which maintains the boundary between Jews and gentiles and which emphasizes the continuing validity of the Torah and its binding nature for all the members of the Matthean community. Whoever joined the community must have known that he or she joined a very Jewish community.

To treat all the Matthean passages that deal with gentiles goes beyond the scope of this paper. So, I will limit myself to discuss a few significant passages in Matthew that have direct bearings on the issue of boundaries and group-identity for the Matthean community, interpreting them in light of the notion of election and covenant. Matt 6:32 juxtaposes τὰ ἑθνη and the addressees in the second person plural (ὑμών), as if the “heavenly father” is only the God of the addressees (ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος) and not of the gentiles. Matt 5:47 and 6:7 also make a dismissive reference to οἱ ἑθνῖκοι as outsiders vis-à-vis the addressees. It is possible that Matthew in these verses is transmitting what came to him as a source material.36 However, the fact that Matthew left the disparaging language about the gentiles intact implies that he and his community share the original ethos of understanding and articulating their self identity as Jews over against the gentiles. Granted that Matthew is distinguishing his community from other groups in Judaism, this intramural tension does not seem to blur the primary boundary between

36 For the hypothesis that the Sermon on the Mount as a whole is a pre-Matthean composition, see Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 43-44.
Jews and gentiles in Matthew’s text. In a similar vein, Matt 18:17 lumps together ὁ ἑθνικὸς καὶ ὁ τελῶνης, as if they are representative of ultimate outsiders to the Matthean community. This case is particularly poignant because in this passage the Matthean community is being referred to as the ἐκκλησία. That is, for Matthew, the ἐκκλησία is most probably smaller than the sum total of the Jews but it still does not obscure the salvifically meaningful distinction between Jews and gentiles.

In the commissioning discourse, the Matthean Jesus instructs his disciples who are being sent out for mission not to go to the way of gentiles (εἰς ὅδὸν ἑθνῶν μὴ ἀπέλθητε, Matt 10:5) but to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (πορεύεσθε δὲ μάλλον πρὸς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἶκου Ἰσραήλ, 10:6), as if gentiles qua gentiles are by default outside the boundaries of the kingdom of heavens. This exclusive mission statement is re-iterated by Jesus regarding his own mission in the story of the Canaanite woman (οὐκ ἀπεστάλην εἰ μὴ εἰς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἶκου Ἰσραήλ, Matt 15:24). The fact that Jesus relents and grants this gentile woman’s wish at the end of the story does not necessarily change the cited principle. Just like the story of the healing of the centurion’s son (8:5-13), the episode of the Canaanite woman is an ad hoc event that stands out because of its exceptional nature rather than a paradigmatic case that changes the principle.37

Also, at the end of the gospel, the resurrected Jesus commands his eleven disciples to go out to πάντα τὰ ἑθνῆ, which may indicate that the Matthean community eventually opened up to the gentiles and conducted an active gentile mission. However, even if there was an active gentile mission by the Matthean community, which Matt 28:19 seems to imply, it should not

automatically lead to the assumption that the Matthean community therefore became predominantly gentile. Most probably, the Matthean community remained predominantly Jewish with an addition of a number, however great or small, of gentile converts. What is not clear is the terms of the gentile admission to the Matthean community. Were the gentile sympathizers asked to formally convert into Judaism by receiving circumcision or its equivalent? Or were they allowed to remain gentiles and to join the community? Sim believes they were required to convert into Judaism. He argues, “We must take into account as well the great probability that in so far as the great commission does avert to a gentile mission that circumcision as a mark of entry was understood by both author and reader alike. Had Matthew’s community abandoned this most Jewish of practices we should expect some defense of this stance in the material which treats the conflict with formative Judaism.”38 This is certainly a possibility, but there is no conclusive evidence for it. Whether circumcision and formal conversion to Judaism was required of gentiles or not, it is clear that once a gentile person was admitted to the Matthean community, he or she was subjected to the fully binding nature of the Torah and the Prophets as salvifically efficacious terms (Matt 5:17-19). In that sense, the Matthean community remained fundamentally Jewish, no matter how many gentiles might have become part of it, and the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, which is an important aspect of the covenantal nomism, was upheld in Matthew.

