

Article

Israel and the Individual in Matthew and Midrash: Reassessing “True Israel”

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Abstract: Since the Holocaust, New Testament scholarship has become increasingly sensitive to issues of Christian anti-Judaism. While many Matthean specialists have acknowledged the problems with polemical interpretations of the Gospel, the idea that Matthew presents Jesus and/or the church as the “true Israel” continues to enjoy broad acceptance. The scholarly conflation of Jesus and Israel recycles the Christian polemic against a comparatively inauthentic or inadequate Judaism. This article argues that Matthew does not present Jesus or his church as the true Israel, and that the Jesus-as-Israel interpretation could be refined by comparing the Gospel with later rabbinic discussion that connects Israel with biblical individuals. Genesis Rabbah 40:6 juxtaposes verses about Abraham and Israel to reveal a comprehensive scriptural relationship between the nation and the patriarch without devaluing either party. The rabbis’ theological thesis is predicated on both similarity and separation between Abraham and his offspring. Insofar as both Matthew and Midrash present similar biblical content and exegesis, a comparative analysis can provide Gospel commentators with a view of the Jesus-Israel paradigm that avoids the Christianization of “true Israel.”

Keywords: Israel; Matthew; Midrash; comparative theology; metalepsis



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In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ experiences and actions recapitulate those of Israel. Based on Matthew’s comparative approach, patristic commentators saw Jesus and Israel as coterminous, and identified the Christian church as the “true Israel.” This early inference relied on a reductive Jesus-as-Israel model that, for the church fathers, denoted a divine abandonment of ethnic Jews and the triumph of Christianity over Judaism. Since the Holocaust, New Testament scholars have become more attentive to the Jewish contexts of Jesus and the Gospels, and more sensitive to the detrimental impact of Christian replacement theology. Yet, the identification of Jesus and the church as the “true Israel” remains prevalent, particularly in Matthean scholarship. In response, I argue that Matthew’s Gospel does not present Jesus and Israel as identical, nor does “Israel” indicate the church. Further, in the spirit of Jewish-Christian dialogue, I propose that New Testament scholars take a closer look at Jewish texts as a way to avoid (over)reading Christ and the church as Israel. Insofar as rabbinic literature also connects individual biblical figures with collective Israel, the Jewish literary tradition offers Gospel readers a way to understand the Jesus-Israel dynamic in a way that does not exclude Jews from their enduring identity as the people of God.

A survey of the Jesus-as-Israel reading establishes its ancient origins and continuation among contemporary scholars. However, the textual data in Matthew do not support the conclusion that “Israel” is limited to Jesus and/or his followers. Instead, the evangelist identifies Israel as a collective “people” (λαός) to whom Jesus is sent as a shepherd.¹ Generally, Matthew’s uses of “Israel” do not indicate the faithful followers of Jesus, but those who are “lost” and require salvation (Matt 10:6; 15:24). Though some Gentiles exhibit faith in Jesus, such trust does not include them in Israel. Rather than presenting a simple equation between Jesus and Israel, Matthew utilizes literary metalepsis—in which a partial biblical quotation presupposes readerly knowledge of the uncited Scripture—to present Jesus as a recapitulation of Israel and a representative for the people. In doing so, Matthew anticipates similar comparisons between individuals and Israel in rabbinic

Midrash. Using Matthew 2:15 as an example of the Gospel's metaleptic approach, I offer an analogous intertextual presentation of Abraham and Israel from the later rabbinic compilation *Genesis Rabbah* to show how New Testament commentators can understand Jesus and Israel without limiting the latter to Christ and Christianity.

1. Jesus-as-Israel in Christian Interpretation

The assertion that Jesus and his followers are the "true Israel" appears very early in Christian interpretation.² In 160 CE, Justin Martyr provides the first explicit formulation: "Israel has been demonstrated to be the Christ, who is, and is called, Jesus . . . As, therefore, Christ is the Israel [of Scripture] . . . we, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelite race."³ Clement of Alexandria (c. 195 CE) asserts that Jews who do not confess Christ have "forfeited the place of the true Israel."⁴ In the fourth century, Lactantius claims that the "house of Judah does not signify the Jews, whom [God] has cast off, but us, who have been called by [God] out of the Gentiles, and have by adoption succeeded to their place, and are called sons of the Jews."⁵ Shortly thereafter, Augustine assures his fellow Christians, "we are Israel . . . let therefore no Christian consider himself alien to the name Israel."⁶ While Justin is the only one of these patristic writers to identify Jesus as "Israel," common to each of these convictions is the replacement of ethnic Israel with the church.

Since the Shoah, New Testament scholars have acknowledged this history of Christian anti-Judaism in relation to the horrors of the Holocaust. Yet, many still maintain that Matthew's Jesus and/or "church" (ἐκκλησία) represent the "new" or "true" Israel.⁷ Though not necessarily the scholarly intention, the use of this terminology (despite its absence in the Gospel itself) suggests that Jews who do not follow Jesus are not "true" Jews. Sensitivity to the Holocaust has not translated into an awareness of how this interpretation deepens the socio-religious divide in contemporary Jewish-Christian relations and reinforces the anti-Judaism reflected in patristic literature.

