Purity, Holiness, and the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew’s Narrative World

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1. Introduction: Beyond the Familiar

“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?” These words from Psalm 24 capture the timeless question of how the divine may be approached, how humans can reach beyond the profane towards that which is holy, towards that which perfects a person, a people, the world. This is also the key question that inspired much of Susan Haber’s scholarship on ancient Judaism, which she defined, appropriately, to include Jesus and the earliest phases of the movement from which one offshoot developed into what later became known as Christianity; the title of her book, “They Shall Purify Themselves,” edited posthumously by Adele Reinhartz, illustrates this well. While it has been common among both Christian and Jewish scholars, not least terminologically, to treat ancient Judaism and Christianity as if they were separate religions from the very beginning, mirroring in some way the modern academic distinction

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1 Psalm 15 expounds the same theme. As for Psalm 24, the question of holiness and human worthiness in relation to the divine is introduced with a universalizing statement about God as the creator and owner of creation in its entirety.
2 Haber, “Purify.” The work includes essays on, e.g., the historical Jesus, the Gospel of Mark, and Hebrews.
3 On Christian writers on Judaism, see, e.g., the pioneering work by Moore, “Christian Writers,” 197–254. Cf. Part One of the now classic study by Sanders, Paul. While most scholar agree with the critique leveled against the confessional biases in earlier scholarship on these and related issues, the fact remains that many researchers still approach Second Temple Judaism as if the historical Jesus and the earliest traditions about him were not part of that religious culture. Somewhat strangely, Rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and did not become mainstream Judaism until Late Antiquity, is often understood, implicitly or explicitly, as more of an expression of Second
between different disciplines (as well as contemporary religious identities), Susan, with whom I had the privilege to work for a few years when she studied at McMaster, belonged among those thinkers who emphasized that history needs to be approached, first and foremost, as something ‘other,’ as something distinct from our own modern cultures, religions, and everyday lives. She would have agreed, I believe, that history begins with profound defamiliarization and acceptance of confusion, and slowly takes form as a result of radical listening. It is my view that once the texts of the New Testament are read not against the background of first-century Judaism but as expressions of it, the workings of their patterns of thought and practice emerge as religio-cultural phenomena making ancient sense beyond the artificial and sometimes less than helpful boundaries of academic disciplines. If we, then, proceed from this basic starting point and approach a first-century text from the eastern Mediterranean such as the Gospel of Matthew, asking the questions about holiness and purity that occupied so much of Susan’s research, in which way does the text ‘respond’?

Entering Matthew’s narrative world, how do people move around in it? Why do they do and say the things they do? As Walter Burkert and others have repeatedly noted, in order to understand ancient ‘religion,’ and the ancient world more generally, it is of key importance to focus on ritual and ritual patterns. Behind such patterns of ritual lie certain ideas about how the world and the cosmos function and how gods and humans should interact; a worldview in which certain notions, as they come into contact with socio-political and other realities in everyday life, activate specific ritual be-

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4 I remember with fondness the graduate seminars on the ancient synagogue, the historical Jesus, and the Gospel of John that she took with me. Her work in those seminars, as well as the theories she developed beyond those settings and discussed with me as a member of her supervisory committee, were of exceptional quality. The energy, vitality, and integrity that characterized her as a person, her professional approach to academia, and her kind and friendly demeanor was an inspiration and an example to everyone around her. It is with gratitude that I dedicate the present study to her memory, hoping that it will to some degree continue the research trajectory that she had begun to outline for herself but which was cut short by her untimely death.

5 Cf. Ruzer, Mapping, who takes a similar overall approach.

6 The concept of ‘religion,’ as this term is commonly used in the West today, did not develop until Late Antiquity; its use in contexts earlier than this period is thus problematic. For discussion, see Runesson, “Inventing,” 62–4, and n. 13.

7 Burkert, Greek Religion. Recently, DeMaris, New Testament, has emphasized the importance of applying such a perspective to the study of the New Testament texts; for his own approach, see especially pages 1–10.
behavior in particular life-situations depending on the religio-cultural setting.\(^8\) This does not mean that theology/ideology or worldview would be more important when the scholar aims to understand ritual, but rather that ritual should be analyzed as intertwined with worldview in such a way that ritual behavior will reveal something about the worldview in the culture in which specific rituals are performed, and vice versa; that a worldview reveals some of the dynamic aspects of ritual behavior. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that if what we are looking for is a reconstruction of what may be called the theology of a specific ancient text, we need to pay attention to both thought patterns and patterns of ritual as expressed in that text in order to avoid an anachronistic distinction between thought and practice.

Turning to Matthew’s Gospel and its implicit and explicit claims about how the world works, we shall focus in this essay on aspects of purity and impurity and attempt to reconstruct how Matthew’s text solves the crisis which it is clearly addressing, and, more specifically, how sin plays a role in the enfolding drama around the main character, Jesus. The central question to be asked is this: Does Matthew’s Jesus pay attention to issues of purity/impurity or does he operate as if such concerns are misguided, as if the Jewish purity system has been abolished with the coming of the Messianic age? In order to answer this question, we shall proceed in the following way.

First, we need to ask the basic question whether, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus and/or the narrator’s voice make the distinction common in the ancient Mediterranean world and elsewhere between holy and profane space. The answer to this question will have implications for how we interpret the characters in the narrative as they act and react. Second, then, we need to address the problem of how Matthew’s Jesus approaches ritual and moral impurity, an issue closely related to the problem of sacred and profane space, as well as to concepts of sin.

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\(^8\) This does not mean, of course, that all people would have elaborate views on exactly what a ritual implied theologically or ideologically. In ritual analysis, it is helpful to distinguish between at least four levels with regard to what rituals are and how people relate to them. These are: the level of ideology (which relates to the meaning ascribed to the performance of rituals); the level of use (which looks at how rituals are used by people, regardless of any ideological content ascribed to them); the level of structure (analyzes how status and relationships are implicitly formed in and by ritual contexts); the level of performance (refers to the concrete ways in which a ritual is executed). For discussion, see Runesson, *Origins*, 42–55. In addition, phenomena that trigger the performance of specific rituals may be used to classify, generally and with some overlap, ritual behavior. Modéus, * Sacrifice*, 33–56, suggests the following six types of main *causa*: *causa* of the cycle of nature; life-cycle *causa*; constitutive *causa*; restitutive *causa*, *causa* of crisis; *causa* of initiation (see also Runesson, *Origins*, 47–51). It is such *causa*, rather than, e.g., specific ideological concerns, that ‘interact’ within a larger worldview in diverse cultures to produce specific ritual performances at specific points in time.
In a third step, we shall look closer at the relationship between purity concerns and Matthew’s understanding of Jewish law more generally, as well as of the related concepts of forgiveness and atonement, all of which are core issues for the understanding of the text and the role of the Messiah it proclaims. Matthew’s narrative is, in fact, quite clear about the purpose of the Messiah, as early on in the story “an angel of the Lord” appears to Joseph in a dream instructing him as follows regarding the child to be born: “you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). The rest of the narrative can, arguably, be said to expand on how this was done, and why. It seems important, then, to ask what ‘sin’ (hamartia) means in this text, and how this concept relates to ritual and moral impurity, if at all, and to other concepts, such as defilement of the land and the Jerusalem temple. As Eyal Regev has recently argued, “[t]here is no doubt that this phenomenon [i.e., moral impurity] underlies the moral exhortations and admonitions in early Christian texts, and perhaps other features of Christian theology itself.” How does such a claim correspond to Matthew’s narrative? Finally, then, we may ask how all of this, holiness – purity – sin, relate to Jesus’ central message of the eschatological kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s Gospel, the goal of his mission. Is purity required for entry into the kingdom?

2. Between Heaven and Earth: Distinguishing Between Holy and Profane

Approaching the Gospel of Matthew with these questions in mind, our historical reading of Matthew’s text should take as point of departure first-century Jewish understandings of law, as it relates to purity and holiness. First, as Haber has emphasized, we need to consider, on the one hand, the distinction between holy and profane, and, on the other, the distinction between pure and impure. While the pure could relate to both holy and profane, the holy must never come in contact with the impure. Second, regarding purity itself, we need to keep in mind that purity concerns were related to both ritual and moral purity, and that moral impurity could, with potentially catastrophic consequences, defile the land as well as render the temple impure. It should be noted, then, that such interrelated concerns

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10 Haber, “Purify,” 165; Haber refers to Milgrom, Leviticus I–16.
11 This is so both in the Hebrew Bible and in many Second Temple Jewish texts, although the exact interpretation of the concepts and the consequences of impurity could vary. For discussion of this issue, see Klawans, Impurity; idem, Purity. Cf. Regev, “Moral Impurity,”
about moral and ritual purity problematizes the common understanding that ethical instruction can be understood independently from purity discourses. Nor should it be assumed that a focus on moral purity would lead to a rejection of ritual purity concerns. While ritual and moral purity are different in nature—ritual purity has nothing to do with sin, while grave sins may result in moral impurity—the core concern is still about impurity and its effect on people, temple, and land.

If we apply these two general phenomena through which law was interpreted and practiced in first-century Judaism as a filter through which we read Matthew’s Gospel, we have anchored our reading of Matthew within a first-century setting and may be able to discern more clearly Matthew’s point of view—negatively or positively—with regard to purity aspects of the law in light of the presence of the Messiah in Israel and worldwide. In the following we shall seek to understand how Matthew approaches the concept of holy space. Does Matthew divide the world into holy and profane, as did other Jews, or does he reject as invalid such distinctions? If a distinction is maintained, what exactly is understood to be holy and how does Matthew relate to such phenomena?

2.1. Jerusalem: The City and the Temple

Beginning with the larger context in which the text was produced, in the ancient Mediterranean world space was perceived as basically divided between holy and profane. Entering a temple meant accessing an area which was seen as qualitatively different from the space in which everyday life was played out; certain rules applied and many of the ordinary human every-day life activities were not to take place beyond the marked boundaries of that space, the boundaries usually indicated by water basins for ritual purification located at the entrances. In addition to temple space, some cities were regarded as holy, and a whole island, such as Delos, could be dedicated to

383–84. Note, also, how Josephus considers the Temple to have been profaned and made ritually impure through the murders committed there in the 60s; see the contribution by Steve Mason in this volume: “Pollution and Purification in Josephus’s Judean War.”


13 Matthew’s narrative is completely focused on Israel, the people, and the land. The story ends, however, with a command that the entire world should be taken on by the disciples, and, therefore, we should assume that what has been said about Israel in terms of law and kingdom must apply also to the rest of the world (Matt 28:18–20). For discussion of Matthew’s Gospel and the land of Israel, see Runesson, “Giving Birth,” 301–27.

