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During the New Testament period, communities of Jewish believers in Yeshua existed in the Land of Israel, Syria and beyond. They were diverse communities that in many ways represented a microcosm of the wider Jewish world. In 2007, Oskar Skarsaune and Matt Jackson-McCabe published edited volumes that surveyed these communities and raised new questions about their social identity. In this issue of *Verge*, I would like to make a few comments about Matthew's community.



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In his published dissertation *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew's Gospel*, Paul Foster describes an emerging “new consensus” in New Testament studies concerning the social identity of Matthew's community. An increasing number of scholars are now identifying Matthew's community as a “deviant movement operating within the orbit of Judaism.” The case for this view is made by Anthony Saldarini, J. Andrew Overman, Daniel Harrington, Joel Willitts, Anders Runesson, Phillip Sigal, among others. Roland Deines, who disagrees with this perspective, nonetheless acknowledges the existence of a new consensus emerging over three points:

- The Matthean community in the last third of the first century CE is

composed of mainly Jewish believers in Christ.

- These Christian Jews see no reason to break with their mother religion just because they believe that Jesus is the Messiah, although they are experiencing some pressure in this direction from mainstream Judaism.
- These Christian Jews live according to the Law of Moses and its valid *halakhic* interpretations of their time, with some alterations, softenings or modifications based on the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is seen as a Law-observant Jew, who offered his own individual points of view on some matters and gave his specific interpretations of disputed *halakhic* rules, but they remained—as Markus Bockmuehl points out—“conversant with contemporary Jewish legal debate and readily accommodated on the spectrum of ‘mainstream’ first-century Jewish opinion.” The Law-critical aspects in the Jesus tradition have to be interpreted within this frame.

I had the privilege of studying under Anthony Saldarini before he passed away and I remember him emphasizing, as many scholars now do, that Matthew viewed his community as a reformist Messianic movement *within klal Yisrael* (all Israel). Saldarini notes in his book *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* that the writer of the gospel uses the term “Israel” to refer to all Jews and never refers to his group as “new” or “true” Israel. In Matthew's gospel, “members of the Jewish community who reject Jesus, especially the leaders, are excoriated in the prophetic mode as unfaithful members of Israel, but members nonetheless. Israel is the concrete community of Jews from which Matthew has been banned, but to which he still thinks he belongs.”