Donald Hagner notes that Matthew has "provided many with a pretext for anti-Semitism," and insofar as the "Holocaust [was] the most horrific result of anti-Semitism, Christians must be responsible" when interpreting Matthew (Hagner 1993, lxxii). Yet, as Hagner disavows New Testament anti-Judaism, he fortifies the true Israel idea: "None of the Jewish Christians of the NT would have thought of Christianity as an anti-Judaism. To believe in the gospel of the kingdom and Jesus as the messianic king was for them to . . . be true Jews, and to form the remnant of the true Israel." (Hagner 1993, lxxii). Hagner presents a dichotomy between "Christianity" and "(anti)Judaism"—terms that never appear in Matthew—predicated upon the supposed New Testament conviction that only Jesus' followers are "true Israel" (another non-Matthean phrase). Hagner's qualifier that Matthew constitutes "intramural Jewish polemic" (Hagner 1993, lxxii) does little to mitigate the inference that, for the evangelist, Jews unaffiliated with Jesus are false Jews. More, according to Hagner, Matthew's true Israel does not remain intra-Jewish for long. Speaking of Jesus' mission to "save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21), he writes that though the verse "leads one to think initially of God's people, Israel, both Matthew and his readers were capable of a deeper understanding of the expression wherein it includes both Jews and Gentiles." (Hagner 1993, p. 20). Thus, Hagner's interpretation ends with "Jesus' disciples and the Church as the true Israel." (Hagner 1993, p. 265).

David Holwerda also situates his reading of Matthew as a post-Shoah project, stating, "The haunting memory of the Holocaust looms large over every discussion and claim . . . [since] the Holocaust would not have happened had it not been for the prior history of Christian persecution of the Jews." (Holwerda 1995, p. 6). Though "aware of contemporary Jewish sensitivities sharpened by the Holocaust," he also discourages the revision or rejection of the Gospels' particular theological claims for the sake of symbiotic Jewish-Christian relations (Holwerda 1995, p. 24). One of these traditional claims, according to Holwerda, is that Matthew presents Jesus and the church as the true Israel:

In the Gospel of Matthew . . . Jesus is Israel, and Israel is Jesus . . . Because Old Testament Israel had not fulfilled its calling and righteousness had not sprung forth before all nations . . . God himself acted to place on earth the one who is both truly Israel and Israel's king so that the righteousness of his kingdom would be established [T]he church, the people of God . . . are seen here as the remnant of Israel or as true Israel. (Holwerda 1995, pp. 44–51)

Holwerda asserts that Matthew's "Jesus is Israel, and Israel is Jesus," but the ensuing contrast between a righteous Jesus and an impotent "Old Testament" Israel anachronistically undercuts the claim that "Israel is Jesus." Just as Matthew has no conception of an "Old Testament Israel," the use of "true Israel" language is also an untextual addition to the Gospel's presentation.

More recently, Nicholas Piotrowski contends that Matthew presents Jesus and the church as Israel (Piotrowski 2016). In particular, he analyzes Matthew 3:3's partial citation of Isaiah 40:3—"A voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord; make straight the paths of our God" (Isa 40:3 LXX)—and argues that the Isaian declaration describes divine preparations for Israel's return from Babylonian exile.⁸ He also notes that Matthew applies the verse to John the Baptist, who proclaims in the Judean wilderness, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt 3:2). Insofar as Jesus presents himself to John for baptism (Matt 3:13), Piotrowski sees Matthew equating Jesus with Isaiah's Israel in its exodus from Babylon. Therefore, he contends, "Jesus is the only true Israelite [God] makes his appeal through John (Matt 3:2) for the whole nation to respond. It does. Jesus responds. As the first exodus defined who [God's] people are, so too does this one according to Isaiah. Jesus alone is Israel . . . and anyone who responds to the same call . . . becomes Israel through their affiliation with him."⁹ On this reading, Matthew frames Jesus as the only existing member of Israel and also identifies his followers as Israel, which precludes any conception of "Israel" outside of the Jesus movement.