2. Passages that deal with election

The verb ἐκλέγομαι is not used either as a conjugated verb or as a participle/infinitive in Matthew. An aorist indicative form of it appears in Mark 13:20, which is the only verse in Mark that has

this verb: διὰ τοῦς ἐκλεκτοὺς οὗς ἔξελέξατο. But Matthew deletes this clause, οὗς ἔξελέξατο, from Mark 13:20 obviously because it is redundant (Matt 24:22). The noun ἐκλεκτοῖ is used four times in Matt (22:14, 24:22, 24:24, 24:31). All of them are mentioned without any explicit explanation as to who they are. This means there is a clear understanding between the author and the readers about who are meant by the ἐκλεκτοῖ. The most natural assumption is that the notion of the people of Israel as chosen by God is maintained in these Matthean references to ἐκλεκτοῖ with no modification. That is, there is no new theology of election that would specifically identify the members of the Matthean community as elect, such as the one expressed in the Hodayot, in which an individual is destined by God to belong to the sectarian community:

And I know that there is hope for the one whom you fashioned out of dust for an eternal community, 1QH X, 20-21. However, at a deeper level, there seems to be room for new interpretation of election in Matthew’s language.

At the end of the parable of the royal wedding feast, Matthew declares that πολλοὶ γάρ εἰσίν κλητοί, ὁλίγοι δὲ ἐκλεκτοί (Matt 22:14). This distinction between the called (κλητοί) and the elect (ἐκλεκτοί) poses a rather puzzling question as to the identity of each category. The word κλητοί is definitely linked to the κεκληµένους (Matt 22:2) and therefore it most probably refers to the leaders of the Jewish religious institutions (οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι τοῦ λαοῦ in 21:23 and οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι in 21:45, and Σαδδουκαίοι in 22:23), against whom a series

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39 The singular ἐκλεκτός is not used by Matthew.

40 For a recent treatment of the notion of election in the Dead Sea Scrolls see Sigrud Grundheim, The Crux of Election (WUNT II.202; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 55-69.

41 Davies & Allison. Gospel according to Saint Matthew, 1.206.
of parables are spoken by Jesus in Matt 21:28 – 22:14. The Matthean text itself says that when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them (21:43). So, the κλητοί in the parable of the royal wedding feast are the Jewish leaders who were originally called but declined the invitation, and the ἐκλεκτοί are the ones who are invited later and responded positively.\(^4\) If allegorically applied to the story of the parable, these two groups are mutually exclusive. Then a question arises; were the religious leaders not originally part of the ἐκλεκτοί? Or is the term ἐκλεκτοί given a new definition here? The text is ambiguous. Most probably, Matthew sees the religious leaders as ones who have fallen out of the community of the ἐκλεκτοί, so that the scope of the ἐκλεκτοί in Matt has been significantly altered.

There are two important observations to make in this regard. One is that there is no evidence either in the parable itself (22:2-13) or in the interpretive conclusion (22:14) that the ἐκλεκτοί are the gentiles who will replace the people of Israel. It is true there has been a tendency in Matthean scholarship to identify the κλητοί as the historic Israel and the ἐκλεκτοί as the church where the distinction between Jews and gentiles is nullified.\(^4\) But there is no evidence for such a replacement theology in the Matthean text itself. If that is the case, the ἐκλεκτοί must be a reference to those among the chosen people of Israel, who unlike the leaders remain faithful to

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\(^4\) Another possibility is that not all those who have come are ἐκλεκτοί but only those who are wearing the wedding garments are. Then there are three categories rather than two. In any case, a precise allegorical correspondence cannot be given.

the covenant and therefore are still eligible for salvation. If gentiles are included in this group, they would be there as new members of a Jewish community, who are now placed under the law.

