The target group of the Ultimate Commission (Matthew 28:19)

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The inclusion of ‘all nations’ as the mission target in the Ultimate Commission of Matthew 28:19 somehow comes as a surprise. The Gentiles seem to have been excluded from Jesus’ and his disciples’ mission in two passages (10:5–6; 15:24). In an attempt to establish the target group of the great commission, this article investigates the meaning of the phrase πάντα τὰ ἔθνη as used in 28:19 and subsequently the literary contexts of the commandment.

ABSTRACT

It is frequently acknowledged that the Ultimate Commission² is important in understanding the whole gospel of Matthew. To Ellis (1974:22), the Ultimate Commission is Matthew’s ‘table of contents’ located at the end. To Kupp (1996:201, italics his), it is ‘the “abstract” for Matthew’s “dissertation”’ and ‘a digest and telos of the work’. Byrne (2002:57–58) suggests that the beginning and the ending are more significant than others in our issue.

Whatever the Ultimate Commission’s genre might be,³ it is closely linked with the overall scheme of the gospel. Readers of Matthew, if they have read Matthew from the beginning to the end with an open mind, will not be surprised at their encounter with the Ultimate Commission, even if they read it for the first time. Its themes are not sudden, but are already visible in every section of the gospel. While reading the gospel, readers would have been well prepared for the Ultimate Commission. So Brooks (1981:2) could say that ‘the author was motivated to produce the work in keeping with’ the Ultimate Commission. It is generally agreed that Matthew has reworked the Ultimate Commission in a redaction-critical sense (Meier 1977b:407–424), whether it is a thorough working (Bornkamm 1969:15; Brown 1980:193–21; Bultmann 1968:289) or a light touch (Beasley-Murray 1962:77–92). Michel (1995:44; cf. Barth 1963:133) also insists that three parts of the Ultimate Commission were originally independent and were put together by Matthew. In that case it is easy to see that the ending corresponds to the whole gospel.

The only possible surprise is the inclusion of ‘all nations’ as the mission target, because at least at the surface level, the Gentiles seem to have been excluded from Jesus’ and his disciples’ mission in two passages (10:5–6; 15:24). The inclusion of the Gentiles in Jesus’ ministry is, however, not totally new, but already visible in the whole of the gospel (Bauer 1998:121–124; Lee 1999:28–93; Viljoen 2007:259). Scholars have noticed the co-existence of universalism and particularism (Guthrie 1990:29–30). Readers too would have been prepared regarding this matter (Hubbard 1974:86). For example, we may include universalistic motives in Jesus’ birth story, Jesus’ prophecy about the worldwide proclamation of the gospel (24:14) and the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of heaven (8:11), Jesus’ ministry in the Gentile territory and healing of some Gentiles (8:5–13; 28–34; 15:21–28), Jesus’ commending of the Gentiles for their good faith (8:10; 15:28), and Jesus’ parables showing universalistic tones: the parable of the mustard seed (13:31–32), the parable of the sower (13:38), the parable of vineyard workers (20:1–16), the parable of two sons (21:28–32), the parable of tenants (esp. 21:43), and the parable of the marriage feast (22:9–10). Matthew himself interprets Jesus’ residence at Capernaum as meaningful to the Gentiles (4:14–16).

The focus of this article is to establish the target group of Jesus’ commission to make disciples. Scholars are divided on translating πάντα τὰ ἔθνη. Some scholars translate the phrase as ‘all nations’ or ‘all peoples’ and do not exclude Jews from the target. For them, Matthew’s community could be either intra muros or extra muros. Others opt for ‘all the Gentiles’ as the translation of this phrase, thereby excluding Jews from the missionary target group.² For them, Jews are now excluded from the mission of Matthew’s community, whose tie with the synagogues has been totally or significantly broken, and whose social status is therefore extra muros.³

INTRODUCTION

The Ultimate Commission as the ‘Great Commission’. The commission is the ‘Great Commission’, which implies its importance. Here we will use the term ‘the Ultimate Commission’ to convey the idea that it functions as a driving force in Matthew. cf. Arias (1991:410).