Nicholas Perrin offers a foreword to Piotrowski's monograph that presents it as a contribution to post-Holocaust New Testament theology:

In light of recent events like the bouts of violence directed against Jews and the resurgence of new-Nazism in the West, many have the palpable sense that anti-Semitism is on the rise. The impact of trends like these is not completely lost on the field of New Testament studies In earlier days, gospels scholars would unflinchingly sling language suggesting that the church had radically supplanted Israel as the people of God In recent decades Matthew has been lumped in among the rouge's gallery of those who stand *contra Judaeos*. This is not a trivial charge, as we are reminded in light of the aforementioned contemporary developments [Piotrowski's] volume forces us to ask afresh . . . "If Christ is the solution, then what did early Christianity think the problem was?" How we answer this question is not unrelated to the tensions inherent in the task of doing post-Holocaust New Testament Theology. Sometimes it takes a groundbreaking project to get us to ask the important questions afresh. Perhaps this volume is just such a project. I suspect it may be.¹⁰

While Piotrowski does not present his work as an engagement with post-Shoah Jewish-Christian relations, Perrin suggests that the book might nuance the notion that "the church had radically supplanted Israel as the people of God." Yet, in his introduction, Piotrowski states, "Matthew introduces his *dramatis personae* in startling terms: as a newly defined people of God . . . [Matthew's] ecclesiological focus . . . [defines] whom the Christ is . . . [and] whom the people of God are." (Piotrowski 2016, pp. 13–14, emphasis original). There seems to be an ongoing disconnect in contemporary scholarship between post-Shoah sensitivities to anti-Judaism and a continued tendency to see the Christian church as the new Israel—or, at least, an unawareness of the theological problems with the interpretation.

The Jesus/church-as-Israel reading does not appear to be abating. In a 2019 monograph on Matthew, Patrick Schreiner argues, "Jesus is Israel, but the better Israel."

(Schreiner 2019, p. 239). He also asserts that Matthew's church replaces a condemned ethnic Israel: "proleptic judgment has come upon Israel for the rejection of their messianic king; as such the concept of 'God's people' as 'national Israel' is radically redefined. Matthew argues that it is only those who accept Jesus' messianic claim who are to be accepted as the 'true Israel.'" (Schreiner 2019, p. 223). This brand of interpretation reenergizes an ancient Christian polemic, but there is no basis in the Gospel for a redefinition of "national Israel" that limits the "true Israel" to Jesus' followers. On the contrary, Matthew never uses "new" or "true" Israel language for the church, so scholars can (and should) retire the terminology.

2. Israel and the Church in Matthew

To call Matthew's church "new," "true," or "Israel" is to describe it in ways that the evangelist never does. The Gospel refers to "Israel," but the word always describes either the biblical land or the ethnic people. More, during Jesus' earthly ministry, "Israel" describes those in need of his leadership and salvation, not those who already follow him. Therefore, while Matthew envisions the ἐκκλησία as a multiethnic assembly that observes Jesus' teaching about the God and Scriptures of Israel (cf. Matt 5:18-48; 28:19-20), the church cannot be a new Israel.

The Gospel refers to "Israel" first when the chief priests and scribes tell Herod of a coming "ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (Matt 2:6). This "people" (λαός) recalls the angelic promise to Joseph that Jesus will save "his people" (λαὸν αὐτοῦ) from their sins (Matt 1:21). Though the combination of these verses suggests that Jesus' "people" is synonymous with biblical Israel (i.e., ethnic Jews), many scholars see an allusion to Gentiles becoming a part of this people through faith in Christ.¹¹ However, after Matt 1:21, λαός always refers to ethnic inhabitants of Israel; the Gospel provides no textual support for its use of "people" being inclusive of non-Jews.¹² An ethnic expansion of Matthew's λαός necessitates a speculative leap that the Gospel's linguistic data does not warrant.

Following two references to the "land of Israel" (Matt 2:20-21)—juxtaposed with the Gentile land of "Egypt" (2:19)—Jesus refers to Israel when he tells the Gentile centurion, "With no one in Israel have I found such faith" (8:10; cf. 9:33). The logic of this statement is predicated on the centurion not being part of Israel: the Gentile exhibits a quality of faith not seen in Israel. Jesus alludes to the centurion's eschatological inclusion with "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" in the "kingdom of heaven" (8:11), but the Gentile's faith does not transform him into "Israel." Schreiner includes this "great faith of a centurion" among his evidence for "Matthew's point . . . that the people of God are those who follow the king of the kingdom." (Schreiner 2019, p. 204). Yet, the centurion does not follow Jesus; instead, Jesus tells him to "go away" (ὑπάγε) and return to his healed servant (8:13).¹³ While Matthew notes that crowds "followed" (ἠκολούθησαν) Jesus from the ethnically diverse "Decapolis" and "beyond the Jordan"—making non-Jewish followership possible—the evangelist includes these areas alongside "the Galilee . . . Jerusalem, and Judea" (4:25). Such specific ethno-geographical designations argue against the notion that Matthew views Gentile followers as part of "Israel."¹⁴

The Gospel's next reference to Israel comes in Jesus' charge to his disciples, "Go into no road of the Gentiles and do not enter into any town of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6). Jesus underscores this ethnic bifurcation between Israel and others when, to avoid interaction with a "Canaanite" woman, he repeats, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). The Canaanite mother—along with all other Gentiles (10:6)—is not among the lost sheep; she is not a member of Israel, "true" or otherwise. Not only is she outside the shepherd's pastoral purview, but she is not "lost" in the first place: she "came out" (ἐξελθούσα; 15:22) to Jesus, and her preexisting "faith" (πίστις; 15:28) in the "son of David" (15:22) secured her daughter's healing. Thereafter, Jesus leaves her (15:29) and she does not follow¹⁵. As the shepherd of Israel, Jesus seeks those whom he sees as "sheep without a shepherd" (9:36).

