



Creating Community Identity in Matthew's Gospel Narrative

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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Tekalign Duguma Negewo is lecturer in New Testament at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis Ababa and Exegetical Advisor at Wycliffe Ethiopia. According to his preface, *Identity Formation in the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative* is a revision of Tekalign's doctoral dissertation from Stellenbosch University. The author believes that Matthew wrote his Gospel to address the *Sitz im Leben* (life setting, context, or current issues) of readers with the intention that the Gospel would have a formative impact on them.

From the introduction, Tekalign premised his work on the assumption that Matthew's Gospel played a key role in forming the identity of the Matthean community, made up of Jews (Judeans) and Gentiles (non-Judeans). On the recipients, Tekalign does not parrot the assumption that the Gospel of Matthew was written to a specific community, which is "a product of too much guess work" (3). His submission is that both Matthew and the other Gospels had in mind the wider community of first-century Christians in general with general identity-forming roles. This means that the authors of the Gospels anticipated a wider circulation of their writings among Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. This "ideal readers' community" (1) does not replace Israel. Rather, it is a reconstituted Israel based on Israel's traditions. This group permitted non-Judeans to be part of the community and to share her messianic blessings. Tekalign's posture rejects the recycled view that there was a distinct extant community in a specific locality to whom Matthew wrote his gospel. He opted for social identity theory to examine the identity formation process for the Matthean community. This informed the choice of socio-narrative reading

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as against other methods such as historical-critical, literary critical, socio-scientific, narrative critical, and semiological (meaning-making using signs and symbols) readings. According to Tekalign, those methods fall short of adequate elucidation of how the text was intended to be received by its implied readers.

Divided into eight chapters, the author probes how Matthew wrote to form the identity of his readers. The first chapter surveys the history of research on the subject. This historical quest borders on identity formation (how Matthean community identified herself); Matthean community (or the community behind the Gospel), using historical-critical method and literary criticism; functions of the Gospel of Matthew (teaching or catechetical manual, liturgical handbook, a biography, or identity shaping manual); and the Gospel and non-Jews. Tekalign believes that an integrative approach is appropriate in investigating the identity formation of the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 2 examines the socio-narrative reading of the Gospels. This is a combination of literary and social studies aimed at seeing the Gospel account as “mythmaking and an identity-forming effort” (69). Tekalign uses social identity construction theory to show how the implied author created the identity of the ideal readers’ community by comparing them with the others, the non-Judeans in general. According to Tekalign, the Gospel of Matthew is a myth with the aim of creating the identity of its readers. Tekalign distinguishes between *myth* and *fiction* because Matthew has historical reference in mind. Matthean use of myth is a means of disseminating ideology. But if myths are not necessarily historically correct, their authenticity and reliability remain questionable.

Chapter 3 examines the negative stereotyped non-Judeans in the Matthean narrative. This traces the boundaries between Judeans and non-Judeans in the Second Temple as reflected in some passages of Matthew that portray the non-Judeans in a negative light such as the Gadarenes (Matt 8:32–34), Pilate (Matt 27:1–6, 62–66), and the Roman soldiers (Matt 27:27–28:15). The concept of τὰ ἔθνη (*ta ethnē*)¹ here denotes “otherness” or those who do not belong both by status and behavior (83). Chapter 4 is about non-Judeans, primarily in Matthew’s genealogy. Tekalign’s argument here is that the inclusion of the four non-Judeans — Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba the wife of Uriah — in the genealogy demonstrates the assimilation and inclusion of these women into the people of God and thus serves as a polemic against the Judeans who considered themselves a pure race based on assumptions of genealogical purity (89). It is a redefinition of the people of God, showing that proselytization is not the only way of becoming part of the community or receiving the blessings brought by

¹ This Greek phrase literally means ‘the peoples’ but generally is used to refer to “people groups foreign to a specific people group.” BDAG, s.v. “ἔθνος,” 2.