14 On Greek temples see, e.g., Burkert, Greek Religion, esp. 84–95. For a comprehensive presentation and discussion of the architectural elements of Greek temples, see Spawforth, Greek Temples.
the gods; such places were purified accordingly. Although in the case of Delos special rules for human life and conduct applied, the holiness attributed to cities was not of the same nature as that of the temples, since in temples purity was of utmost concern and no human being can be ritually pure at all times.

In Judaism, the Jerusalem Temple was the most holy site, the house of the God of Israel, and just as we find a gradual increase of sanctity within the temple, progressing from the Court of the Gentiles toward the Holy of Holies, we find a gradual increase of holiness as the Temple city, Jerusalem, is approached. The land itself in its entirety was, and is, also regarded as holy. The question is, then, if we find a similar concept of holiness in Matthew’s Gospel, and if so, what exactly it is that this narrative sets apart as holy.

In terms of physical structures and areas, the narrative voice of Matthew’s Gospel describes Jerusalem as a holy city in Matt 4:5 and 27:53, and there is no indication that the city changes status as the narrative progresses. The reason for this attributed holiness is implied in Matt 5:35, where Jesus is reported to have said that Jerusalem is “the city of the great king,” the king being the God which Matthew elsewhere identifies, through the voice of the crowds who had witnessed Jesus’ healings, as “the God of Israel” (Matt 15:31). There can be no doubt that, for Matthew, Jerusalem is a holy city, because in this city dwells the God of Israel. This fact, in turn, leads us to consider the status of the Jerusalem Temple. If the city of Jerusalem is regarded as holy, it follows that the Temple’s status, as in other forms of Judaism, is still more elevated. Indeed, any approach or theory that would claim sanctity for the city but not for the Temple would present us with multiple problems that would be very difficult to solve.

Reading through Matthew’s narrative, in the fifth discourse, which deals with eschatological matters, the author lets Jesus refer to the Book of Dan-

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15 For example, childbirth and death were prohibited on the island.
16 This increase in the level of holiness is connected to the different status of the people who could be close to the holy of holies: The outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, allowed the presence of non-Jews, the Court of Women allowed Jewish women and men, the Court of the Israelites allowed only Jewish men, the Court of the Priests only (male) members of the priestly family; the holy of holies was accessed only once a year, and only by the High Priest.
17 On the Jerusalem Temple, see Busink, Tempel. For Jerusalem as a holy city, see, e.g., Neh 11:1, 18; Isa 52:1; Jer 31:23; Dan 9:24; Tob 13:9; 1 Macc 2:7; 2 Macc 3:1; 3 Macc 6:5. In later Jewish tradition, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias have also become regarded as holy cities, although not on the same level of sanctity as Jerusalem.
18 See, e.g., Zech 2:16 [12]; Wis 12:3; 2 Macc 1:7.
20 Matthew 24–25. For a recent discussion of Matthew’s structure, see Runesson, “Matthew, Gospel According to,” 59–78 especially 64–73.
iel as he predicts that the desecration of the temple will trigger apocalyptic disaster:

So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place [en topō hagio], as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. (Matt 24:15–22)

It is interesting to note that, for Matthew’s Jesus, the end of the world as we know it is related to the desecration of the holy Temple in Jerusalem, not to Jesus’s death. While Jesus’ death is intertwined theologically with the destruction of the Temple, it is the latter that signals the end for all to see. The distinction between the Temple and Jesus is also seen in the fact that the blame for the destruction of the Temple is laid squarely at the feet of the “scribes and the Pharisees,” whereas the blame for the death of Jesus is related primarily to the Temple authorities. In any case, Matthew’s view of the Temple as holy space (which, by implication, can be defiled) is confirmed in Matt 23:16–22, where the Temple and the altar are referred to as sacred, the space itself being God’s dwelling:

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22 Cf. the less explicit expression in Mark 13:14: “But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be.”
24 The destruction of the Temple in Matt 23:37–24:2 is clearly linked to the severe critique of the “scribes and Pharisees” of Matt 23:1–36.
25 The Pharisees disappear in the passion narrative, in which “the chief priests and the elders of the people” take the leading role as Jesus is handed over to the non-Jewish authorities to be executed (Matt 26:3). This is probably due to Matthew’s conservative approach to his sources for the passion narrative. However, one may note that the dual blame laid on Pharisees (for the destruction of the Temple) and chief priests (for Jesus’ death) is brought together in Matt 21:45, which concludes the parable of the wicked tenants. In Matthew’s version of the parable, it seems clear that the vineyard refers to Jerusalem, whose crops the tenants (the Pharisees and the chief priests) refuse to hand over to God (the landowner). The landowner sends servants (the prophets), whom the tenants beat up and kill (cf. Matt 23:30–31, 35); as the landowner’s son is sent, the tenants drag him out of the vineyard (Jerusalem) and kill him. The kingdom of God (Israel in its ideal state) shall thus be taken from the chief priests and the elders (Matt 21:41, 43), as well as the Pharisees (Matt 21:45), and given to another group (the [Jewish] followers of Jesus; Matt 19:28 reveals that the new leadership group envisioned is comprised of Jesus’ closest disciples, the twelve), which will produce the right fruit (a people obedient to the law; cf. 5:17–20, 48) for the landowner (cf. Matt 3:8, 10; 7:15–20; 12:33; 13:23). The parable thus represents a condensed outline of the Jesus event as understood by Matthew.
“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary [hagiozō] is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘Whoever swears by the altar [thysiastērion] is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.’ How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells [katoikeō] in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it. (Matt 23:16–22)

We may note here the explicit statement that it is the sanctity of the altar that is said to make the sacrificial gift sacred (Matt 23:19). The gift belongs, in and of itself and regardless of the intentions of the giver, to the profane sphere (although it has to be, as noted above, pure). It is when the pure sacrificial gift comes in (objective) contact with the holy that its status is transformed and becomes acceptable to the God of Israel.

It seems clear, then, that Matthew’s Jesus understands the Temple as sacred space, and that the holiness of this space needs to be taken more, not less, seriously than the author accuses the “scribes and Pharisees” of doing. What we see is a critique of attitudes and rulings deemed too lenient in relationship to the holy. As elsewhere in Matthew, the problem is not that “scribes and Pharisees” keep the law, or keep it too strictly; they simply do not keep it rigorously enough. For Matthew, lawlessness (anomia) is the real problem. In fact, reading Matt 23:16–22 together with Matt 5:33–37,

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26 Cf. Exod 29:37: “[T]he altar shall be most holy; whatever touches the altar shall become holy.” For discussion, see Nolland, Matthew, 935–36, who also refers to m. Zeb. 9:1, where it is stated that “[t]he altar makes holy whatsoever is prescribed as its due” (transl. by Danby). On the Mishnah and the laws of holiness, see Neusner, History.

27 Matt 5:20; 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12. In Matthew, the law (nomos) refers to the law of Moses (Matt 5:17–18; 7:12; 11:13; 12:5; 22:36, 40; 23:23; cf. 15:3; 19:17–18). The meaning of lawlessness (anomia) is thus dependent on such an understanding of law and should be seen as the antithesis of keeping Moses’ law. The apocalyptic setting for some of the references to anomia, or this concept’s relationship to the concept of sin (cf. 1 John 3:4), do not mitigate against this interpretation of the terms as they are used in the cultural world of Matthew’s narrative. Cf. Did. 16:3–4. The point in the text is not that Matthew would have been attacking “antinomian Christians” (cf. Davison, “Anomia,” 617–33). Rather, the key, in my opinion, lies in Matthew’s critique of ‘Pharisees and scribes’ and the claim that they do not keep the law of Moses. In Matt 7:23, any (Jewish; cf. Matt 10:5–6) follower of Jesus (Matt 7:21–22) who does not follow Matthew’s strict interpretation of the law, with its emphasis on doing justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23), will be the target of the same judgment as the “scribes and the Pharisees” whose type of righteousness will not be enough for the kingdom (Matt 5:20). In the same way, Matthew’s Jesus attacks the “false prophets” of the movement in 7:15 by using the same kind of rhetorical distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of a person as he does against the “scribes and Pharisees” elsewhere in the Gospel, most strongly in 23:25–28. In other words, Matthew’s text seems here to critique Jews who confess Jesus but act like Pharisees who do not. As I have argued elsewhere regarding the setting in
where the swearing of oaths is prohibited altogether, indicates that the her-
meneutical principle governing Matthean law discourse is the importance of
righteousness when dealing with things holy; God’s name must be sancti-
fied (παντιεύτηρησα; Matt 6:9), and the Temple must not be defiled (Matt 5:23–34).
Despite the sometimes supposed contradiction between Matthew 5, where
swearing is prohibited, and Matthew 23, where swearing is assumed, the
two passages argue from the same perspective, namely that swearing is in-
tertwined with the holy, and therefore that care is to be taken. In fact, the
ruling of Matt 5:33–37 may be read as a logical continuation of the argument
in Matthew 23, constructing a “fence around the law.”

These rulings on behavior related to the Temple are clearly meant to be
understood as descriptive of Jesus’ convictions and normative. Indeed, the
Temple cult itself is so important and delicate a matter in this narrative that
anyone who is about to offer a sacrifice needs not only to approach the
altar in a state of ritual purity, but also to account for the purity of his
or her conduct (moral purity), before presenting the sacrificial animal for
slaughter:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or
sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first
be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to
terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your
accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be
thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the
last penny. (Matt 5:23–26)

As seen from this quote, purification in relation to sacrifices consists of
prior reconciliation (διαλασσώμαι) with anyone with whom an individual

which the Gospel was produced by a group of Pharisees leaving the larger Pharisaic move-
ment after 70 C. E., on sociological grounds the most likely scenario would be to assume that
some members of the Matthean group chose to remain within the association of the Pharisees
when those who produced the Gospel left (see Runesson, “Re-Thinking,” 95–132, especially
126–127, and n. 108; idem, “Building,” 397–408). If this is correct, it is quite likely that the
rhetoric against Christ-believing ‘false prophets’ and ‘lawbreakers’ is directed against these
Pharisaic followers of Jesus. The same interpretation applies to Matt 5:19 too, and those who
are said to break even the least of the commandments and teach others to do the same. In
Matthew, the Pharisees are those who break the law of God (e.g., Matt 15:3–9; 23:23, 28); it
seems likely, then, that Pharisaic Christ-believers would be targeted as this topic comes up
in relation to believers in Jesus, in an attempt to convince them to join the ‘separatists’ who
are now establishing their own independent association (cf. Matthew 18, where rules for
such an association are laid out).