Prior to Jesus' resurrection and the subsequent Great Commission (28:19), only ethnic Jews are in the Matthean sheepfold.

Israel remains distinct from Gentiles even at the eschaton. Jesus tells his disciples, "When the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28).¹⁶ At the Parousia, these "tribes of Israel" (φυλάς τοῦ Ἰσραήλ) retain their particular ethnic identities alongside "all the tribes of the earth" (πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς) who also "see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24:30). Then, the enthroned Son of Man separates people to himself from "all the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη; 25:32), one of which is Israel. Individuals of all nations, including Israel, maintain their ancestral distinctiveness in this world and in the world to come. Hence, (mis)identifying the multinational church as "Israel" flattens the ethnic dynamics of Matthew's ecclesiology and eschatology.

Finally, Matthew mentions Israel in conjunction with the chief priests. When they accept the return of Judas's blood money, the priests fulfill the prophecy, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel" (Matt 27:9). Accordingly, even Jesus' most vocal Jewish opponents retain their status within Israel. Prior to this, in Matthew's parable of the Vineyard Tenants (21:33-46), Jesus alludes to a future in which the "kingdom of God" will be taken from the current parabolic "tenants" (γεωργοῖς)—namely the "chief priests and Pharisees" (21:45)—and given to another "people" (ἔθνει; 21:43), but Matthew does not call this people "Israel."¹⁷ More, Matthew's use of "sons of Israel" for the priests after the parable (27:9) shows that, while they will be replaced with "other tenants" (ἄλλοις γεωργοῖς; 21:41), they do not relinquish their membership in Israel. For Matthew, "Israel" is an ethnic category that remains constant regardless of one's posture towards Jesus. At the cross, these same chief priests (along with scribes and elders) say of Jesus, "He is the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him" (27:42). "King of Israel" parallels the Gentiles' use of "king of the Jews" (cf. 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37) and underscores that Jesus is king of a particular ethnic people—in neither context is he the monarch of an ethnically heterogeneous church.

Based on the Matthean data, "Israel" does not refer to the ἐκκλησία. When used for people groups, the title can refer to the Jewish people as a whole (Matt 2:6; 8:10; 10:6; 15:24, 31; 27:42), the chief priests (27:9), or the tribes of Israel governed by Jesus' disciples in the world to come (19:28). Based on this third usage, it is too much to say, as some have, that Matthew defines the church in opposition to Israel—or as "non-Israel."¹⁸ Some in Israel will populate the eschatological kingdom of God and others will not (cf. 8:12; 13:38)—as is the case with individuals from "all nations" (24:14; 25:32; 28:19). At the Gospel's conclusion (28:19-20), the Great Commission becomes the mechanism by which the "gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (24:14), so that this church can expand to include all people—including, but not limited to, Israel. Matthew never calls this multiethnic assembly the true Israel. To the extent that commentators do so, they either mistakenly miss or purposefully bypass the Gospel's narrative nuance and salvific specificity.

3. Individuals and Israel in Matthew and Midrash

The most common locus for the Jesus-as-Israel reading is Matthew 2:15. When Joseph takes his family to Egypt, Matthew notes, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" The latter portion of this verse includes a partial quotation of Hosea 11:1, the whole of which reads, "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." In citing only part of Hosea 11:1, Matthew expects the reader to supply the full prophetic verse. The evangelist utilizes a literary device known as metalepsis, which "requires the reader to interpret a citation . . . by recalling aspects of the original context that are not explicitly quoted." (Hays 1993, p. 43). A metaleptic reading of Matt 2:15 vis-à-vis Hosea 11:1 encourages the reader to see Jesus as a

recapitulation of Israel: in traveling to Egypt and coming back out, Jesus reruns Israel's Egyptian slavery and exodus.¹⁹ In fact, the metaleptic link between Jesus and Israel offers multiple layers of intertextual resonance insofar as the sonship of Israel in Hosea 11:1 echoes God's earlier declaration, "Israel is my firstborn son . . . Let my son go that he may serve me" (Exod 4:22-23; cf. Deut 1:31; 8:5; Jer 31:9, 20).