1. There are some scholars who try to understand the phrase denoting the diaspora Jews. Robinson, for example, suggests understanding the phrase as designating ‘Jews of the Dispersion, those scattered among Gentile nations’ (O’Brien 1976:73). Similarly Overman (1996:406) tries to understand the phrase as ‘all the world’.


2. Usually this is called ‘the Great Commission’, which implies its importance. Here we will use the term ‘the Ultimate Commission’ to convey the idea that it functions as a driving force in Matthew. cf. Arias (1991:410).


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In an attempt to establish the target group of the great commandment, we will at first investigate the meaning of the phrase παντα τα ἐθνη as used in 28:19 by means of studies of the use of these words in the first gospel and the New Testament in general. Subsequently, the literary contexts of the commandment will be investigated.

THE MEANING OF παντα τα ἐθνη
According to Bertram (1964:369), the Greek word ἐθνη is generally used in the LXX to render the Hebrew שבט (the Gentiles), while ליו is used for ζ (the chosen people). In the New Testament, however, both terms are sometimes used interchangeably, while in many passages we see the same phenomenon as in the LXX (Bertram & Schmidt 1964:369–370). In Matthew, the meaning of the Greek word ἐθνη seems to differ according to whether it is singular or plural and whether it is modified by the adjective πας.

We can find 15 instances where Matthew uses the term: three times in the singular (21:43; 24:7[2a]), four times in the plural with an adjective πας (24:9, 14; 25:32; 28:19) and eight times in the plural without an adjective πας (4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 12:18, 21; 20:19, 25).

Gentiles: Used in the plural without πας
When the term is used in the plural without the adjective πας, it seems to always mean ‘Gentiles’. It seems that there is no difference in meaning whether it has an article or not.

Matthew 4:15 is the citation of Isaiah 9:1 [8:23 MT] and evidently defines the Galilean region as ‘of the Gentiles’ (Hagner 1993:74; Hare & Harrington 1975:362; Meier 1977a:95; Sim 1998:220). By citing a passage from Isaiah, Matthew tells us that Zebulun and Naphthali are regions where there are many, or at least some, Gentiles.

In 6:32, the term is used pejoratively to denote a group of people who are interested only in worldly things. Based on our understanding that in the Second Temple period the Gentiles were generally despised in this way, and on our assumption that Jesus’ audience were Jews, the most probable meaning of the term is ‘the Gentiles’ (Hare & Harrington 1975:362; Meier 1977a:95). Matthew 6:32 shows that the word ἐθνη can be used interchangeably with its cognate word ὕπνηω, which always renders a derogatory meaning in Matthew (5:47; 6:7; 18:17).

In 10:5, disciples are instructed not to go εἰς δόξα ἐθνων. It clearly refers to the Gentiles, because it is coupled with Samaritans to be compared to the lost sheep of Israel.

In 10:18 it is prophesied that the preachers will be dragged before governors and kings to bear witness against them and τοις ἐθνεσιν. Since they seem to be distinguished from those who flog the missionaries in their synagogues (10:17), τοις ἐθνεσιν seems to denote the Gentiles.

We have two instances in 12:18–21 where Isaiah 42:1–4 is cited. Matthew uses the word ἐθνη as a translation of two Hebrew words, שבט and שפ. Matthew probably has not translated (or targumised) the quotation independently (pace Stendahl 1968:109), but might have utilised the already existing version available to him (Menken 2005:54, 67–88). We have no specific reason to think that Matthew is changing the original sense of the Hebrew words here by introducing the Greek word (pace Nolland 2005:493).

In 20:19, Jesus prophesied that the Son of Man would be delivered to τοις ἐθνουσιν. Because Jewish high priests and scribes deliver him to τοις ἐθνουσιν, as is confirmed in the later passion narrative, it obviously refers to the Gentiles.