Another observation is that not even the ἐκλεκτοί are always safe in Matt, because the parable talks about one person among those who have come and joined the feast who will eventually be thrown into the outer darkness. This is certainly a very different soteriology from the conventional form of covenantal nomism, such as found in m. Sanhedrin 10:1 that says, “بال ישראל יש להם חלום לעולם הבא" (All Israel have a share in the world to come.)” In the Gospel of Matthew, a membership with a community of the chosen people is no guarantee for salvation. This point will be affirmed later in the eschatological discourse (Matt chs.24-25).

In Matt 24:24, which talks about the signs and wonders of the pseudo-messiahs (ψευδόχριστοι) and the pseudo-prophets in the end times, there is an ominous implication that they might be able to lead astray even the elect (ὡστε πλανήσαι, εἰ δυνατόν, καὶ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς). This is not surprising, though, in light of the fact that the religious leaders have already fallen away and therefore are no longer part of the ἐκλεκτοί, as far as Matthew is concerned. This verse seems to be giving a warning to the members of the Matthean community to the effect that being part of a Jewish Christian group such as the Matthean community is not coterminous with salvation. This idea is significantly different from the soteriological pattern of covenantal nomism. This rather unique idea is also in sync with the recurring theme in Matthew that good and bad always coexist even among the chosen disciples of Jesus and by inference within the
Matthean community, as the parable of the weeds (Matt 13:24-30) symbolizes with the juxtaposition of the σῖτος and the ζιζάνιον.\(^4^4\)

On the other hand, this point is balanced with a prospect that the elect are not necessarily limited to the members of the Matthean community. In Matt 24:31, the Son of Man at his parousia will send out his messengers and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heavens to another (καὶ ἐπισυνάξουσιν τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων ἀπ’ ἄκρων οὐρανῶν ἐως τῶν ἄκρων αὐτῶν). There is no hint in this passage that the elect of the Son of Man are a brand new category different from the historic chosen people of God. Rather, they seem to refer comprehensively to all the chosen people of Israel both in the heartland of Palestine and in the Diaspora, who remain faithful to the Torah and the Prophets as they are interpreted by Jesus and who are therefore qualified for the eschatological salvation. Again, if gentiles are included there, they are included in the capacity of their new identity as law-abiding members of the Matthean Jewish Christian community as well as followers of Jesus Christ.

The examination of the notion of election and covenant in Matt has revealed that Matthew as a Jewish theologian has not invented a new wheel for the theology of election. He takes it for granted that his community of followers of Jesus Christ is primarily a Jewish community and as such it is a community of chosen people of God. In that sense Matthew is said to assume that it is by God’s grace that the members of his community are given the status of the elect. In a similar vein, he maintains the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, even though the

\(^4^4\) In Matthew, Jesus frequently uses the adjective ἄλγοστος/ἄλγοστοι (6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8) and the noun ἄλγοστια (17:20) for his disciples/followers.
terms of demarcation may not have been clearly defined for himself or for the members of the community. But he also seems to have altered the scope of the ἐκλεκτοὶ in such a way that parts of people of the historic Israel, especially its religious leaders, are now excluded and at the same time some gentiles are included among the elect with or without formal conversion to Judaism. He also hints at the possibility that ἐκλεκτοὶ are not necessarily guaranteed for salvation either. As noted earlier, this seems to be a tipping point that makes Matthew’s soteriology significantly different from covenantal nomism.