Several scholars go a step further to claim that Matthew presents Jesus as an "Israel" who replaces the previous people. According to John P. Meier, Matthew's Jesus is "the new and true Israel What Israel was has now been absorbed into the person of Jesus."²⁰ Similarly, William Kynes argues that Matthew "puts Jesus in the place of Israel as he assumes the filial relationship with God once predicated of the nation."²¹ These readings strain the ontological and theological limits of Matthew's narrative. If, as Meier avers, the original Israel has been "absorbed" into Jesus by Matt 2:15, then there should not remain "lost sheep" in Israel (Matt 10:6; 15:24), nor should Jesus need to die in order to "save his people" from the sins they committed before his birth (1:21). Against Kynes's argument, if Jesus assumes the nation's former filial relationship, then Matthew should not describe Jewish people other than Jesus glorifying the "God of Israel" (15:31). To be sure, Matthew presents Jesus in sinless obedience to God (e.g., Matt 4:1-10), whereas Hosea 11:2 notes of Israel, "The more they were called, the more they strayed." Yet it is precisely because of this earlier Israelite waywardness that Jesus must succeed in his mission to "save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21)—not to become a "new Israel." A comprehensive merging of Matthew's Jesus and Israel shatters the soteriological bond between Jesus as shepherd and Israel as sheep. More, the rest of Hosea 11 underscores God's continued love for Israel (Hos 11:3-4), a divine unwillingness to end the relationship (11:8-9), and the people's ultimate salvation (11:11-12). Thus, Hosea 11 provides a useful summary of what Matthew's Jesus must accomplish for Israel; but for one "son" to replace the other is to miss the Gospel's missional message.

Rabbinic literature can offer Matthew scholars an interpretive model for Jesus' relationship with Israel that does not necessitate recourse to "true Israel" rhetoric.²² *Genesis Rabbah* (c. early 5th century CE)²³ juxtaposes biblical verses to support the notion that everything Scripture says of Abraham would also be written of Israel:

[God] said to Abraham our father, "Go out and tread the path before your children." One finds that all that was written of our father Abraham was written of his children. Of Abraham it is written, "There was a famine (רעב) in the land" [Gen 12:10]; of Israel it is written, "For these two [years] the famine (הרעב) . . ." [45:6]. Of Abraham it is written, "And Abram went down to Egypt (מצרימה . . . וירד)" [12:10]; of Israel it is written, "Our ancestors went down to Egypt (מצרימה . . . וירדו)" [Num 20:15]. Of Abraham it is written, "To sojourn (לגור) there" [Gen 12:10]; of Israel it is written, "We have come to sojourn (לגור) in the land" [47:4] Of Abraham it is written, "Say that you are my sister, that it may go well (ויטב) with me" [12:13]; of Israel it is written, "God dealt well (ויטב) with the midwives" [Exod 1:20]. Of Abraham it is written, "As Abram came to (כבוא) Egypt" [Gen 12:14]; of Israel it is written, "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to (הבאים) Egypt" [Exod 1:1]. Of Abraham it is written, "Abram was very rich with cattle, with silver, and with gold (בכסף וזהב)" [Gen 13:2]; of Israel it is written, "[God] brought them out with silver and gold (בכסף וזהב)" [Ps 105:37]. Of Abraham it is written, "Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him out (וישלחו אתו)" [Gen 12:20]; of Israel it is written, "The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out (לשלוחם)" [Exod 12:33]. Of Abraham it is written, "He went on his journeys (למסעיו)" [Gen 13:3]; of Israel it is written, "These are the journeys of (מסעי) the children of Israel" [Num 33:1].²⁴ (*GenR* 40:6)

The comparison of biblical verses in *Genesis Rabbah* 40:6 shows that Abram enters and leaves Egypt, and Israel does the same. In this, the midrash makes an assertion about Abraham and Israel similar to the one that Matthew makes about Jesus and Israel. The

midrash presents a filial relationship between “father” Abraham and “his children” (or “sons”; בניו), and Matthew’s Jesus is a “son” (υἱός) who follows a biblical precedent. As Jacob Neusner notes, the rabbinic passage shows how “Abram in his biography lives out the future history of Israel . . . [and] how the Israelites . . . relived the life of Abram.”²⁵ Matthew asserts that Jesus lives out the history of Israel and the Israelites prefigured the life of Jesus. Yet, in *Genesis Rabbah*, Abraham is not absorbed into Israel nor is Israel the “true” Abraham. The patriarch serves as the exemplar whom God calls to “tread out the path” for Israel, the nation reaffirms God’s relationship with Abraham, and both retain their respective identities. Nothing in the Gospel precludes a consonant reading: Matthew’s Jesus follows the path that Israel treads “out of Egypt” (Hos 11:1), he underscores God’s relationship with the collective, and he serves as an exemplar for Israel.