In 20:25, Jesus holds the rulers of the ἐθνων as a contra-model for his disciples not to imitate. Even though every ruler, either Jewish or Gentile, has a tendency to exercise authority over the people, and even though it is more natural to think that the comparison is made not to the Jewish rulers but to the disciples, it is better to translate the word as ‘Gentiles’ (see Hare & Harrington 1975:362; pace Meier 1977a:96). By adding τοις ἐθνουσιν to the rulers, Jesus seems to be emphasising the derogatory meaning (cf. 6:32; also see 5:47; 6:7; 18:17). However, it is also possible in 20:25 to translate the word as ‘nations’.

A nation: Used in the singular
When the term is used in the singular, it seems to mean ‘a people’ in a collective sense or ‘a nation’ in a political sense, depending upon its context.

In 21:43, it is said that the vineyard will be given to ἐθνος who produces its fruits. Here obviously it cannot be a nation as a political unit, but a people in a collective sense (Meier 1977a:97). Here we see a contrast between Israel and the church, a new people, which is ‘composed indiscriminately of Jews and Gentiles’ (Hare & Harrington 1975:363). Therefore, the term includes Jews.

We have two instances of the term in 24:7. Here Meier (1977a:98) argues that one ἐθνος refers to the Jewish people while the other refers to some other nation engaging them in war, based on the idea that this could allude to the Jewish revolt in 66–70 CE (see also Hare & Harrington 1975:362). Thus the possibility exists that ἐθνος denotes the Jewish people. However, the text does not necessarily depict a situation of ‘Israel’ and Israel’s engagement in war with another nation is not mentioned in the text. Matthew 24:7 rather explains 24:6, ‘You will hear of wars and rumours of wars’. Matthew 24:7 tells of future wars between the nations. Here Israel could probably be the nation who will be engaged in these wars. But the first and primary reference of the term in this case is ‘a nation’.

All nations: Plural with πας
When the term is used in the plural with an adjective πας, it seems to always mean ‘all nations’, not necessarily excluding Israel. We have four such cases in Matthew.

In 24:9, we hear an apocalyptic warning from Jesus that the disciples will be hated by παλαι των ἐθνων because of his name. Here it seems that ‘all nations’ fits better in this context, because the text refers to the severity of the tribulation. It is also said in 10:17 that the disciples are to be persecuted by the Jews. Both 10:17 and 24:9, probably both dependent on Mark 13:9–13, could refer to the same situation (Meier 1977a:97; Trilling 1964:27). Hare and Harrington (1975:362) appeal to the alteration Matthew has made to Mark 13:13, which shows the evangelist’s intention to change the impact. However, the author’s intention is not as clear as they think. Matthew simply would have understood it as Mark did. We have no reason to exclude Israel from the view. In 24:14, we have an apocalyptic prophecy of Jesus about the end. Here it is said that before the end the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to παντα των ἐθνων. In this case, ‘all nations’ is a better translation than ‘all the Gentiles’, because the phrase τοις περι του ὡρων conveys the idea that there will be no people or nation ‘left behind’ in hearing the gospel (Zahn 1903:658).

In 25:32, we are informed about the last judgement in heaven. There παλαι των ἐθνων will be summoned before the heavenly Judge. Even though it is unclear what ‘the least of my brethren’ refers to (for various opinions see Davies & Allison 1997:422), it is natural to assume that it is a final judgement and here every nation including the Jews will be summoned (Trilling 1964:27).

7. Ironically, Hare and Harrington categorise 21:43 in the passages that obviously mean Gentiles, while acknowledging the inclusion of the Jews on the same page.

8. cf. Buchanan (1996:838, 841) thinks the term does not denote the Gentiles, but the Jewish nation only, while taking the wicked tenants as Romans who instead of adequately financing Palestine by paying “rent”, in fact, collected taxes from their heirs, the rightful owners of the vineyard. As creative as this may be, it cannot explain the response of the chief priests and the Pharisees (v.45).