III. Nomism in the Gospel of Matthew

The nomism part of Sanders’ covenantal nomism has to do with the measures provided in the law for maintaining one’s membership in the covenant community. In principle, this requires observation of all the Torah commandments, but in Sanders’ scheme, a great emphasis is laid on the provisions of the Torah that absolve any act of breaching the Torah commandments such as guilt offerings or sin offerings. The hermeneutical principle in Matt 5:17-19 in no ambiguous terms affirms the lasting validity of the Torah in its entirety and therefore it implies the continuing obligation on the part of the covenant people including the members of the Matthean community to keep the entire Torah. This is clear evidence that Matthew composed this passage, whether he was relying on a source material or not, with the Jewish audience in mind, who are still under the authority of the Torah. However, there is no hint of legalistic perfectionism in this passage. It is interesting to notice that in the context of emphasizing the binding nature of the
Torah, Matt 5:19 implies that even the one who loosens up a Torah commandment will at least be in the kingdom of heavens, albeit being called the least there.\(^{45}\)

One of the important aspects of Sanders’ theory of covenantal nomism is that the primary soteriological function of the law is to allow the members of the covenant community to maintain their salvific status by providing measures to deal with failures to observe the commandments. There is a notion that the reward and punishment according to one’s faithfulness to the Torah will be meted out wither in this world or in the world to come, but nevertheless that does not alter the status of the members of the community as saved people.\(^{46}\) If this is part of the core soteriological rubric of the covenantal nomism of the common Judaism, the Matthean text seems to have taken a critical departure from it, because in Matthew both the covenant people of Israel and the church are a mixed group and those who are already in should still be held accountable for their lives at the last judgment with a living possibility that they may not be let in the kingdom of heaven depending on the final verdict.

\(^{45}\) For a brief discussion of the suggestion by scholars that the word \(\varepsilon\lambda\chi\iota\sigma\tau\varsigma\) here could be a word play on the name of Paul (L. paulus meaning “small”), see Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1985), 51. If that is indeed part of the authorial intent in this passage, one can say that the anti-Pauline rhetoric of Matthew here, however substantial it may be, is still benign and not as scathing as that of the later anti-Pauline language such as in Pseudo-Clementine literature.

\(^{46}\) Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE*, 272-73, “In most discussions in the Jewish literature of our period, reward and punishment function within this world; life after death is not a major theme, and Christian scholars often impose soteriology on the material. Further, when Jews thought about salvation beyond this world, they did not suppose that fifty-one per cent of one’s total deeds would determine the issue. God’s grace always emerges as the most important point.”
It is assumed that as a Jewish sectarian group, the Matthean community still acknowledges in principle the validity of the temple cults, even though it might have already become a mute point by the time of the composition of the Gospel of Matthew because of the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent cessation of the temple cult. Matt 5:23-24 shows that the Matthean Jesus takes it for granted that his addressees are participating in the temple cult. Whether that would still apply in principle to the Matthean community is ambiguous. But, even if we were to assume that the various measures to deal with disobedience of the law were still available for the Matthean community, it is mitigated by the fact that in Matthew’s soteriology such measures are not the kinds of provisions that Sanders speaks of in the context of covenantal nomism. Also, Matthew’s language of reward and punishment does have a soteriological overtone. A statement like Matt 5:20, which is given in the context of emphasizing the necessity to observe the Torah commandments, implies that there are different degrees of righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) and one has to achieve/maintain a certain level of it in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Considering that both the addressees of the Sermon on the Mount and the intended readers of Matthew’s gospel are primarily Jewish people, this statement is a provocative declaration that the membership of the covenant community is no guarantee for salvation and that conventional ways of observing the commandments may no longer be salvifically efficacious.