28 Cf. Deut 23:22 (23): “But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt.”
29 For this hermeneutical strategy, cf. m. Pirge ‘Avotb 1:1.
30 Ritual purity would have been required of anyone who wanted to enter sacred space in
antiquity, and must be seen here as understood even if not explicitly mentioned. See further
discussion in section 3 below.
may have had a dispute (v. 24), the logic behind the ruling being that any relationship between human beings is also simultaneously affecting the relationship between humans and the God of Israel in space considered holy. Reconciliation is all the more important since Jesus has just equated anger with murder (Matt 5:21–22); bloodshed, together with sexual sins, idolatry, and deceit, is one of the severe sins that morally defile a person resulting in an impure status unacceptable for anyone’s presence in the Temple. We shall return to the discussion of moral and ritual impurity below. What is important to note here is that requirements relating to the Temple in Jerusalem concern purity, which in turn confirms that Matthew’s Jesus considers the Temple to be holy space. In Matthew’s narrative, then, Jerusalem is the city of God and thus holy, and the Temple is the abode of God and therefore sacred. While holiness is ascribed to other phenomena in Matthew, such as God’s name (Matt 6:9), the Spirit (e.g., Matt 1:18; 12:32), and certain individuals from the past (Matt 27:52), the notion of physical space as holy carries specific importance, since it assists us in locating Matthew’s narrative firmly within a specific ritual worldview, namely the Jewish ritual world centered on the Temple and Jerusalem.

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31 This theology is also applied to God’s Messiah and his followers, so that anyone who has acted mercifully towards a follower of Jesus is counted as righteous, since deeds of mercy done to a follower are perceived as if they were done to Jesus himself, the future cosmic judge (Matt 10:40–42 [Jews]; 25:31–42 [non-Jews]). The necessity of correlation between ‘inner’ attitude and ‘outward’ behavior is similar to the ruling on repentance in relation to forgiveness in m. Yoma 8:9, and mirrors the distinction between moral and ritual purity to be discussed below. For discussion of ritual and moral impurity in rabbinic literature, see Klawans, Impurity, 118–35.

32 Regev, “Moral Impurity,” 383; On this issue, see also Fredriksen, “Did Jesus?” 18–25, 42–47.

33 Cf. Gurtner, “Matthew’s Theology,” 130, who concludes that, “the first evangelist has a remarkably consistent and positive portrayal of the Temple. No negative word is uttered by either the evangelist or his Jesus about the Temple itself.” One text that is sometimes noted as relativizing Matthew’s view on the Temple is Matt 12:6, where the Matthean Jesus states that, “something greater than the Temple [hieron] is here,” referring to the events associated with himself, especially the mercy characteristic of the approaching eschatological kingdom. (Note the use of the neuter here, which speaks against any direct reference to Jesus as that which is greater than the Temple; however, that which happens around Jesus is inextricably interwoven with the person of Jesus, making too sharp a distinction between the events and Jesus difficult.) The argument of 12:1–8, which is a dispute over the definition of work in relation to the Sabbath, is structured such that the Temple is said to be more important than the Sabbath, and the eschatological events around Jesus more important than the Temple; thus, that which happens around Jesus is more important than the Sabbath. In addition to confirming the validity of the Sabbath, although as subordinated under Temple and eschatological mercy, such a statement about the Temple establishes the importance of the Temple for Matthew, since its mention here is meant to indicate the exceptional importance of the Messiah and the eschatological events happening around him. For discussion, see Gurtner, “Temple,” 134–35; Nolland, Matthew, 484–85; cf. Saldarini, Christian-Jewish Community, 126.
2.2. The Synagogue

Does Matthew speak of other types of space as holy, such as synagogues, and if so, what requirements would be associated with such space? Interestingly, the answer seems to be in the negative. There is only one area and place in Matthew that is associated with the holy: the city of Jerusalem and the Temple within its walls. Synagogues are not talked about in such terms, and events related to synagogues are not described as qualitatively different in terms of space than events taking place in the open air. One passage, Matt 6:5–6, does mention individual prayer in such an institution; this, however, does not turn the building into sacred space. On the contrary, as the context makes clear, synagogue space is public space, in which a person may be seen by other people, just as much as a street corner is open for all to observe what others are doing (v. 5). This, in fact, constitutes a problem for Matthew since prayer is communication with the holy (Matt 6:9–13), and approaching the holy requires attention to purity of some sort. Just as sacred space will be defiled by anger/bloodshed (Matt 5:21–22), prayer will be offensive to God if done in order to acquire recognition and respect among fellow humans. The space issue here, then, is not about its holiness but about the fact that it easily lends itself to inappropriate human attitudes relating to vanity and arrogance. The solution to the problem is to pray alone in private space when prayer is performed beyond public meetings; when in public space, humility and a complete focus on the divine is the only way to prepare a person for communication with the God of Israel.

Purity, moral and/or ritual, is, then, not associated with synagogues more than with the land in general. This overall picture is in agreement with current research on ancient synagogues, which has confirmed that, while several synagogues outside the land, especially in Egypt, are described in the sources as sacred space, and we have one source speaking of an association synagogue in the land as holy space, there is no evidence to support such a notion for public synagogues located in the land itself. This does not mean,

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34 See discussion below on moral impurity.
35 Cf. Luke 18:10–14, where the public setting is the Temple.
36 For primary sources, see Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*. The only synagogue whose space is claimed to be holy is the association synagogue of the Essenes, as described by Philo (*Prob*. 81). This synagogue was, however, not public but for members only, and, as such, gave expression to this specific group’s way of understanding themselves and doing Judaism. There is, though, one interesting exception with regard to synagogues in the land: the synagogue building in Caesarea Maritima mentioned by Josephus (*J. W.* 2.289). This synagogue is said to have been “desecrated” (*miainô*) when a non-Jew performed a sacrifice of birds just in front of its entrance. This seems to imply that the building was seen by Josephus as sacred. The manner in which the story is told, however, may have been Josephus’ way of using the synagogue institution in his rhetoric aimed at a Roman audience, which would understand the whole episode to have been as atrocious as if it were about the desecra-
though, that, for Matthew’s Jesus, purity was not a concern outside the Temple and Jerusalem, which in turn may indicate that the land had special status in the author’s mind.

2.3. The Land

It is likely that Matthew regarded the land as a whole not only as Israel’s (i.e., belonging to the people of Israel), which is stated in Matt 2:20, 21, but also as, on some level, holy. To be sure, this is not mentioned explicitly in the narrative. Special status of the land may be inferred, however, from descriptions of how Jesus is working throughout the narrative to purge the land of unclean spirits (Matt 12:43–45; cf. Zech 13:2), demons (Matt 8:16; 9:32–33; 10:6–8; 17:18), and unclean animals (Matt 8:30–32); such phenomena should not come into contact with the holy. It would seem that such concerns would fit well with the general situation in the land in the first century, as it can be reconstructed from, e.g., the existence of miqvaot (ritual baths) and the pervasive use of stone vessels in Judea as well as in Galilee and the Golan; such stone vessels were considered resistant to ritual impurity. These baths

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and stone vessels indicate that Jews at this time desired to be ritually pure in settings beyond the Temple in Jerusalem and not only when they visited the Temple, despite the fact that the Torah is only concerned with the purity of the Temple; to be in a state of impurity is not judged to be a breach of law until such a person attempts to enter the Temple. (In the Hebrew Bible, ritual impurity is not considered to be a sin.) In the first century, however, it seems clear that ritual purity practices had become widespread and were performed in daily life settings by people not travelling to Jerusalem and the Temple. This may or may not be directly related to concerns about the status of the land, since such status would be affected by the position of the people living there; such a relationship between people and land could also be thought of as indirectly connected to the temple cult. With regard to the position of the people, as John Poirier has argued, “purity is connected to holiness, which is enjoined upon all of Israel”; this, however, does not exclude concerns for the land as holy.

Further, what is usually spoken of as ethical demands in Matthew, e.g., in the Sermon on the Mount, should rather be understood within the context of concerns about moral impurity. It is difficult to determine whether, for Matthew, concerns about moral impurity and the defilement that would follow are primarily related to the temple or the land as such. A distinction between the Temple and the land may, in the end, be misleading, however, since the Temple and the land were ideologically intertwined, so that defilement of the Temple led to the exile of the people from the land; the purity of the land is required on some level, and the Temple offers the means necessary to keep its status acceptable to the God of Israel. It seems as if, for Matthew’s Jesus, whose main message is the imminent arrival of the kingdom of heaven, the land as well as the people need to be prepared for the transformation that is about to happen, when divine rule will be implemented. Since the holy must not come into contact with the impure (if disaster and destruction is to be avoided) this leads us to consider the question the stone vessels, after the fall of the Temple in 70 C.E. the number of miqvaot decreases drastically; the few that remain after this time are located mostly in Galilee. On miqvaot and stone vessels, see also now the discussion by Miller, “Stepped Pools.”

39 In Qumran, the sectarians expanded and merged the concepts of ritual and moral impurity, so that, on the one hand, members of the community who were ritually impure had to atone, and, on the other, sinners had to purify themselves. See Klawans, *Impurity*, 90.

40 For discussion of purity concerns beyond the Temple, see Haber, “Purify,” 194–199; Poirier, “Purity,” 247–265. Cf. Repschinski, “Purity,” 380, who states that “purity issues were not restricted to temple worship, but became increasingly important in Diaspora settings.” As for the land, the Qumran texts are of special interest in this regard.

41 Poirier, “Purity,” 254; cf. 253. See further discussion below.

42 Defilement resulting from moral impurity could contaminate the Temple from a distance according to some Jewish sources; see Regev, “Moral Impurity,” 388, n. 18.
of ritual and moral impurity more specifically, and the implications of these concepts for our understanding of Matthew’s version of the Gospel story.

3. Ritual and Moral Impurity: Active Categories or Rejected Matters of the Past?

In any sacred space, Jewish or non-Jewish, certain behavior would be required. To achieve a state of ritual purity would be necessary for anyone entering a temple. Different cultures would have distinctive ways of understanding what makes a person impure, and would provide different types of purification rituals to remove impurity. It is hardly possible to speak of space as sacred without at the same time implicitly acknowledge that individuals entering such space must have gone through certain rituals of purification. As Haber has convincingly argued, the historical Jesus, in all likelihood, purified himself ritually before entering the Temple. She correctly insists that the “burden of proof must remain on those who would argue that Jesus departed from the common practice of his fellow Jews.”

The question is, then, whether Matthew’s portrait of Jesus would be consistent with such a reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Would a reader of/listener to Matthew’s Gospel in the late first century, after the fall of the Temple, have understood this portrait of Jesus as concerned with purity issues, ritual and/or moral, or would they have drawn the conclusion that this Jesus disregarded as unimportant – or even abolished – purity practices? In the following, it will be argued that Matthew operates fully within a Jewish interpretive paradigm in which both ritual and especially moral purity concerns are active and affect how the story is being told.