9. This is an example of scholarly attempts to historicise the text. Historical understanding should serve to clarify a text, not impose a meaning upon it.
Hare and Harrison (1975:364–365; see also Hooker 1971:363), however, presuppose two judgements and insist that this is a judgement for non-Christian peoples. The Matthewan context, however, does not support the two judgements and there is no reason to exclude the Jews (Davies & Allison 1997:422–423).

Usage in the rest of the New Testament

So far we have come to the following observation with regard to Matthew’s use of the word; the plural form without the adjective παντα usually denotes ‘Gentiles’, while the plural form with the adjective παντα is used to denote ‘all nations’ (Nolland 2005:1266; pace Luz 2005:249). We will now examine whether our observation in Matthew is also applicable to the rest of the New Testament. Our word παντα is used 147 times in the rest of the New Testament, among which 19 cases are used with the adjective παντα. Among them, 17 cases are used to primarily denote the meaning ‘all nations’ (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:5; 10:33; 14:16; 17:26; Romans 1:5; 15:11; 16:26; Galatians 3:8; 2 Timothy 4:17; Revelation 7:9; 12:5; 14:6, 8; 15:04; 1803; 18:23), which does not exclude Jews or Israel in their concept, except Acts 2.5. Even in Acts 2.5, the phrase is used to denote the idea that there were people from every corner of the world. It is used as an opposite concept to ‘a nation’, not to ‘Israel’. There are two cases in which the primary meaning should be ‘all the Gentiles’ (Luke 21:24; Acts 15:17). From our observation, we have found that the phrase can be used either to denote ‘all nations’ or ‘all the Gentiles’, while the former usage is more common in the New Testament in its entirety.10

We have come to the conclusion that the target of the mission charge of the Ultimate Commission is ‘all nations’. There was no other choice for Matthew but παντα τα εχθρα in order to convey the idea that the commission was aimed at all human beings, including Jews. Πάντες οἱ λαοί, as suggested by Hare and Harrington (1975:368), cannot work for Matthew, because the word λαοί usually means the people of Israel only (1:21; 2:4; 6; 4:16; 23; 13:15; 15:6; 21:23; 26:3, 5, 47; 27:1, 25, 64). Translating the phrase as ‘all the Gentiles’ and then excluding the Jews from its connotation does not coincide with the risen Lord’s claim of the universal authority (Kevalbin 2000:54–55; Stuhlmacher 2000:27). The word study favours the translation of the phrase as ‘all nations’ rather than ‘all the Gentiles’. However, a word study cannot deductively define the usage of a word or phrase in any specific sentence. Therefore, we need to look at its immediate literary context (Levine 1988:187–188; Silva 1983:137–148).

THE ULTIMATE COMMISSION IN ITS LITURGICAL CONTEXT

Even though we have come to the conclusion through the word study in the previous section that the phrase παντα τα εχθρα should be rendered as ‘all nations’ rather than ‘all the Gentiles’, it is necessary to examine the Ultimate Commission in its literary context.

Those who see the Ultimate Commission from a literary point of view tend to regard the Ultimate Commission as exclusive of Jews. They often include the following in their reasoning. Firstly, in the resurrection narrative the Jews are described as rejecting Jesus. Luz (2005:249), for example, suggests a comparison between the disbelief of ‘Jews’ in 28:15 and the mission to ‘all Gentiles’ in 28:19. Secondly, the Common context is compared and opposed to Jesus’ earlier command (10:5–6). So the Ultimate Commission implies that ‘for Matthew’s church the orientation toward the mission of Israel has been replaced by the world-mission’ (Luz 2005:249). Thirdly, Luz (2005:14) regards the story of the magi and other elements related to Jesus’ nativity as ‘the clearest signals’ to the ending of the Jesus story. If the literary devices of Matthew point to transforming the special status from Israel to the Gentiles, the possibility of translating 28:19 as ‘all the Gentiles’ would become more of a probability. In order to evaluate their argument, we first need to establish the plot of Matthew.