47 Matthew’s repeated references to “their” synagogues should not necessarily lead to a conclusion that he now regards all Jewish institutions as others. Matt 23:23 also affirms the cultic laws even in the context of highlighting the weightier matters of the law. Considering that this anti-Pharisaic rhetoric in ch. 23 reflects more of Matthew’s contemporary situation than that of the historical Jesus, one can safely assume that the principle behind Matt 23:23 is still valid for the Matthean community.
What then is the correct way of fulfilling the obligation to observe the Torah commandments that would ultimately allow one to enter the kingdom of heaven in Matthew? The context makes it clear that the δικαιοσύνη that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 5:20) is articulated in the so-called six theses and antitheses in Matt 5:21-47, in which honoring the intent rather than the letter of the Torah is required of the addressees. Together with the declaration of the full validity of the Torah in Matt 5:17-20, this section provides the hermeneutical principle of the Torah by Jesus,48 which is as salvifically binding as the Torah itself. In other words, the Matthean soteriology is based on the unique combination of the Torah as the unshakable foundation of salvation given by the grace of God through the covenant on the one hand and the new authoritative interpretation of it by Jesus as the supreme authoritative teacher of the Torah par excellence on the other.

Another direct statement in regard to the question how one enters the kingdom of heaven is found in Matt 7:21 (ο/uni1Fω0 π/uni1FB6/uni03C2 λέγων µοι κύριε κύριε, ε/uni1F30σελεύσεται ε/uni1F30/uni03C2 ν βασιλείαν τ/uni1FF6ν ο/uni1Fω0ραν/uni1FF6ν, /uni1F00λλ' /uni1F41 ποι/uni1FF6ν τ/uni1F78 θέληµα το/uni1FE6 πατρό/uni03C2 µου το/uni1FE6 /uni1F10ν το/uni1FD6/uni03C2 ο/uni1Fω0ρανο/uni1FD6/uni03C2). Having rejected the scribal and the Pharisaic way of observing the Torah as a means to enter the kingdom of heaven earlier (Matt 5:20), the Matthean Jesus is now denying the salvific efficacy of calling Jesus κύριε (7:21). Calling the name of Jesus as χύριος may or may not specifically mean confessing him as one’s savior in this particular context. However, given the obvious fact that the members of the Matthean community are primarily, if not exclusively, Jews, who follow Jesus as the σωτήρ and

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παντοκράτωρ,⁴⁹ it is remarkable that calling out to Jesus as κύριε will not guarantee eschatological salvation. This Matthean saying of Jesus seems to have an allusion to Rom 10:13 (πᾶς γὰρ δὲ ἂν ἐπικαλέσηται τὸ δόμομα κυρίου σωθήσεται), which may even suggest an implied anti-Pauline ethos.⁵⁰ Regardless of the correctness of the argument for an anti-Pauline ethos in Matt 7:21, the point is that the two sayings in Matt 5:20 and 7:21 combined seem to imply an emphatic denial of any guarantee for salvation on the basis of conventional observation of the Torah as members of the historic covenant community of Israel or a mere confession of Jesus as κύριος as members of the community of followers of Jesus. In this sense, it is again made clear that covenantal nomism is being radically altered by Matthew.

The upshot of these theologizing of Matthew is that there are now two foundations of salvation in the Gospel of Matthew. One is the Torah and the other is its interpretation by Jesus. Both are salvifically binding. But at the same time, neither the membership of the covenant community nor that of the Jesus movement, including the Matthean community or any other early Christian communities, provides guarantee for salvation. In that sense, Matthew has clearly broken away from the fundamental soteriological ethos of the covenantal nomism as it is defined by Sanders.

⁴⁹ Neither the word σωτηρία nor σωτήρ appears in the Gospel of Matthew, but the verb σώζειν is frequently used by Matthew (1:21, 8:25, 9:21, 22, 10:22, 14:30, 36, 16:25, 19:25, 24:13, 22, 27:40, 42, 49). The word παντοκράτωρ does not appear in Matthew either, but the concept is expressed in 28:18.