As with Matthew’s citation of Hosea 11:1, metalepsis functions in the rabbinic references to biblical verses. It is common for scholars to view the rabbis’ single-verse juxtapositions as proof of an atomistic approach to Scripture concerned only with the isolated terms on the midrashic page.²⁶ However, *Genesis Rabbah* 40:6 assumes a knowledge of the uncited text.²⁷ The passage mentions the “famine” (רעב) in the days of Abram and Joseph according to Gen 12:10 and 45:6, but the uncited text following the latter verse is the real support for the rabbis’ view of Abraham prefiguring Israel²⁸. After Joseph refers to the famine in 45:6, he tells his brothers, “God sent me before you (לפניכם) to preserve for you a remnant in the earth” (45:7). Thus, in the verse that follows the midrashic citation, Joseph’s divinely appointed placement in Egypt parallels the rabbinic contention that God told Abraham to go into Egypt “before your children” (לפני בניך). Just as Matthew expects an awareness of Hosea’s surrounding context, the rabbis expect similar familiarity with Genesis.

The second midrashic juxtaposition reflects metaleptic resonance that parallels Matthew’s rendition of Hosea. The rabbis note that Abram “went down to Egypt” (Gen 12:10), just as “our ancestors went down to Egypt” (Num 20:15). Though these verses describe parties going *to* Egypt, the verse following the latter quotation describes Israel’s exodus *from* Egypt: “When we cried to the Lord, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt (ממצרים)” (Num 20:16). Similarly, Matthew describes Jesus’ family fleeing *to* Egypt, and contends that this relocation fulfills, “Out of Egypt (ἐξ Αἰγύπτου) I called my son” (Matt 2:15). As in the midrash, the Gospel anticipates an exit from Egypt at the same time that it narrates entry into Egypt.

When *Genesis Rabbah* then notes that Abram and Joseph’s family came “to sojourn” (לגור) in Egypt (Gen 12:10//47:4), a metaleptic reading of the midrash dovetails with Matthew’s presentation of Jesus and Israel. In the biblical verse before the rabbinic quotation of Gen 47:4, Joseph’s brothers tell Pharaoh, “Your servants are shepherds (רעה), as were our fathers (אבותינו)” (47:3). The brothers’ jobs as shepherds are contingent on their ancestors’ occupations. Likewise, just as Jesus will “shepherd my people Israel” (ποιμανεῖ τὸν λαόν μου τὸν Ἰσραήλ; 2:6), God says that David will be a “shepherd to my people Israel” (ποιμανεῖς τὸν λαόν μου τὸν Ἰσραήλ; 2 Sam 5:2 LXX).²⁹ In both Gospel and Midrash, the shepherds follow prior precedent. Joseph’s brothers are not the “true” shepherds over against the “untrue” patriarchs and matriarchs; nor is Matthew’s Jesus the “true” shepherd over against an “untrue” David.

The next midrashic juxtaposition highlights Israel’s fidelity in light of Abram’s dishonesty. Abram demands of Sarai, “Say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me” (Gen. 12:13); after the Hebrew midwives defy the Pharaonic decree to kill all male offspring, “God dealt well with the midwives” (Exod 1:20). Based on the interplay between these verses’ contexts, the midwives represent a righteous response to Abram’s earlier iniquity. As Yair Zakovitch notes:

Abraham lies in order to save his own life, for which he is ready to abandon his wife. The midwives, in contrast to Abraham, fool the king . . . in order to save the lives of the Hebrew male newborns In his distress, Abraham does not rely on God’s help, in contrast to the midwives who fear God Pharaoh

is the one who favors Abraham, and improves his financial position, while it is God who favors the midwives. The contrast between the two stories emphasizes once again Abraham's undignified behavior. (Zakovitch 1991, pp. 24–25)

The Hebrew midwives embody a correction to Abraham's folly. Yet, the rabbis would never take the interpretive liberties of modern Matthew scholars in asserting that the midwives represent a "new" Abraham into which the "old" Abraham is absorbed, or that an occasionally obstinate Abraham gives way to the "true" Abrahamic midwives, or that these valorous women are Abraham.

Were the midrash to be (over)read in this way, it would conflict with the subsequent rabbinic comparison between Abram exiting Egypt "with silver and with gold" (Gen 13:2) and Israel coming from Egypt "with silver and gold" (Ps 105:37). True to metaleptic form, the co-text comes from a psalm that extols Abraham: "Offspring of Abraham, [God's] servant, children of Jacob, his chosen one He remembers his covenant forever . . . the covenant he made with Abraham For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant" (Ps 105:6, 9, 42). The midrash argues that Israel exists because of the Abrahamic covenant; similarly, Matthew opens with the assertion that Jesus' lineage originates with his father Abraham (Matt 1:1). The birth of Matthew's Messiah and his subsequent mission to Israel are grounded in God's prior dealings with Abraham.