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the Messiah. In chapters 5–7, the Magi in Mathew's account (Matt 2:1–12), the healing of the Roman Centurion's servant (Matt 8:5–13), and the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matt 15:21–28) all indicate that in the ideal Matthean community, non-Judeans participate in Messianic blessings. The book concludes with summary and recommendations in chapter 8.

By way of appraisal, this book has many merits. The author is right that the Gospel of Matthew is a manifesto demonstrating that the reconstituted community, made up of Judeans and non-Judeans, is a full realization of the messianic expectations. Likewise, the author has painstakingly engaged scholars with wide range of theological persuasions. Similarly, the author made a paradigm shift from older historical-critical method with the assumptions that Matthew's Gospel was addressed to a distinct extant community in a specific locality. He believes that Matthew's audience is the wider community of first-century Christians in general. Another credit for this book is its spotlight on identity formation in the Gospel of Matthew — an aspect which is often ignored in scholarship. In line with Tekalign, my own thesis is that all the gospel writers wanted to construct their new self-identity according to the teachings, values, and beliefs received from their Lord, Jesus Christ. But our point of departure is his view on Matthew as a construction of identity through mythology. Finally, his concept of the ideal readers' community which is not to be regarded as a replacement for Israel but a reconstituted Israel founded on Israel's traditions is a good recipe against anti-Semitism.

The merits above notwithstanding, my first critical concern about this book is the author's choice of nomenclature, beginning with "Judeans" and "non-Judeans" in place of "Jews" and "Gentiles." The author acknowledged that most scholars go for the latter rendering, that is, Jews and Gentiles. Tekalign's choice of Judeans is based on how best the words Ἰουδαῖος (*Ioudaios*) and ἔθνος (*ethnos*) could be translated. The author admits that the former term was better understood as *ethnic Judeans* in the first century rather than as *religious adherents of Judaism*. But since "Judeans" would generally be understood as inhabitants of a region in Southern Israel, the use of *Judeans* would seem to exclude Jews outside Judea or in the diaspora. Therefore, to invent a term only for the sake of innovation is unjustified.

My second critique is based on personal observation that the author seems to have leaned heavily on liberal terminologies, ideas, and conclusions regarding the composition and identity formation of Matthew's Gospel. The author states categorically that Matthew's Gospel is a myth intended to fabricate the identity of its readers. He says Burton Mack's theory of myth creation and identity formation fits his own theory. This could imply that Matthew's Gospel must be

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demythologized for its relevance and not its historical authenticity.² This method of viewing the gospel narratives runs against the grain of conventional evangelical theology; the Gospel of Matthew is cast in the mold of subjective ideologies rather than objective narrative. While the author is entitled to his views, his posture seems to have eroded the credibility of Gospel of Matthew and his book for evangelical readers.

Nonetheless, the depth of scholarship demonstrated in the book is commendable. By his notes and bibliography, the author has provided a rich tapestry of resources for further discussion on identity formation in the Gospel of Matthew.

² Editors' note: As acknowledged on p. 366, "Tekalign distinguishes between *myth* and *fiction*." In common usage, a *myth* is "a widely held but false belief or idea," "a misrepresentation of the truth," or "a fictitious or imaginary person or thing." *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. "myth," 2. But in literary criticism, *myth* does not refer to idolatrous mythology or to "a false belief." Rather, *myth* as a technical term refers to a narrative that has the power to reveal truth. (See John M. Alexander, "Myth as an Organizing Principle for a Literary Curriculum," *CEA Critic* 41, no. 3 (1979): 32–38, p. 33). Tekalign uses *myth* in this latter sense and he certainly recognizes the factual character of Matthew's account. Thus it can be correct to refer to Matthew's Gospel as *mythic* — the gospel narratives certainly have the power to reveal truth — but from a Christian perspective, referring to Matthew as *mythological* (and therefore presumably nonfactual) suggests unbelief. It is, of course, always potentially confusing when a technical use of a term has a different meaning than its customary usage.