⁵⁰ For an extensive argument for the anti-Pauline perspective of this passage, see David Sim, "Matthew 7.21-23: Further Evidence of its Anti-Pauline Perspective" NTS 53 (2007) 325-43. In this article, Sim argues that those condemned in Matt 7:21-23 are specifically Pauline Christians. He develops this argument mainly on the basis of an antinomian interpretation of ἀνομία in vs.23 and a comparison between the activities of prophecy, exorcism and miracles mentioned in vs.22 and their Pauline parallels.
Matthew’s denial of the salvific significance of the membership of the covenant community and the departure from covenantal nomism as a result seems to have become the major impetus for the gradual opening up of the mission scope in the Gospel of Matthew from the initial limitation to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ, Matt 10:5) to the post-Easter mission mandate to go out to all the nations (πάντα τὰ έθνη, 28:19). Since being born into the covenant community does not guarantee salvation, the Jewish members of the Matthean community do not necessarily enjoy an exclusive privilege as people who are saved by default. The flip side of the coin is that the gentiles who joined the Matthean community have an equal footing with the original Jewish members, when it comes to soteriological obligations, i.e. doing the will of God revealed in the Torah as interpreted by Jesus. It is still the Jewish Torah interpreted by a Jewish teacher Jesus. So, the distinctive Jewishness of the Matthean soteriology is still strongly maintained, which is different from Pauline soteriology. However, the exclusive nature of the covenantal nomism of the so-called common Judaism is radically transformed into universal mission. In other words, the Matthean soteriology can be characterized as a Torah-based Jewish soteriology that is articulated in (Jewish-) universal terms made possible through the hermeneutics of Jesus on the interpretation of the Torah.

IV. Concluding Remark: Ambiguities of Salvation in Matthew

If Matthew as a Jewish (-Christian) theologian has moved away from covenantal nomism, and if covenantal nomism is characteristic of the common Judaism at that time, is his soteriology becoming the less Jewish and the more Christian because of that? This is a difficult question to answer partly because the notion of salvation is expressed at multiple levels in the Gospel of Matthew and partly because the Gospel of Matthew has mostly, if not exclusively, been read in
the larger context of Christian canon. Therefore, recognizing the ambiguity of salvation\textsuperscript{51} on the one hand and reading Matthew in its own terms rather than imposing upon it extra-textual Christian theological ideas will be a critical reading strategy to understand Matthew’s soteriology.

Matthew contains a significant amount of apocalyptic material and it definitely has an impact on his soteriology. As a Jewish theologian, Matthew maintains the classic Jewish notion of \textit{salvation here and now},\textsuperscript{52} but at the same time as an apocalyptic thinker he envisions an ultimate eschatological salvation, which is symbolized by the expression, “entering the kingdom of heaven(s) (εἰσέρχεσθαι εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν).” This is obviously different from “getting in” to a covenant community. For Matthew, deliverance from any condition of present predicament is salvation and there are many instances in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus dispenses such salvation to individuals. Healing the centurion’s πάθος (Matt 8:5-13) and healing the Canaanite woman’s daughter (15:21-28) are representative examples. In both cases the healing is extended on the basis of the πίστις of the one who requested the healing (8:10 & 13; 15:28). Such deliverance from disease is certainly an aspect of salvation, but it should not automatically be identified as granting the eschatological salvation, which is still reserved for those who do the will of God that is revealed in the Torah and interpreted through the particular hermeneutics of Jesus.

\textsuperscript{51} For the ancient semantic theories that recognize inherent ambiguity of connotations of words used by ancient authors, see F. Gerald Downing, “Ambiguity, Ancient Semantics, and Faith” \textit{NTS} 56 (2009), 139-62. Downing’s chosen example of the ambiguity of a critical vocabulary in the NT is faith, but his theory can easily be applied to the notion of salvation as well.