Finally, *GenR* 40:6 concludes by affirming both Abraham and the nation's post-Abrahamic leadership. Just as "Abram went on his journeys" (Gen 13:3), Scripture states, "These are the journeys of the children of Israel" (Num 33:1). The whole of Numbers 33:1 reads, "These are the journeys of the children of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the hand of Moses and Aaron." Thus, the midrash metaleptically alludes to Israel's eventual Mosaic and Aaronic leadership, but this does not destabilize Abrahamic primacy. Under Moses and Aaron, Israel recapitulates Abraham's precedent. Likewise, Matthew's Jesus will lead his "people Israel" (2:6) out of the slavery of their "sins" (1:21), and this messianic mission recapitulates what God has already done with Moses and Aaron in Israel's history. That Matthew's brand of salvation constitutes a hamartiological restatement of the exodus does not position Jesus as a new/true Israel any more than Mosaic Israel becomes a new/true Abraham—each exodus has its particular aspects and import, but one is not any "truer" than another. *Genesis Rabbah* follows Matthew's comparative technique and metaleptic method, but the midrash does not warrant an understanding of Israel superseding, redefining, or becoming Abraham. Nothing in Matthew 2:15 precludes a similar understanding of Jesus and Israel.

4. Conclusions

The idea that Jesus and his church are the "true Israel" has been a part of Christian commentary since the second century CE. From a Jewish-Christian relations perspective, the *telos* of this trope positions Christians as the new people of God, and Jews as outside the redefined parameters of Israel. Though many problematic interpretations of the first Gospel have been reevaluated since the patristic period—and particularly since the Shoah—this one remains prevalent. However, since Matthew never describes the church as the new or true Israel, there is no reason to continue this imprecise interpretational trend. While the Matthean church consists of both Jews and Gentiles after Jesus' resurrection (28:19), Matthew's "Israel" and "people" (λαός) always refer to ethnic Jews. In the Gospel's narrative world, "Israel" consists of "lost sheep" (10:6; 15:24) to whom Jesus has come as a shepherd. At the eschaton, Jesus chooses people from all the nations to enter the kingdom of God, but the inhabitants retain their national identities—Jesus' eschatological church is not "Israel." Though several scholars identify Jesus as Israel and use this conflation to support the church's Israel-status, this conclusion comes from an overstatement of Matthew's comparison between Jesus and Israel. The rabbinic presentation of Abraham and Israel in *Genesis Rabbah* provides a view of the individual vis-à-vis the collective that avoids this reductive overread. Insofar as the scriptural quotations in both *GenR* 40:6 and Matt 2:15 reflect metalepsis, the midrash is an example of Jewish exegesis that mirrors

Matthew's method and shares the kind of literary complexity that evades a simplistic fusion of Israel with the individual. The midrash compares Israel with Abraham—including the patriarch's peccadillos—without downgrading either party; there is no reason that Matthew cannot be doing the same with Israel and Jesus. Therefore, Matthew scholars can be true to the Gospel's portrait of Jesus without perpetuating the Christianization of "true Israel."