The plot of Matthew

Matthew’s story consists of ‘the prologue and five main sections’ (Luz 2005:244–245). The prologue not only covers the birth of Jesus, but also anticipates his whole story. According to Luz, the main narrative thread of the Gospel of Matthew ‘tells…a story of Jesus’ increasing conflict in Israel’ (Luz 2005:246). Jesus’ ministry has revealed ‘Israel’s unrepentant cities’ (ibid.). Jesus and his disciples withdrew from Israel’s leaders. Later ‘Jesus confronts Israel and its leaders’ (ibid.) and ‘leaves Israel’s temple’ (ibid.). The Passion and Easter narratives…have a double ending. The story of Jesus’ resurrection (28:1–10) is a story of death for Jews and its leaders. They fail to recognize “to this day” (28:15) the truth of Jesus’ resurrection (ibid.). The two pericopes 28:11–15 and 16–20 mark the double ending of Matthew’s story, leading to a hopeless situation for Jews and a new mission with salvation history for the community (ibid.). This inclusive story implies the situation of Matthew’s community. ‘In future their mission to the Gentiles will be central. The mission to Israel is complete’ (ibid.).

In his analysis of the immediate literary context, Luz (2005:246) insists that the parable of the wicked tenants implies that the kingdom of God will be taken not only from Israel’s leaders but also from the people of Israel to be transferred to a new people (i.e. the Gentiles). In his view, the parable on the wedding banquet, Luz sees the Gentile mission after the destruction of the city. Luz (2005:247) also finds a shift of the announcement of judgement. It has been addressed initially only to the leaders (23:1–33), but later also to ‘this generation (23:35–36). Now ‘the whole people, led astray by their leaders, will be subjected to judgement’. Also the lament over Jerusalem (23:37–39) implies that the whole people was rejected. Luz (2005:250) insists that for Matthew ‘the mission to Israel is over’.

Similarly to Luz, Matera (1987:243) asserts that ‘the plot of Matthew’s Gospel concerns the rejection of Jesus’ messiahship and the movement of the Gospel from Israel to the nations’. He takes notice of the following features in Matthew’s plot. Firstly, even though Matthew organises his narrative according to the life of Jesus, the inclusion of his genealogy, ‘which extends back to Abraham’ (241), and of the resurrection appearance, which ‘points to the close of the ages’ (ibid.), implies that ‘the plot of Matthew’s gospel has something to do with salvation history’ (ibid.). Secondly, ‘the effective response Matthew’s narrative seeks to produce’ can be glimpsed in the Ultimate Commission (242). Matthew’s plot makes use of causality, according to Matera (ibid.), to expect ‘the readers to worship Jesus as the risen Lord and to be confident that he is present to the church until the close of the age’ (ibid.). Thirdly, in terms of ‘a sense of inevitability and necessity’, Matera (242–243) analyses that the attitude of Israel toward Jesus has changed from initial acceptance to later rejection.

Most of Matera’s analysis of the plot of Matthew is acceptable. However, his analysis of inevitability and necessity of the plot is disputable. Luz and Matera have emphasized ‘Israel’s role’ too much in their rejection. Matthew’s emphasis is not on ‘Israel’ but on ‘rejection’. In Matthew, the Gentiles play roles in the rejection of Jesus, too (10:18; 10:18–19; 27:26, 27:31–34). Rejection of Jesus was a universal phenomenon, as much as reception of him was opposed from its beginning.
also universal. Rejection was great, while reception was little. Interestingly, current Matthew scholarship is divided on who persecuted Matthew’s community. Hare (1967), on the one hand, suggests Jewish persecution, while Sim (1998:231–236), on the other hand, suggests Gentile persecution. Matthew’s inclusive story, however, reveals that there was universal persecution of Matthew’s community.