3.1. Ritual Purity

Regarding ritual impurity, we have already noted that Matthew’s narrative describes the Temple as holy space, and that, by implication, ritual purity concerns would have to be assumed to be a vital part of the worldview within which this text logically works, even if specific rituals are not mentioned explicitly. While such considerations in and of themselves would, arguably, be enough to settle the case, there is more evidence indicating that ritual purity is a live issue for the author, as he describes both Jesus and the assumptions of Jesus’ audience, friend and foe alike.

44 Haber, “Purify,” 206.
In Matt 8:1–4, Matthew recounts a story in which Jesus heals a leper, an act which places him in the prophetic tradition of healing. As he has done so, Jesus, keeping to the instructions in the Jewish law commanding the Israelites to follow the priests’ teaching on leprosy and purity rituals (Deut 24:8–9), orders the man: “[S]how yourself to the priest, and offer the gift [dōron, i.e., sacrifice] that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” This passage shows unambiguously that the author of Matthew understood Jesus to be concerned with ritual purity laws (not just the law in general), to recognize the authority and role of the priests in cases involving this disease as described in the Torah, and to tell people he healed to follow the law, just as he had previously insisted in the Sermon on the Mount.

Since this is described in Matthew as Jesus’ approach to laws on ritual purity, we will have to assume that as the twelve disciples are sent out to accomplish the things that Jesus had begun and would continue to do, the same attention to ritual purity would apply to them and the people they healed as the story progresses. The eradication of impurity associated with leprosy through healing and priestly rituals in the temple is accompanied by exorcisms: “Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits (exosian pneumatōn akathartōn), to cast them out”

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45 Cf., e.g., Numbers 12; 2 Kings 5; 20.
46 The mention of a testimony (martyrion) to the priests is not to be understood as a weakening of the importance of ritual purification or as a judgment on Israel, as has been common in church history. Rather, the testimony is about Jesus’ status as a prophet, healing the people from their illnesses. The prophetic power of healing thus backs up the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), which is eschatological in orientation; both healing and teaching reveal who Jesus is. This is what the priests are urged, through the ‘real-life proof’ of his healings, to understand. Luz, Matthew, 6, is thus only partially correct when he suggests that the main function of this comment is to ensure the reader that Jesus, as Israel’s Messiah, keeps the Torah.
47 Contra Luz, Matthew, 2.6, who understands the meaning of the passage to refer to the law more generally, comparing it to Matt 5:17–19. However, while the latter passage is indeed a programmatic statement on the validity of the Jewish law in its entirety for any Jew, including the followers of Jesus, Matt 8:4 gives an example which insists on the validity of the ritual purity laws specifically.
48 On leprosy, see Lev 13–14.
49 Note especially Matt 5:17–20, but also the insistence on actually doing what was required, Matt 7:21–23. For a discussion of Jesus’ visit to the house of a certain Simon the Leper just before Passover, see Neusner, Idea, 60–62. Neusner concludes that the name refers to this person being an ex-leper, not that he would still be suffering from leprosy.
50 The disciples are told to go to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel” and “proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse (katharizō) the lepers, cast out demons” (Matt 10:6–8). The “cleansing” of the lepers must be understood to refer to priestly rituals rather than the healings, as indicated by how Matthew presents the process in 8:4. In 10:8, the expression captures the result, or goal, of the healings performed by the disciples: due to their work, the lepers will become ritually pure. See also Matt 11:5.
(Matt 10:1). In 10:4, these “unclean spirits” are identified as “demons” (daimonion).\(^{51}\) In other words, as Jesus and his chosen representatives of the twelve tribes worked to initiate the kingdom the author of Matthew’s Gospel describes the removal of impurity as a central component of what was involved in this process.

Now, if the author was concerned with the ritual purity of individuals suffering from leprosy (as well as with the removal of unclean spirits), it follows that ritual impurity contracted from other sources would also be a concern for Matthew. The issue of food has been discussed extensively in the literature,\(^ {52}\) and need not be revisited here; it is clear that Matt 15:1–20 is not intended to abrogate the food laws. Rather, what we see here is an example of Matthew’s rhetoric, also evident elsewhere,\(^ {53}\) which blames the Pharisees for breaking God’s law (v. 3) in favor of other rules.\(^ {54}\) This pericope is designed to clarify the relationship between ritual and moral purity: Matthew’s Jesus states clearly here what is both implicit and explicit elsewhere, namely that ritual impurity is less important, or urgent, than moral impurity.\(^ {55}\) This should not be understood, as we have seen, as if ritual impurity may be neglected. The logic is rather that the grave sins which generate moral impurity render the person unclean in such a way that it requires atoning sacrifices; if atonement is not achieved, the Temple and land would be defiled and apocalyptic disaster would follow.\(^ {56}\)

The hermeneutics of Matt 23:23 seem to be valid here: people need to focus on the weightier matters of the law without neglecting the other commandments. We shall return to this in the next section.

The above examples show how ritual purity issues are relevant as Matthew describes Jesus’ healings and legal disputes with other Jews. In addition to this type of evidence, we also see from the rhetoric Jesus is described as engaging in when debating with his opponents that ritual purity is a live issue for the author. This is particularly evident in Matthew 23. The Matthean Jesus, who is, in accordance with Jewish law, wearing tzitzit (kraspedon) and

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51 Cf. above, n. 37.
54 As Furstenberg, “Defilement,” 176–200, has argued, it seems likely that the Pharisaic ritual of hand washing before meals debated by Jesus had its origin in Graeco-Roman practice, not in priestly purity laws. Such an understanding of the historical Jesus, as reacting against innovations which he deemed did not have any support in the Torah fits well with Matthew’s description of him accusing his adversaries of breaking God’s law more generally, including rules regarding honoring mother and father in relation to gifts for the Temple (15:3–9).
55 See discussion in the following section.
56 On similar patterns of thought in other Jewish movements, see Klawans, *Impurity*; note especially the discussion on pages 47–48 of the apocalyptic disasters mentioned in Jubilees to follow as a result of the moral impurity that had defiled land and temple.
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tefillin (phylaktērion),\(^{57}\) and is protecting the law of tithing,\(^{58}\) compares the way the “scribes and Pharisees” keep the law with a metaphor based on laws on ritually unclean animals, gnats and camels: “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” (Matt 23:24).\(^{59}\) The sting of the metaphor is missed if the impurity of such animals is not part of a worldview that is shared by the Matthean Jesus and his audience. The accusation against the Pharisees is that they have become impure by ignoring the weightier commandments; these weightier laws have previously been identified as justice, mercy, and, faith (krēsis, eleōs, pistis; 23:23). The reference to camels here thus functions to emphasize the fact that breaking (aphiēmi) these fundamental laws puts them in a state of (moral) impurity, which is far worse than any form of ritual impurity, and, indeed, makes useless any ritual purity they may have achieved through other means.

Having stated that the practices of the “scribes and Pharisees” will lead them – and anyone else following their practice (Matt 23:3)\(^{60}\) – to contract impurity, Matthew’s Jesus goes on to claim that his opponents are, in fact, in a state of impurity. This is done through reference to the ritual impurity of food vessels and dead bodies, which are, metaphorically, said to describe these individuals (Matt 23:25–27). Again, we see that a shared worldview in which impurity constitutes the main obstacle for approaching the holy is utilized rhetorically to drive home the point that moral impurity overrides any form of ritual purity that people can achieve; regardless of any efforts to achieve a state of ritual purity, the opponents of Jesus are said to be impure. In other words, what Matthew’s Jesus is saying is that his opponents have contracted impurity from breaking the law just as much as anyone would have done who has touched a corpse or who has not cleaned the cups and

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\(^{57}\) Num 15:37–41; Deut 22:12; cf. Zech 8:23. Jesus’ tzitzit are mentioned in Matt 9:20 and 14:36. While Jesus’ tefillin (phylacteries) are not explicitly mentioned by Matthew they have to be part of Matthew’s portrait of the messiah on the basis that the rhetoric of Matt 23:5 is aimed at the size of these ethno-religiously important markers, not the phenomenon itself, and we know that he followed one of the laws mentioned (wearing tzitzit).

\(^{58}\) E.g., Num 18:21–32; Deut 14:22–29. Tithing of dill and cumin is not part of the requirements in the Torah, but is required in rabbinic halakah; these herbs are mentioned in m. Maas. 4:5 and m. Dem 2:1, respectively. Mint is not mentioned in other Jewish sources; see Nolland, Matthew, 937–38. In Matt 23:23 Jesus states clearly that it is necessary to follow both the weighty and the less weighty matters of the law, as he also insisted on in Matt 5:19. For the author, probably writing in Galilee, tithing, which applied to the produce of the land of Israel only, and not the Diaspora, was one of the less weighty matters that still needed attention in accordance with the interpretation of the law of Moses current in the day, probably among the Pharisees.

\(^{59}\) Lev 11:4 (camels), and 11:41–43 (gnats and similar creatures); note the summarizing statement in Lev 11:44–45 giving the reason behind the laws: the people of Israel should not defile themselves by eating impure foods, but must be holy as the God of Israel is holy.

\(^{60}\) For an interpretation of Matt 23:2–3, see Powell, “Do and Keep,” 419–35.
plates from which they are eating and drinking. The force of the rhetoric lies precisely in the fact that the audience of the Gospel is expected to take for granted that corpses are ritually unclean and will impart impurity on those who touch them, and that cups and plates need to be cleaned in order not to confer impurity to those who use them; while there are rituals to purify a person from such ritual impurity, the moral impurity stemming from sin needs atonement.

The sins mentioned by Matthew’s Jesus so far in chapter 23 that produce impurity are lack of justice, mercy, and faith (23:23), as well as greed, self-indulgence (23:25), hypocrisy and, more generally, lawlessness (anomia; 23:28). To this is now added bloodshed, one of the worst sources of (moral) impurity in the bible and in Second Temple Jewish literature. Matthew formulates this accusation against “scribes and Pharisees” through a transferal of the guilt of “those who murdered the prophets” to apply to them (23:29–31, 35–36). Again, Matthew accentuates the theme of impurity through a reference to “scribes and Pharisees” as “snakes” and “brood of vipers” (23:33), that is, as ritually unclean creatures that are a source of impurity to the Jewish people. As with other unclean animals mentioned in Leviticus 11, snakes will defile the people of Israel. Therefore, in Matthew’s story, Israel needs to avoid these teachers in order to be holy as God is holy. Using this image of a ritually unclean animal to describe Jesus’ opponents is very close to claiming that they are inherently impure and that nothing good can come from them or their practices (cf. Matt 12:23, 34; 16:12).