\textsuperscript{52} Sanders, \textit{Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE}, 272-73.
Another important aspect of Matthew’s salvation is that there is no statement in the entire text of Matthew that identifies a belief in Jesus or a confession of him as κύριος as a necessary and sufficient condition for the ultimate eschatological salvation. In that sense, Matthew is very different from Paul, who did say, ἐὰν ὁμολογήσης ἐν τῷ στόματί σου κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ πιστεύσῃς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου ὅτι ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ἤγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν, σωθήσῃ (Rom 10:9), and, πᾶς γὰρ δὲ ἂν ἐπικαλέσηται τὸ δόμομα κυρίου σωθήσεται (Rom 10:13). Also, the theological interpretation of the death of Jesus as vicarious suffering and penal substitution is not explicitly developed in Matthew’s text either. It is true that Matthew preserves the Markan saying, καὶ γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἠλευθερώθη εἰς ἄλλα διακόνησι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν (Mark 10:45) verbatim in Matt 20:28. However, in the absence of any further interpretive gloss provided by Matthew, this saying especially in Matthew’s Jewish context should be taken as a reference to the similar redemptive impact of a martyr’s death such as the one in the Maccabean literature. Even the statement in Matt 26:28 (τὸ τοῦ γὰρ ἐστίν τὸ αἷμα μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυνόμενον εἰς ἀφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν) does not clearly indicate how the absolution of sins will be granted. Whatever the unarticulated meaning was in Matthew’s mind, there is no evidence that it refers to the theology that whoever believes in Jesus will be forgiven their sins just by virtue of the belief itself.

In sum, salvation is not a matter of belief or confession or even a membership of a particular community in the Gospel of Matthew. It is for Matthew still a matter of life according

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53 The word λύτρον is a ἀπαξ λεγόμενον both in Mark and Matthew, at Mark 10:45 and Matt 20:28 respectively. Also, neither λύτρωσις nor ἀπολύτρωσις appears in Mark or Matthew.

54 The word ἀφεσις is a ἀπαξ λεγόμενον in this verse in the Gospel of Matthew.
to the will of God in the Torah as it is interpreted by Jesus. In that sense Matthew’s soteriology is still articulated in Jewish terms within the parameters of Jewish theology, however far it is removed from the pattern of soteriology of the covenantal nomism, and at the same time it is very much anchored in the teaching and the life of Jesus that is based on the principal will of God in the Torah as he understood it. It has a universalistic orientation, even though this universalism is still of a Jewish character. This may represent the effort of Matthew as a Jewish theologian who is trying to maintain both his Jewish and Christian identity, while grappling with the fact that substantial alterations of conventional Jewish ideas are being made in various early Christian communities. Unlike Paul, Matthew is not willing to say there is no longer Jew or Gentile in Christ (Gal 3:28). Nor does he want to believe that Christ is the end of the Torah (Rom 10:4). For Matthew, the Torah endures for ever (Matt 5:17-20). Previously, the Torah was exclusively for the Jews only. Now, in Matthew’s Jewish Christian theology, the Jewish Torah as newly interpreted by Jesus’ particular hermeneutics is made available for all the nations. If Paul departed from covenantal nomism and if by doing so he also broke with Judaism, as Sanders argues, Matthew too radically alters covenantal nomism but nevertheless he self-consciously stays within Judaism. This inherently entails unresolved tensions within the Matthean text, which is understandable because any alteration of traditional ideas would cause a certain degree of

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55 For an argument that Paul broke with Judaism, see Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 511-15 and 543-56. A fuller treatment of this subject is in Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 207-10. As Heikki Räisänen points out in “A Controversial Jew and His Conflicting Convictions: Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People Twenty Years After” in Udoh et al. ed. *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities*, 319-35, Paul’s break with Judaism may not have been fully conscious and there is inconsistency in his thoughts. But there is a cumulative effect in Paul’s negative portrayals of the Jewish law that leads to an ultimate departure of his theology from Judaism.
category confusion and cognitive dissonance. So, characterizing Matthew’s soteriology straightly as a “transformation of covenantal nomism to universal mission” may indeed be too simplistic and therefore it may not do justice to the complexities of Matthew’s text. There are still too many unresolved tensions among these conceptual categories. But it may not necessarily inflict too much injustice to Matthew’s text, because leaving tensions in the text as unresolved rather than imposing a forced resolution seems to be a preferred method of Matthew’s writing.