So the inevitability and necessity of the plot of Matthew is not Israel’s rejection of Jesus while the nations show interest. Rather it is ‘Jesus’ victory over the whole world’ (Wright 1996). Universal rejection of Jesus was overcome by his resurrection from the dead and now his victory should be proclaimed universally.

The contrast between Jesus’ first mission charge (10:5–6) and his last command (28:19) has been made often. These two mission charges make the contrast possible. The Ultimate Commission is usually taken either as ‘a replacement’ or ‘an expansion’ of Jesus’ first mission charge (Levine 1988:191; Luz 2005:249). If it is regarded as a replacement the Ultimate Commission would exclude the Jews in its scope. However, if it is regarded as an expansion it would include the Jews.

The most immediate literary context of the command to make disciples is the risen Jesus’ claim of authority over heaven and earth. The command to make disciples is closely related to the claim of authority through the use of the conjunction αὐτοῦ.14 It is, therefore, most natural to assume that the scope of the Ultimate Commission does include humanity as a whole and does not exclude the Jews (Carter 2000:552; Davies & Allison 1997:684; Kvalbein 2000:54–55).

An eschatological event?

Sim (1995:43–44) is not of the opinion that the Gentile mission was the task taken by Matthew’s community. He (1998:244) insists that Matthew’s community might have approved the validity of the universal mission without actually being involved in it. He asserts that the risen Lord’s command to make disciples of all nations is not binding for Matthew’s community. Ironically he argues that the same command is the binding teaching for law observance, including the circumcision (Carter 2004:279 n.64). He pushes the Gentile mission to the eschatological age. Curiously he takes τόπος συνέλευσις τοῦ αἰῶνος, as conforming to his interpretation. So the universal mission becomes an eschatological event and not urgent for Matthew’s community. They did not interpret the Ultimate Commission, according to Sim (1995:42), as a command to pursue a mission to the Gentile. Here Sim seems to be an omniscient novel writer, according to Sim (1995:43–44) is not of the opinion that the Gentile mission is ‘all nations’, which includes Jews, and not ‘all the Gentiles’, exclusive of Jews. Based on the word study of ἀναλύει πάντα in the first gospel and the New Testament in general it is clear that Matthew conveys the idea that the commission was aimed at all human beings, including Jews. The examination of the Ultimate Commission in its literary context confirms that the scope of the Ultimate Commission does include humanity as a whole and does not exclude the Jews.

The evangelist expects his readers to take part in the universal mission. Jesus has been raised from the dead and claims universal authority. The same Jesus calls his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The readers will identify themselves with the disciples. Matthew’s community has engaged in the universal mission.

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14 Textual evidence strongly supports this, though there are other variants. Manuscripts like δὲ, A, 0148, א, Ρ, and bo omit οὐδὲ, while D has υπ’. Instead, then it also cannot be a strong base for his case. Based on 24:14, Sim (1995:244) argues that according to the evangelist’s timetable, the gospel will be preached throughout the whole world ‘just prior to the end of the age’. To him, the passage has turned out to be about Matthew’s community’s inaction rather than their involvement in the Gentile mission. However, the passage should be interpreted as ‘an incentive to Matthew’s audience to start the mission in their present situation’ (Foster 2004:244).

CONCLUSION

Based on this investigation it appears that the target group of the Ultimate Commission is ‘all nations’, which includes Jews, and not ‘all the Gentiles’, exclusive of Jews. Based on the word study of μεταλαμβάνει πάντα in the first gospel and the New Testament in general it is clear that Matthew conveys the idea that the commission was aimed at all human beings, including Jews. The examination of the Ultimate Commission in its literary context confirms that the scope of the Ultimate Commission does include humanity as a whole and does not exclude the Jews.

The evangelist expects his readers to take part in the universal mission. Jesus has been raised from the dead and claims universal authority. The same Jesus calls his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The readers will identify themselves with the disciples. Matthew’s community has engaged in the universal mission.
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