In sum, we see in Matthew’s narrative world explicit references to Jesus as being concerned with ritual purity. More often, however, Matthew’s Jesus refers to ritual purity in order to draw attention to the more important and more devastating effects of moral impurity. As in Jubilees, while ritual impurity is certainly a reality, moral impurity seems to be the main concern of this text.

3.2. Moral Purity

The discussion above, especially on Matthew 23, has shown that the author of Matthew thinks of Jesus’ view on various kinds of sins in terms of

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61 Cf. Lev 11:42.
62 Lev 11:42: “For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” Unclean snakes are, however, considered clever in Matthew. When used as a metaphor in relation to the disciples of Jesus, that image is balanced with a metaphor of innocence: “doves” (10:16). Elsewhere, Matthew lets John the Baptist call Pharisees and Sadducees vipers. For Gentiles, Matthew has reserved other metaphors of (unclean) animals: swine and dogs (Matt 7:6; 15:26–27).
63 Klawans, Impurity, 46–48; see also his discussion of the Dead Sea scrolls, 49–56, 67–91.
impurity. In other words, the assumption seems to be that sin produces impurity. Such reasoning identifies the real problem, as the kingdom is being established, to be defilement; removing impurity is key when the eschaton is approaching. Within such a worldview we should, consequently, expect Jesus’ fundamental task to be focused on removing the source of impurity, sin, and, by doing so, setting in motion the merger between heaven and earth.

This is, in fact, precisely what we see as Matthew sets the scene for his entire narrative in chapter 1. After the author has presented a genealogy stating who Jesus is (son of David and the Messiah64), he moves on to affirm what this Messiah’s task is. Jesus’ very name, as we noted in the beginning of this study, is an indication of what he will be accomplishing; Joseph is told in a dream that Jesus “will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). In addition, Jesus’ second (explanatory) name is given through a quote from Isa 7:14 as Immanuel, “God with us” (Matt 1:23). The interpretive effect of those two names combined can be seen as a condensed form of the Gospel story:65 The Messiah will remove the sins of the people and he will be representing God’s will, even presence (through the spirit; Matt 12:28), in their midst as he does so. The latter requires the former, since sin produces impurity and impurity is an obstacle to any human – divine relationship; the holy must not come into contact with the impure. The people of Israel must be holy, as God is holy.66 Or as Matt 5:48 formulates it: “Be perfect (teleios), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”67 This, then, seems to be Mat-

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65 On the birth narrative as a “miniature” of the Gospel story as a whole, see Brown, Birth, 7.
66 The holiness of the people is stressed in relation to purity and food in Lev 11:44–45. In Lev 19:2ff, the holiness of the people is related to the lack of various forms of idolatry and witchcraft, deceit, theft, lying, false swearing, injustices done to the poor and the laborer, unjust judgment, slander, hate of neighbor, lack of respect for the old, lack of love for immigrants, cheating when doing business. See also Lev 20:7–8 (the statutes of God will sanctify Israel; cf. Num 15:40); 20:26 (food laws will keep the people holy); 21:5–8 (priests must be holy).
67 Cf. Deut 18:13 (LXX), where teleios is also used. The NRSV translation captures the sense in Matthew too: “You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God” (cf. Matt 22:37). Teleios is connected with the keeping of God’s law and commandments in 1 Kgs 8:61, and some kings are said to have been completely loyal, or true, to God, the author using this term (David, 1 Kgs 14:4; Asa, 1 Kgs 15:14). In the same sense, Noah is portrayed as “perfect” (teleios) in Gen 6:9 and Sir 44:17. To be completely loyal is thus related to following the law without wavering, which in turn has implications for the status of the people as holy, just as God is holy (cf. n. 66 above). Consequently, the use of teleios in Matt 5:48 should not be understood as asking the impossible; Wis 9:6 sheds some light on the ultimate dependency of the “perfect” on the wisdom of God: “for even one who is perfect (teleios) among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you.” For Matthew, there is only one teacher who can instruct the people in the law, namely the Messiah, who has been identified as “God with us” (Matt 23:10; 1:23).
Matthew’s overall message as he tells his story with the aim of contributing to these developments.

As I have argued elsewhere, the kingdom of heaven is, in this text, what we might call a political and geographical reality, as well as a religious world. Klawans and others have shown that in many of the texts from the Second Temple period, as well as in the Hebrew Bible, sin, defined as departure from God’s law, results in the defilement of the land, and, ultimately, the exile of the people. As we have noted above, the Book of Jubilees envisions more than a result of moral impurity, which cannot be removed through ritual purification; apocalyptic disaster and the annihilation of the unrighteous will follow if the land and the temple are defiled by sin. If Matthew’s Gospel, which is a product of roughly the same time period and culture, is identifying sin as resulting in impurity, we should expect a focus on keeping the law in order to extinguish the source of impurity. If the law is not taught correctly the people will not be able to attain the righteousness required for entry into the kingdom. We should also expect the question of forgiveness and atonement to be a central aspect of the story, as such concepts are related to the idea of the eradication of guilt, and thus to the purification, or holiness, of the people, the land, and the Temple. We shall return to the wider issue of law and atonement in relation to purity issues in the next section. Here, we shall focus on the fact that Matthew’s story explicitly claims that Jesus understood sin to be defiling.

In Matt 15:18–20, our author states that certain sins, of which some have previously been discussed as examples of violations of the law, result in defilement (moral impurity) of the individual:

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions [dialogismos], murder, adultery, sexual im-

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68 Runesson, “Giving Birth,” 301–27. See also Willitts, Messianic.
69 Klawans, Impurity; Regev, “Moral Impurity.” In the Hebrew Bible, we may note texts such as Lev 20:22 (“You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out”). Cf. Deut 23:14 (LXX 23:15), the latter stating that the camp (in the wilderness) has to be holy (LXX: hagios) if God is to be present in their midst and save them from their enemies.
70 Klawans, Impurity, 48. See Halpern-Amaru, Rewriting, 25–54, especially 48–54, for discussion of the relative place of the land in an eschatological setting aiming ultimately at the restoration of the primeval human condition.
71 Matt 5:20. On the failure of other leaders to teach the people the law, see Matt 15:3, 7–9, 13–14; 16:6, 11–12; 23:3, 8, 15, 35–36. One may note in Matt 16:12, where the teachings of the “Pharisees and Sadducees” are said to be yeast, that yeast stands in a negative relationship to Passover, and thus to the liberation which Jesus associated with his own life and death (cf. 26:1–2, 17–19, 26–29); yeast prevents liberation and ownership of the land, while correct teaching and sacrifice open the way to the kingdom.
72 See the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5).
morality [porneia], theft, false witness, slander [blasphēmia]. These are what defile a person.

These sources of moral impurity are played out against Pharisaic teachings on the ritual washing of hands before meals, i.e., an innovative practice which is rejected by the Matthean Jesus. In addition to the author’s rejection of ritual hand washing before meals, we find in this pericope a statement regarding the relative weight of ritual and moral impurity, where the Matthean Jesus claims that food cannot defile a person as much as sin. As we shall see below, this is a recurring theme in Matthew’s understanding of the law: while obeying ritual law is necessary, it is meaningless if the weightier matters of the law, i.e., its moral aspects, are ignored.

In Matt 19:18–19 we find a short list of commandments meant to protect the people from the defilement following from some of the sins mentioned in 15:19: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Since there is an overlap between the commandments listed here and those of Matt 15:19, we may safely assume that the author regarded the sins which occur only in 19:18–19 to be defiling too. Thus, hermeneutically, while only some sins are mentioned explicitly as defiling, all violations of the moral aspects of the law are most likely understood as defiling a person, since such sins are, ultimately, coming from the heart (15:18–19). While, contrary to several texts from Qumran, Matthew’s Jesus distinguishes between ritual and moral impurity, the author, in ways similar to the Qumran material, claims that all kinds of sins will lead to impurity.76

73 Matt 5:20: “to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” Cf. the discussion by Furstenberg, “Defilement,” 198–99, who argues that hand washing is not part of the priestly purity system, neither is it an expansion of it (cf. n. 54 above). For discussion of Pharisaic hand washing, see also Neusner, Idea, 61–71; Harrington, Impurity, 267–81. See also Matt 15:3, 6, 9. For Matthew, it is simply a rejection of a Pharisaic custom, and the rhetorical strategy is to refer to what most likely all agreed on were defiling acts, thus moving the discussion from ritual impurity, which can be removed by purification rituals, to moral purity, which requires atonement.

74 Matt 15:11. For this interpretation, see Davies and Allison, Matthew 2.526–31, and literature there.

75 If this would not have been the case, one would have expected an explicit distinction between sins that defile and sins that do not at some point in the narrative. Such distinctions are, however, lacking in Matthew. For the importance of the pureness of the heart (which cannot be seen by anyone but God, but which is revealed to others through attitudes and deeds) in relation to God, see Matt 5:8; 5:28; 6:21; 12:34–35; 13:15; 15:8, 18–19; 18:35. Cf. 22:37 and 11:29. Jub. 1:21 displays a similar emphasis on a pure heart (“Create a pure heart and a holy spirit for them. And do not let them be ensnared by their sin henceforth and forever.”). Cf. Halpern-Amaru, Rewriting, 51, who notes that the pureness of the heart (and fidelity to the covenant) is an eschatological marker for the author of Jubilees.