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Notes

- 1 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 2 See (Aguzzi 2018, pp. 23–56; Vlach 2010, pp. 35–50; Richardson 1969, pp. 1–32).
- 3 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 134–35 in (Roberts and Donaldson 1994), 1.267.
- 4 Clement, *The Instructor* 2.8 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2.256.
- 5 Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* 4.20, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7.123.
- 6 Augustine, *On the Psalms* 114.3 in (Schaff 1994, 8.550).
- 7 See e.g., (Schniewind 1960, p. 220; Trilling 1964, pp. 95–96, 219, passim; Caird 1965, p. 7; Strecker 1966, p. 111; Pesch 1967, p. 412; Gibbs 1968, pp. 38–39); Rev. (Kirk and Obach 1978, pp. 127–30; Frankemölle 1984, p. 195; France 1985, p. 85; Scott 1989, pp. 241–42; Menninger 1994, pp. 135–57; McKnight 1999, p. 95; Martens 2000, pp. 158–62; Schnackenburg 2002, pp. 25, 212; Huizenga 2005, p. 54; Kennedy 2008, p. 225; Osbourne 2010, p. 791; Theophilus 2012, p. 223; White 2014, p. 374; Leithart 2017, passim, pp. 7–16; Barret 2020, pp. 110–12).
- 8 This verse does not describe the exiles' return from Babylon, but rather God's journey to Jerusalem. See (Baltzer 2001, p. 51; Blenkinsopp 2002, p. 181; Goldingay 2005, p. 11). Piotrowski [*New David*, 186] acknowledges this, but also rightly notes that this wilderness "way" (דרך/ ὁδός) will also be the means of the exiles' return later in Deutero-Isaiah (cf. Isa 42:16; 43:16; 49:9, 11).
- 9 (Piotrowski 2016, pp. 191, 203–03) *New David*. Why Jesus should need to "respond" to John's call to "repent" in Matt 3:2 is unclear.
- 10 Nicholas Perrin (2016), "Foreword," in Piotrowski, *New David*, xi, xiii (emphasis original).
- 11 See (Frankemölle 1984, pp. 218–20), *Jahwe*; (Hagner 1993, pp. 1–13, 19, 20), *Matthew*; (Piotrowski 2016, p. 38), *New David*; (Brown 1977, p. 131); (Meier 1980, p. 8); (Davies and Allison 1988–97); (Gnilka 1992, 1.19).
- 12 For Matthew's other references to ethnic Israel cf. Matt 2:4, 6; 4:16, 23; 9:35; 13:15; 15:8; 21:23; 26:3, 5, 47; 27:1, 25, 64. For the "people" of 1:21 limited to Jews, see (Saldarini 1994, p. 29; Overman 1996, p. 36; Sim 1998, p. 251; Cousland 2002, p. 85; Repschinski 2006, pp. 255–56; Willits 2007, p. 109; Baxter 2012, pp. 132–33).
- 13 Matthew's magi (Matt 2:1–12) are also used to argue that Gentiles are among Jesus' "people." For instance, according to Piotrowski [*New David*, 38], the magi's encounter with Jesus shows "the reader is justified in understanding 'his people' as whosoever follows and obeys Jesus be they Jew or Gentile." Cf. Frankemölle, *Jahwe*, 211–18; Meier, *Matthew*, 12; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:210. However, the magi do not "obey" Jesus—one wonders what a baby could say for the magi to obey—nor do they "follow" him; they go back to "their [own] country" (χώραν αὐτῶν; 2:12). More, the magi underscore a distinction between themselves and Israel when they ask, "Where is he who is born king of the Jews?" (2:2)—they do not ask for "our king."
- 14 Matthew may also envision the whole of biblically promised "land of Israel" (Matt 2:20–21), which included areas "beyond the Jordan" (see Joshua 17–18), thereby limiting Jesus' followership to Jews. See (Konradt 2014, p. 51).
- 15 [(Levine 1988), p. 140] contrasts the Canaanite's use of "son of David" (15:22) with the title's next use by two blind Jews who, after being healed, "followed him" (ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ; 20:34).
- 16 The proposal [e.g., Gnilka, *Matthäusevangelium*, 2.171–72] that the disciples condemn, rather than govern, the twelve tribes of Israel falters in several ways. First, Jesus describes the disciples judging at the "regeneration" (παλιγγενεσία), which suggests a time after condemnation. Second, Jesus says that Gentiles will "condemn" (κατακρινοῦσιν) those in his own generation at the eschatological judgment (Matt 12:41–42)—condemning the unfaithful within Israel is not a task for the Jewish disciples (cf. Lk 11:32; 22:28–30). Third, Jesus' references to "Son of Man" and "thrones" recalls the divine council in Daniel 7:9–27, which describes the "holy ones of the Most High" governing eschatological Israel; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.56.
- 17 Based on ἔθνει in 21:43, (Stanton 1992) prefers "new people" for the church, rather than "new Israel." Stanton's term is also imprecise since Matthew never calls the ἔθνει "new."
- 18 See (Hare 1967, pp. 153–57; Gaston 1975, p. 33). For a fuller critique of this view, see (Turner 2002, pp. 56–59).
- 19 See (Kennedy 2008, pp. 140–47), *Recapitulation*; (Harrington 1991, p. 49; Gundry 1994, pp. 33–34; Garbe 2005, pp. 31–32; Luz 2007, p. 121; Eubank 2013, p. 118; Hays 2016, pp. 113–14).
- 20 (Meier 1991, p. 55, n. 19); cf. (Hare 1993, p. 16; France 2010, pp. 78–81; Leithart 2017, p. 17), *New Israel*; (Schreiner 2019, p. 217), *Matthew*.
- 21 (Kynes 1991, p. 20). Kynes (pp. 172, 200–3) also refers to Jesus as the "true Israel."

- 22 I posit no dependent relationship between Matthew and *Genesis Rabbah*. However, some see rabbinic literature responding to Christian ideas. [(Neusner 1991), p. 169] reads the discourse about Abraham and Israel in the above passage (*GenR* 40:6) as a rabbinic “refutation” of the Christian claim to be “Israel ‘after the spirit.’” While I find a lack of concrete evidence for this view, it is certainly possible that, at times, the rabbis responded to Christian theology. See, e.g., (Grypeou and Spurling 2009).
- 23 See (Strack and Stemberger 1996, pp. 279–80).
- 24 Hebrew from (Theodor and Albeck 1965), 1.385–86.
- 25 Neusner, *Creation*, 168–69; cf. (Brettler 1995, p. 52; Bakhos 2016, p. 120).
- 26 (Kugel 1983, p. 147), limits rabbinic exegetical attention to “bits” of text within the cited biblical verses; cf. (Stern 1991, pp. 153–54; Shanks Alexander 2006, pp. 84–85; Sommer 2012, pp. 66–69; Bakhos 2014, p. 49).
- 27 For metalepsis elsewhere in *Genesis Rabbah*, see (Schaser 2017, pp. 107–32).
- 28 Per (Holtz 1984, p. 191), “Sometimes the Midrash will only quote the first section of the biblical verse, but its concern may be with the end of the verse, or the verse that follows it.”
- 29 See, e.g., (Soares Prabhu 1976, pp. 261–62).

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