76 On Qumran, see Klawans, Impurity, 67–91. See also Werrett, Ritual Purity, who offers,
This more general perspective on all violations of the moral aspects of the law as causing a person to become impure seems to be confirmed by the last commandment mentioned in Matt 19:19: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Since this commandment is listed among other commandments, some of which overlap with those explicitly noted in 15:19 to be defiling, one may assume that anything done to a person’s neighbor which is not an expression of love will result in defilement. This is all the more interesting since this commandment is elsewhere, together with the commandment to love God above everything else, identified by the author as the most important commandment in the law of Moses (Matt 22:34–40). In other words, love for God and neighbor must be the hermeneutical hub around which all interpretation and application of the law moves. Thus, reading these passages together as illuminating one another and the story as a whole, we have at the very center of the Matthean understanding of law a connection to moral purity issues. Law observance in Matthew aims, consequently, at eradicating moral impurity and, through the resulting purity and holiness that is required of the people of God (cf. Matt 5:48), open up for participation in the kingdom of heaven, which is about to recreate the world.77

This insistence on love, and the path to purity that lies within it and establishes the possibility of a relationship between the people of God and God, identifies Matthew’s main concern throughout the narrative. Love and mercy is a required part of the law, without which it cannot be fulfilled (cf. Matt 5:43–47; 9:13; 12:27; 19:19; see also 7:12). Love is, thus, law, and lack of law results in lack of love (24:12). Keeping ‘minor’ commandments, among which the ritual commandments are found, is still important (23:23), but, as noted, such law obedience is meaningless if the weightier matters of the law are ignored (23:24).78 Sin is much more in Matthew than simply disobedience to God; the real problem is impurity and the aim is purity as Jesus sets the kingdom in motion. Sin, which is birthed in a person’s heart, produces that which stands in the way of purity and brings death and disaster.79

77 For the eschatological event as the rebirth of the world, see Matt 19:28 (paliggenesia). Cf. Jubilees and the return to an Edenic state of things as the eschatological goal.
78 Cf. n. 59 above; purity is the underlying concern even when moral issues are discussed: the camel, as well as the gnat, is a ritually unclean animal according to Jewish law. Thus, sources of ritual impurity, agreed on by all, are used to illustrate the effects of the neglect of the weightier matters of the law.
79 Cf. James 1:14–15: “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”
moving sin, beginning at its place of origin (the heart), leads to purity and holiness, interpreted as perfect loyalty to God (Matt 5:48).80

The moral impurity of a person is serious not only on the individual level, but also on a larger scale. The ruling on anger (and, by implication, bloodshed) in Matt 5:21–22 shows that moral impurity is thought to pollute the temple cult. Sins, as in several of the Qumran texts, render the sinner ritually defiling.81 That this Matthean passage is concerned with purity, and therefore with the protection of the holiness of the Temple, is shown by the fact that Matthew elsewhere states that bloodshed causes a person to become impure.82 The ruling on reconciliation before sacrifice (Matt 5:23–26) is presented as the practical application of the law on anger/bloodshed in 5:21–22. Reconciliation will resolve the cause of impurity, it seems, and make a person’s status acceptable for presence in the Temple.83 It is interesting to note that later on in the narrative bloodshed is, as in the writings of Josephus, related to the fall of the Temple (23:29–24:2).84 Moral impurity defiles the cult, and, if not eliminated, will result in the destruction of the Temple.

Having seen that moral and ritual concerns in Matthew converge on the issue of purity, which itself is the matrix within which all discussion of law is formed, it would be misleading to distinguish between ritual and ethical issues in this text, as is often done in the literature on ethics and the New Testament, and claim that ethical aspects of the law are emphasized at the expense of ritual concerns or concerns with purity.85 As Boris Repschinski has argued, to distinguish between pure and impure is to be holy as God is holy.86 For Matthew, purity is a real concern, and moral impurity is more than an active category in the narrative; it is the underlying concept that may

80 See n. 67 above.
81 Klawans, Impurity, 90.
82 Matt 15:19.
83 No rituals are mentioned as required after reconciliation has been achieved before a person may approach the altar.
84 Josephus, J.W. 6.127, 300, where God leaves the temple before its destruction; cf. below, n. 109. See also the contribution by Mason in this volume, “Pollution and Purification in Josephus’s Judean War.” Later, the rabbis combined bloodshed and hatred as they explained the destruction of the first and the second temple respectively; see b. Yoma 9b. This passage makes explicit that “baseless hatred” (sin’at hinam) is equaled to the worst of sins: bloodshed, sexual immorality, and idolatry.
85 For example, while Meeks’ study on the Origins of Christian Morality is of great import for anyone interested in the early developments of Christian morality, it lacks any discussion of the concerns about purity and impurity that were at the center of the first-century Jewish worldview in which both Jesus and his earliest followers were socialized. As Regev, “Moral Impurity,” 391–92, has alerted us to, a deeper understanding of Christian morality, and theology more generally, requires us to look closer at the Jewish concept of moral impurity.
explain the eschatological purpose of the Messiah. There is a constant emphasis in this narrative on the root of good and evil in peoples’ hearts, and the consequences of sin and impurity. As noted above it could be expected that such matters should, within a Jewish worldview, lead to an emphasis on law and a concern for forgiveness and atonement, issues to which we now turn.

4. Law, Forgiveness, and Atonement

In the following, we shall discuss two of the most dominant aspects of Matthew’s story, law and forgiveness, before we conclude with some reflections on the eschatological setting of the events recounted in the text. Beginning with the Jewish law, we have already noted the programmatic statements in Matthew with regard to its validity. The key passage is Matt 5:17–20, a perspective which is reinforced later in the narrative. Beyond such general statements, some aspects of the law and its interpretation considered especially important are mentioned in the text. These examples of how to obey the law highlight what the author thought were critical issues in light of what he judged to be accurate representations of Jesus’ position on the matter. As we take a closer look at these specific laws and practices, it becomes clear that, as we have seen above, while laws relating to ritual purity are among those both explicitly confirmed and alluded to, the main concern of this narrative is moral impurity. In order to better understand how this fits into the larger context of the narrative, it is of some value to give a summarizing overview of what this text is saying about doing Judaism the right way.

Specific practices and commandments confirmed by Jesus are mentioned as they become relevant for the progression of the story. These include almsgiving (6:3–4); individual prayer (using a fixed format, Matt 6:5–13); fasting (6:16–18; cf. 9:14–15); the Sabbath (12:1–1489; 24:20); dietary laws (15:1–20); laws on purification of individuals healed from leprosy (8:4); wearing tzitzit and, most likely, tefillin90 (9:20; 14:36; 23:5); tithing (23:23); impurity related to food vessels and corpses (implied in 23:25–26);91 festi-

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87 Cf. n. 75 above.
88 See, e.g., 13:41–43; 19:17, which relate the keeping of the commandments to life in the kingdom; cf. 7:12, 21.
89 Cf. n. 33 above. See also Davies and Allison, Matthew, 2.304–22.
90 See n. 57 above.
91 In addition, the fact that Jesus never enters the house of a non-Jew in the story may be an indication of the purity concerns that are more explicitly elaborated on elsewhere in the text. See, e.g., Matt 8:5–13. Note also that while Mark 7:24 states that Jesus entered a house in the area of Tyros, Matthew’s version of this passage deletes this detail, and adds the explicit
vals (Passover, 26:2, 17–35); laws regulating or related to the sacrificial cult, including the temple tax (5:23–24; 12:3–5; 17:24–27; 23:16–22); oaths and vows (5:33–37; 15:3–6; 23:16–22). Other laws mentioned and discussed concern adultery (5:27–30), divorce (5:31–32; 19:3–9), bloodshed (5:21–22; cf. 27:6), retribution (5:38–42), honoring father and mother (15:4; 19:19); greed (19:21–24). In addition, jealousy (phthonos) is mentioned in association with the chief priests and the elders as they hand Jesus over to Pilate (Matt 27:18). While not previously explicitly listed as a sin, such emotions are clearly viewed as forbidden and, by implication, defiling. In light of the seriousness with which the law generally and some commandments more specifically are brought up and discussed in the Gospel, it is very likely that circumcision was also part of the ritual worldview which produced the perspective on law otherwise explicitly noted in the text. We may also note that public reading of Torah in synagogues is taken for granted, and that Jesus is said to do much of his teaching in synagogues (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 13:54). Such teaching was, judging from the Sermon on the Mount and other passages in Matthew, understood to be focused on interpreting the law for the people. The problem in Matthew is the lack of law obedience, lawlessness statement that Jesus had only come to save “the lost sheep of the people of Israel”: 15:21, 24. Matthew’s Jesus also instructs his disciples’ not to engage with non-Jews in their mission to prepare for the kingdom (10:5–6), although this is later, after Jesus has been given authority over the entire world, reversed (28:18–20).

92 Cf. n. 28 above.

93 The point of Matthew’s argument is not to abolish the law’s prohibition of murder, but to widen the application of this law to cover also the related feelings of anger as well as insults (cf. 24:10). The same hermeneutics of building a fence around the law apply to other commandments as well, such as the prohibition of adultery (5:27–30), and, even more sharply, vows (5:33–37), retribution (5:38–42), and love of neighbor (5:43–47).

94 That this passage is a comment on greed as a sin preventing a person from entering the kingdom may be inferred from the fact that Matthew notes specifically that the young man decides not to follow Jesus when he is asked to leave all his riches to the poor (cf. Matt 23:25). Thus, despite the many commandments he has fulfilled, the man violates the law requiring radical love for the neighbor; full loyalty to God (teleios; see discussion of Matt 5:48 above, n. 67) is, therefore, lacking.

95 Cf. Mark 7:22, which lists avarice (pleonexia) and envy (ofthalmos) as sins that defile a person. The related concept of coveting is, of course, prohibited in the Decalogue (Exod 10:17, LXX epibytheô; cf. Rom 13:9). Cf. Luz, Matthew, 3. 497, who identifies envy as “the worst of all evils,” referring to Wis 2:24; T. Sim. 3–4; Philo, Spec. leg. 3:3. In Matt 27:18, however, the main point might be to combine the accusation of the leaders breaking the law with an allusion to the fate of biblical heroes, such as Daniel, along the lines of traditions appearing in 3 Macc 6:7 (“Daniel, who through envious slanders was thrown down into the ground to lions as food for wild animals, you brought up to the light unharmed”; cf. 3 Macc 6:8; Matt 12:39–40), or Joseph (cf. Acts 7:9: “The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him”).

96 See, e.g., summarizing statements such as Matt 4:23; 9:35. Cf. Matt 7:29.

97 For further discussion of Matthew and the law, see especially Saldarini, Christian-Jewish Community, 124–64.
(anomia), which is confirmed by the fact that such behavior excludes both Jesus’ followers (Matt 7:23) and those who opposed the movement from the eschatological kingdom (Matt 13:41; 23:28; cf. 24:12). Those who lack the law altogether, the Gentiles, are regarded more generally, perhaps even generically, as sinners (Matt 26:45).

Sin is, then, defined as violation of the law, and righteousness is defined as the opposite. The eschatological divine judgment is based on whether or not a person’s deeds align with the law’s requirements (Matt 7:21; 16:27). To prevent the impurity that results from violation of the law, correct teaching of the law is necessary. As in the Torah, however, the removal of moral impurity requires forgiveness and sacrifice. The question is how Matthew presents Jesus’ approach to these phenomena; is forgiveness dependent on the temple cult, which we have argued is understood as valid while Jesus’ is proclaiming and performing his message, or does he set up a new process, new mechanics, for the forgiveness of sins?

First, it should be noted that, regardless of the mechanism used to bring about forgiveness (temple or extra-temple), the aim is to purify the people from the defilement resulting from sin. The basic worldview is thus the same for the Matthean Jesus as for many other forms of Judaism at this time. Having said that, there is a tension in the narrative between Jesus’ forgiveness of sins and the function of the Temple in Jerusalem, a tension that is solved, as

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98 See also discussion in n. 27 above.
99 Cf. Gal 2:15 and n. 62 above. For the identification in Matt 26:45 of “sinners” as Gentiles, see discussion in Davies and Allison, Matthew, 3.501. The context merges the Jewish leaders, who, in Matthew, are portrayed as breaking the law, into the same category as the Gentiles, who do not have the law (for this hermeneutic, applied to Jesus’ own followers when they stray from his teaching, cf. Matt 18:17). It is to both of these groups Jesus is being handed over, first by one of Jesus’ disciples (Judas) to the chief priests and the elders, and then by these leaders to the Gentiles (cf. Matt 17:22–23). That Gentiles as a group are portrayed as sinners is seen in several passages: everything they do – when addressed as a group – is contrary to proper behavior; Matt 5:47; 6:7, 32; 18:17; 20:25–26. On grave sin defined as imitating Gentiles, cf. Halpern-Amaru, Rewriting, 49; Klawans, Impurity, 47–48. This does not mean, however, that Gentiles in Matthew’s Gospel would automatically be excluded from the kingdom. They too, just as the Jewish people, have a choice. See discussion in Runesson, “Judging Gentiles,” 133–51. In Matthew, Jesus’ aim before his resurrection is to address sinners within the Jewish people (9:12–13; 11:19); after the resurrection and as a result of the now universal power and authority given to Jesus, this aim is, somewhat logically, expanded to address the (sinful) nations (Matt 28:18–20). As indicated by the individual exceptions mentioned previous to chapter 28 (non-Jews who realize the power set in motion as the eschatological process is begun), many non-Jews will respond positively (Matt 2:1–18; 8:5–13; 15:21–28).
100 Without such teaching, the Matthean Jesus regards the people to be lost: Matt 7:29; 9:36; 16:12; 15:14; 23:15–22.
101 For ancient concepts of forgiveness, as opposed to modern ideas, see Konstan, Before Forgiveness, especially the discussion of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament on pages 91–124. See also now Griswold and Konstan, eds., Forgiveness.
we shall see, only when the progression of events in the narrative as a whole are taken into consideration and made part of the equation.

Second, we need to distinguish between forgiveness between humans and between humans and God on the one hand, and the removal of defilement on the other. Forgiveness between human beings is defined as the cancelation of debt (\textit{opheilēmata}; Matt 6:12). This process is mirrored in the human – divine relationship, which is dependent on the effectiveness of inter-human forgiveness; God will not cancel a person’s debts if that person is not cancelling what others owe him or her (Matt 6:14–15; 18:23–35). The process of divine forgiveness is thus inextricably interwoven with the human ability, and willingness, to forgive. This structure of forgiveness as cancelling debt works well within the system of the sacrificial cult in the temple, and is independent of Jesus as far as the effectiveness of the cult itself is concerned; only when humans reconcile will God respond to sacrificial gifts (Matt 5:23–24). This means, by implication, that humans can, potentially, bind others in their debt, since debt can be removed only by the victim. Since this would make impossible the removal of the impurities that follow from sin, the Matthean Jesus orders his followers to always forgive, without limitation (Matt 18:21–22).\footnote{On the requirement of limitless forgiveness, see Nolland, \textit{Matthew}, 753–55.}

Forgiveness must be willingly given, but the offender must accept responsibility and thus acknowledge the need for forgiveness (Matt 18:15). If the offender refuses to acknowledge the need to be forgiven (and thus refuses to deal with his or her impure status), after a number of steps have been taken but have failed to make clear to the perpetrator the nature of the offence, the community of Jesus’ followers must exclude him or her (Matt 18:15–17). Such a procedure will ensure that the defilement caused by the sin is removed from the community (and relocated to a general category of sinners: Gentiles and tax collectors; 18:17).\footnote{It may be noted that this concern about the purity of the community may be related to the presence of Jesus in the midst of the group (Matt 18:20). It is interesting here to compare Matthean concern with the purity of the community with similar concerns in the Qumran community and in Paul: see Cecilia Wassen’s contribution to this volume, “Do You have to Be Pure in a Metaphorical Temple? Sanctuary Metaphors and Construction of Sacred Space in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Paul’s Letters.”} The Matthean Jesus tells his followers that they have the right to bind such a person in his or her (impure) status through exclusion (which implies absence of forgiveness and thus retained debt), as well as the right (or perhaps better: obligation; cf. Matthew 21–22), should the offender recognize his or her offence, to free him or her from debt (Matt 18:18).

In the narrative, all of this function well within the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem temple; after reconciliation, a person is able to offer sacrifice
without defiling the altar (Matt 5:23–24). However, the Matthean Jesus also adds an aspect to the process of forgiveness, which is centered on himself and which goes beyond the system described so far, albeit still existing within the horizon of the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem. In Matt 9:1–8, Jesus heals a paralyzed man in Capernaum by forgiving him his sins (hamartia). There is no description of what the man’s sins had been, nor any mention of who the offended party was. Since there is a very distinct focus in Matthew on sins that relate to inter-human interaction (with consequences for the human–divine relationship), we may assume that a first-century reader would have understood the man’s condition as resulting from his wrongdoings to others.105

The logic of the system of forgiveness presented elsewhere in Matthew would rule that in order for the paralyzed man’s sins to be forgiven, the victim(s) of his sins must cancel his debts. We are not told whether they have refused, and thus bound him in his sins (and, by implication, in his [moral] impurity), or whether the paralytic has refused to acknowledge his debt. The point of the story, though, is beyond such details; the passage describes a situation in which the pattern of forgiveness is broken in that Jesus, who was not involved in the man’s previous history, steps in and extends the forgiveness that unbinds him from his ‘spiritual’ condition, an act which has physical ramifications. By cancelling the debts that the man owes, Jesus overrides the role of the victim(s) and establishes a direct link to the forgiveness of God, which in turn results in the charge of some scribes present that this behavior amounts to “blasphemy” (blasphēmia). The man is now free to bring his sacrificial gifts to God in the temple, without defiling the altar (cf. Matt 5:23–24). The passage thus reveals Jesus’ authority as he sets the kingdom in motion (Matt 9:6); just as purity is accomplished through exorcisms,107 the forgiveness of sins removes defilement.

So far we have seen two ways in which Jesus’ function as the Messiah, i.e., to “save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21), is played out. This is done, first, through instructing the people in the law, including commanding them to allow for limitless forgiveness, as well as giving a strategy for expulsion of followers who do not acknowledge their debt, and thus their...

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104 This is the only passage in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus explicitly forgives sins.
105 There is no mention here of the man being born paralyzed (cf. John 9:1–12). In addition, we may note that there is only one sin mentioned in Matthew which relates directly to God: sin against the holy spirit (Matt 12:31–33). This sin is, however, said to be unforgivable, which makes it irrelevant for the current context.
106 It should be noted that Matthew has removed the comment of the scribes in Mark that only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:7). Matthew also adds to the response of the crowds the summarizing comment that “they glorified God, who had given such authority [exousia] to human beings” (Matt 9:8).
(moral) impurity. Second, Jesus himself overrides the victims’ role as he brings about the reconciliation required for the perpetrator to be unbound and restored. While these strategies indicate Jesus’ extraordinary authority and foreshadow the interpretation of his death as atoning for sins, they do not contradict the temple cult but function within its purity logic. As the story progresses, however, this changes and Jesus offers himself in place of the (defiled) temple cult in order to bring the atonement which cannot otherwise be achieved without the temple cult.

The Matthean Jesus predicts that the Jerusalem Temple will be destroyed, and the cause of this destruction is the defilement brought about by the grave sins of certain leading scribes and Pharisees, who are held responsible even for bloodshed committed in the temple in Israel’s past (Matt 23:29–24:2). For Matthew, like Ezekiel before him, the temple cannot be destroyed as long as God dwells there. In Matt 23:38, addressing Jerusalem and referring to the temple, Jesus declares: “See, your house is left to you, desolate.” Then, having said this, Jesus leaves the temple, predicts that it will be destroyed (Matt 24:1–2), and walks to the Mount of Olives east of the city (Matt 24:3) where God’s presence had previously lodged after having left the first temple before its destruction (Ezek 11:23). This way of preparing the reader for Jesus’ death opens up for an understanding of Jesus’ status as one of extraordinary closeness to the God of Israel. However, while such a reading is certainly plausible, it seems clear that for Matthew, God Self actually leaves the temple at the moment of Jesus’ death, which is the most likely interpretation of the torn veil in Matt 26:51. In any case, Matthew’s story leaves little doubt that the temple as well as Jerusalem will be destroyed, and that God leaves the temple before this happens. Since according to Matthew the temple is desolate (ερῆμος; 23:38) already when Jesus dies, there will be no means of atonement for the people. Therefore, to save his people from their sins – and the moral impurity that results from sin – and thus initiate the kingdom process, Jesus is said to offer

108 Ezek 10–11.
109 See also Josephus, who shares the same view: J. W. 6.124–128; 300 (cf. 300–309). Cf. Ant. 20.165–167; J. W. 2.254–257. See also Mendels, Rise, 301–302. Guilt for the destruction of the Temple is always sought, in the Hebrew Bible, Josephus, as well as in rabbinic literature and the New Testament Gospels, within the Jewish people, since if someone else, such as the Romans, would be accused, their god(s), by implication, would have to be judged stronger than the God of Israel. By blaming the Jewish leadership (the Gospels), or Jewish ‘bandits’ (Josephus), the Romans are transformed into a tool in the hand of the God of Israel as he punishes his people. This strengthens the view that the Gospels were written by Jews from an inner-Jewish perspective, even if they were meant to be read also by a non-Jewish audience.
110 Cf. Repchinski, “Purity,” 383, who makes this claim; see also idem, “Re-Imagining,” 37–49.
his own body as a sacrifice, taking the place of the defiled, empty, and soon to be destroyed temple (Matt 26:26–29); his blood is “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins [eis apbesin hamartion]” (v. 38). This function of his death is already suggested in Matt 20:28, where the life of “the Son of Man” is said to be given as “a ransom for many.” Jesus’ death thus leads to the removal of the impurity that results from sin and offers a way for the people to be holy and perfect (Matt 5:48) without the temple cult.112 Contrary to common Christian theology, the Temple is not destroyed because of Jesus’ death; the logic goes in the opposite direction in Matthew: Jesus has to die precisely because the Temple will be destroyed.113

In other words, while the temple cult was still intact and functioning in the narrative until chapter 23/24, after God has left his abode as a consequence of its defilement, caused by the sins of the leaders, the Temple can no longer fulfill its purpose. In the same way, whereas forgiveness was related to the temple cult until Jesus’ death, eschatological atonement was achieved apart from the Temple. Since the Jewish law is still to be taught after Jesus’ resurrection (Matt 28:19–20), it would have to be assumed that the teaching on forgiveness, which was previously positioned in relation to the temple cult, is now centered on Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for the sins of the many, and thus on the ritualized meal in his remembrance.114 Apocalyptic catastrophe will still come (Matt 24), as will the final judgment after people

112 It is of some interest to note that Matthew, contrary to the author of Luke–Acts, moves Jesus’ followers, and Jesus himself, from Jerusalem to Galilee after the resurrection, from where the worldwide mission is to be launched. It seems, then, that for this author, just like for the Qumran community, regardless of whether the historical Temple had yet been destroyed, Jerusalem was not the place to stay for Jesus’ followers during the period between Jesus’ death and the coming of the eschatological Son of Man, who will execute the final judgment (cf. also Matt 24:16).

113 Since, as we have mentioned above, the “scribes and Pharisees” are blamed by Matthew for being the cause of the destruction of the Temple, Jesus’ death has become necessary because of them. This may explain the consistently negative portrayal of the Pharisees in Matthew’s narrative, which is not mirrored in the other Gospels. One may also note, of course, that Jesus’ death in this story is for the people of Israel in its entirety, and thus also opens up for the inclusion in the kingdom of these same groups who are accused of causing the crisis in the first place (cf. Matt 13:52).

114 On the meal as related to temple cult, cf. Neusner, Idea, 70, who argues that the Pharisees, by insisting on purity beyond the Temple when they ate ordinary food, would have regarded their tables as related to the temple altar in more than a metaphorical way. (Cf. b. Ber. 55a, attributed to two third-century rabbis, i.e., the saying is said to originate in the period after the Temple was lost: “As long as the temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel, but now a man’s table atones for him.”) For the pre-70 Pharisees, then, these additional sacred meal settings did not replace the Temple, but added to it, so to speak. For Matthew, the meal in Jesus’ remembrance is explicitly said to represent Jesus’ body and blood, i.e., it is construed as a sacrificial meal, and this is done to compensate for the loss of the (defiled and soon to be destroyed) Temple in a way similar to how the Qumran community replaced the (defiled) Temple with their own community.
from among all the nations have been informed that the end is approaching (24:14; 25:31–46); those who endure in love during this period of suffering will be saved (24:12–13).

5. Conclusion: Purity, Sin, and the Kingdom of Heaven

Summarizing our findings, it seems clear that we find in the Gospel of Matthew the same basic approach to reality as is present in the ancient Mediterranean world more generally and in other forms of Judaism more specifically, namely that certain space is dedicated to the divine and is therefore defined as holy, as opposed to ordinary space, which we call profane. Once this has been established it follows by necessity that certain rules and laws would need to be in place in order to distinguish and administer the holy as qualitatively different from the profane; if Matthew is to be understood as taking a different approach, which ignores such regulations, the burden of proof would be on those who believe this to be the case. On the contrary, however, I have argued here that there is substantial evidence in the text that the narrative takes very seriously the distinction between holy and profane, as well as the purity regulations that follow. While that which is pure can relate to space both holy and profane, the impure must never come into contact with the holy.

The purity regulations that protect the holy can be divided into two related categories: ritual and moral purity, the latter being the overall concern of the Matthean Jesus, but not to the exclusion of the former. Just as in some texts from Qumran, sin in the Gospel of Matthew renders the sinner ritually impure. Indeed, the impurity generated by sin seems to be at the core of the narrative, the very reason for the arrival of the Messiah at the end of time. The good news (euangelion) as proclaimed by this author is that Jesus, whose task is defined to be to “save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21), offers himself as an atoning sacrifice to eliminate the impurity that had defiled the temple and, at the end of the narrative, ultimately caused it to be abandoned by God.

In other words, the crisis perceived by the Matthean Jesus is the defilement of the cult, blamed on the “Scribes and Pharisees” (Matt 23:1–24:2) but not on the Jewish people as a whole (i.e., the crowds are exempted from guilt, since they had been led astray; e.g., Matt 21:1–16, 46; 9:36). The defilement of the holy Temple leads to God abandoning his abode. This

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115 The temple aristocracy, the chief priests and the elders, are primarily blamed for Jesus’ death, which is presented as unrelated to the “scribes and Pharisees.” The two groups of leaders are, however, accused together in Matt 21:33–45.
abandoning of the Temple by the divine happens in two steps: first, God’s agent, the Messiah, leaves the Temple and proclaims it desolate (ἐρέμωσ; Matt 23:38–24:2); second, God God-self departs from the Holy of Holies at the moment Jesus dies (Matt 27:51). As in Ezekiel (10–11), and Josephus (J.W. 6.127, 300), the Temple cannot be destroyed as long as God is present; any prediction of the destruction of the Temple has, therefore, to involve the idea that God departs before it happens.116 This chain of events leaves the people without access to the cult and, consequently, inaugurates a time of extreme apocalyptic suffering (Matt 24:21).

It is as a solution to this imminent117 crisis that the author presents Jesus as offering himself as a sacrifice in order to save his people (Matt 1:21; 20:28; 26:28).118 Jesus’ death is said to atone the sins of “many.” It is through the removal of the source of (moral) impurity, sin, that impurity can ultimately be eliminated. The ritual reenactment of the sacrifice (Matt 26:26–29) constructs a metaphorical ‘space’ in which God can be accessed throughout the duration of the apocalyptic disasters (cf. 18:20). At the end of these sufferings, the “Son of Man” will execute a final judgment (Matt 25:31–46), which will precede the full establishment of the eschatological kingdom of heaven.

116 As mentioned above (n. 43), Haber, correctly in my opinion, argued that the historical Jesus was concerned with purity issues. This conclusion is supported by a forthcoming study by Morten Hørrning Jensen (“Purity and Politics in Herod Antipas’s Galilee”). Such conclusions have implications for how we understand Jesus’ relationship to the Temple, its possible defilement, and predicted destruction. Matthew’s Gospel seems to maintain the perspective of the historical Jesus with regard to purity issues, which makes it likely that it may also have preserved authentic traditions about Jesus’ view of other issues connected to and logically following from purity concerns, such as the possible defilement of the Temple, and therefore, by necessity, its future destruction. If the historical Jesus did in fact predict the fall of the Temple – something that should not be viewed as particularly strange considering the religio-political situation (cf. similar predictions recorded by Josephus and elsewhere) – this would have implied the claim that God would have left the Temple before it would happen. This in turn brings up the question of Jesus’ view of his own role in the eschatological process, including the meaning of his death as a sacrifice, in lieu of the temple cult, that would liberate his people. It may well be that Matthew captures in this regard something of the historical Jesus’ self-awareness. Recent developments in Jesus research focusing on religio-cultural context and archaeology may thus lead to a better understanding not only of Jesus but also of Matthew’s (as well as other Gospels’) role(s) as transmitter(s) of Jesus traditions. It seems to me that the bias of Mark’s Gospel, which results from, among other things, the fact that he is obviously – contrary to the historical Jesus and Matthew – addressing his message to non-Jews, should lead us to question not the priority of Mark as a literary document (it is most likely our oldest Gospel), but the priority that this text has enjoyed in historical Jesus scholarship for more than a century.

117 Matt 10:23; 24:34.

118 Jesus’ death at Passover triggers motifs related to liberation from slavery, but the language of sacrifice and atonement indicates a cultic temple focus. It seems as if, in Matthew, imagery related to both Passover and Yom Kippur merge as Jesus’ death is narrativized. On various interpretations of the Day of Atonement, see Stökl Ben Ezra, Impact. See also now Hieke and Nicklas, Day.
Thus, the merging of heaven and earth (i.e., the kingdom), an Edenic state in which the divine is always both present and accessible, requires purity.

Within the cultic worldview represented in the Gospel, the Jewish law is valid both before and after the defilement of the Temple (the idea of defilement is in and of itself dependent on the validity of the law). What changes as the world is about to be reborn is the mechanism through which atonement is achieved. Once the kingdom process is complete, judgment has been carried out and the world has been renewed (re-created), i.e., once “all is accomplished” (Matt 5:18), the law will not be needed, just as it was not in existence when the world was once created. What leads us to this conclusion is the use of language, in an eschatological setting, referring specifically to the current world’s rebirth as well as to the creation of the world itself in prehistoric times (Matt 19:28; 25:34). The eschatological kingdom of heaven thus recreates the state of things once present in Eden, which, in God’s eyes, was something “very good” (Gen 1:31). For the Matthean Jesus, then, the law was added as a means to protect the people from impurity and enable them to relate to God; once the world has been reborn, impurity will no longer be an issue; humans will be holy as God is holy in a state mirroring the Garden of Eden.

The fact that the end is like the beginning also explains why Matthew’s Jesus suddenly, at the end of the Gospel, addresses issues relating not only to Jews but also to the non-Jewish world; until now, the narrative has been focused on the Jewish people only, with a few non-Jews representing marginal characters drawn centripetally to the Messiah. In Matt 28:18–20, Matthew’s Jesus instructs his followers to make disciples of all the nations, teaching them what he had taught them, i.e., how to correctly follow the Jewish law. Also, non-Jews need to go through a purification ritual: baptism.

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119 Cf. the priority of Genesis over Moses as the Matthean Jesus interprets the law: Matt 19:3–8. It is the beginning that is authoritative, since this is what is being recreated in the eschaton.

120 The law for Matthew thus, in a sense, seems to fill a function similar to how Paul understood its meaning in Gal 3:19–25, as a “pedagogue” (paidagogos) awaiting the eschaton; the law loses its meaning once the world has been renewed. The difference between Matthew and Paul seems to be that Paul, contrary to Matthew, understands eschatology to be realized in the sense that the “disciplinarian” function of the law is a matter of the past; faith (pistis), for Paul, opens up for the purity of the age to come already now, through the work of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:22 where Paul’s view on the eschatological events defined as the rebirth of the world surfaces). It should be noted, though, that Paul is here writing to non-Jewish Christ-believers; elsewhere he still upholds the distinction between those circumcised and those who are not, and the former should uphold the law until the end (cf. 1 Cor 7:18; Gal 5:3).

121 It is of some interest to note that neither Jesus nor his disciples baptize Jews in Matthew’s story. The only baptism of Jews mentioned by Matthew is that of John the Baptistizer, a baptism which is said to be different from what Jesus is accomplishing (Matt 3:11), although
words, since the eschaton means the rebirth of the world, even non-Jews need to be cleansed from impurity in order to be part of the world to come.

In the end, it seems Psalm 24 and the question of who may approach the holy mountain of God, which we referred to in the beginning, summarizes well the underlying concerns of Matthew’s Gospel. This psalm, as also Psalm 15, elaborates on moral purity, but ritual purity is assumed as a given. It may be appropriate, then, to end this essay honoring Susan’s life and work with a few more words from this psalm. May her memory be for a blessing.

The earth is the LORD’S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

(Ps 24:1–6)

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