

The sword motif in Matthew 10:34

David C Sim¹

School of Theology, Australian Catholic University

Visiting Scholar: Department of New Testament

Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria

Abstract

In Matthew 10:34 Jesus utters a very difficult saying. He claims that he has not come to bring peace, but a sword. The form of this saying does not trace back to the historical Jesus; it is the product of Matthew's redaction of a Q passage which is found in a more original form in Luke 12:51. What did the evangelist mean when he wrote that Jesus brought a sword? In the Hebrew scriptures the sword was a common symbol for the judgement and punishment of God, and in later times it represented a number of themes associated with the eschaton. It is argued in this study that Matthew, who was fully immersed in the apocalyptic-eschatological traditions of his day, probably used the sword motif in Matthew 10:34 to symbolise a number of important eschatological events.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Q pericope in Matthew 10:34-6 and Luke 12:51-3 is without doubt one of the most difficult sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. In the Matthean version Jesus makes the initial statement, "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (v 34), and he follows this by claiming that he has come to set family members against one another (vv 35-6). The parallel in Luke is slightly longer, but makes substantially the same point. The Lucan Jesus asks, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (v 51), and this too is followed by material spelling out how Jesus causes serious conflict within households (vv 52-3). The reference to familial clashes in the latter part of the pericope recalls the division within households of Micah 7:6, and it is the admission of Jesus that his mission brings conflict and division to families which has caused commentators no end of difficulty.

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In this study I do not wish to address the complex issue of Jesus' claim that his mission results in conflict between family members.² Rather, I want to focus on the initial sentence of this Q passage. As noted above when quoting the Matthean and Lucan forms of this sentence, Matthew's Jesus proclaims that he has come not to bring peace on earth but a sword (μάχαιρα), while his Lucan counterpart claims that he gives division (διαμερισμός) rather than peace. The verbal difference between the two Gospel accounts raises two important issues. First, who is responsible for this reference to the sword in Matthew 10:34? Did Matthew find this motif in Q or did he introduce it to his source? Secondly, if Matthew is responsible for this motif, what does this reference to the sword mean in the context of the Gospel? The remainder of this study will address these two issues in turn.

2. THE SWORD MOTIF AS MATTHEAN REDACTION

A small number of commentators argue that this difference in wording is not attributable to either evangelist; they suggest that the two recensions of Q differed at this point.³ The vast majority of scholars, however, disagree with this view. The most popular explanation for this verbal discrepancy is that Matthew's μάχαιρα reflects the text of Q, while the Lucan διαμερισμός is redactional. This conclusion is normally supported by one of two arguments. Either Luke has introduced the noun διαμερισμός because he twice uses the verbal cognate (διαμερίζω) in the two following verses (Luke 12:52-53),⁴ or the Lucan "division" looks like a weaker substitute for the Matthean "sword."⁵ Neither of these arguments is wholly convincing.

² I have said something about this aspect of Jesus' mission in a previous study. See D C Sim, "What about the Wives and Children of the Disciples? The Cost of Discipleship from Another Perspective", *Heythrop Journal* 35 (1994), pp 373-90, esp p 375.

³ See, for example, I H Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), p 548.

⁴ S Schulz, *Q Die Spruchquelle der Evangelisten*, (Zürich: Theologischer, 1972), p 258.

⁵ So many scholars; see W D Davies and D C Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, (ICC; 3 vols; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997), II, p 218; E Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, (London: SCM, 1976), p 250 and M Black, "'Not Peace but a Sword': Matt 10:34ff; Luke 12:51ff", in E Bammel and C F D Moule (eds.), *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp 287-294, esp p 288. Cf too E E Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), p 183; J Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, (HTKNT; 2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1986, 1988), I, p 393 and C F Evans, *Saint Luke*, (TPI New Testament Commentaries; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p 541.

Let us begin by examining Luke's redactional tendencies. The first thing to be said here is that Luke has no apparent aversion to μάχαιρα, the term found in Matthew 10:34. He adopts it twice from Mark (Luke 22:49, 52//Mark 14:47, 48) in the episode of Jesus' arrest, though he does omit a third reference in Mark 14:43 when drastically abbreviating the section in which it appears (cf Mark 14:43-6 with Luke 22:47-8). In addition to this, Luke inserts μάχαιρα into his Marcan source in the passage where Jesus predicts the downfall of Jerusalem and its inhabitants (Luke 21:24//Mark 13:19). Given Luke's general tendency to adopt this word from his sources and his willingness to insert it into those sources, it must be concluded that the evangelist had nothing against the word μάχαιρα itself.

It might be argued of course that while Luke had no aversion to the word μάχαιρα, he might have had reservations about associating Jesus with a sword; perhaps the evangelist wished to avoid the impression that Jesus was not a pacifist. After all, the Lucan Jesus brings peace on earth (2:14; cf 19:38), enjoins love of enemies in the Sermon on the Plain (6:27-36), and at his arrest admonishes the unnamed disciple who cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave (22:51). Any such argument, however, would have little force. The sword in Matthew 10:34 is not meant literally; Matthew did not think that Jesus conducted his ministry by brandishing a real sword. As we shall see shortly, the motif has an obvious metaphorical meaning. So even if we grant that Luke was concerned to portray Jesus in a non-violent light, it is doubtful that he would have been perturbed by the symbolic weapon of Matthew 10:34. Moreover, we need to remember that the Matthean Jesus also demands love of one's enemies (Matt 5:38-48), and that he is even more adamant than his Lucan counterpart on the impropriety of carrying a sword. In Matthew 26:52, Jesus orders the disciple who cuts of the slave's ear to put away his sword, and he proclaims that all who take up the sword will die by the sword. The example of Matthew demonstrates that the association of Jesus with a symbolic sword is not in any way inconsistent with a desire to present Jesus in a pacifistic light. It is of course true that what applies to Matthew does not necessarily hold for Luke, but it can be questioned in any event whether Luke was motivated to substitute διαμερισμός for μάχαιρα in order to promote a more non-violent Jesus. In the very verse under discussion, Luke 12:51, the Evangelist retains Jesus' statement from Q that he had not come to bring peace on earth. Why would he repeat this material if his intentions in this verse were to depict Jesus as a pacifist?

The same question can be asked of Luke 22:35-8. This passage, which has no synoptic parallel, concludes the Lucan version of the last supper. It begins with Jesus advising those of his circle who have no arms to sell their cloaks and buy swords (vv 35-6). He then tells the disciples that the prophecy from Isaiah 53:12, "And he was reckoned with the transgressors" (v 37), must be fulfilled. When the disciples produce two swords, Jesus tells them that "it is enough" (v 38). This is on any account an obscure passage which is replete with problems. One such difficulty is the identity of the transgressors. Is this group to be identified with the disciples who have now armed themselves?⁶ If so, then it could be argued that in this passage Luke is making the point that Jesus stood staunchly against the use of swords. This in turn would then support the view that in 12:51 the Evangelist altered the original "sword" in Q to "division". But this understanding of the motif is not likely. The disciples produced the swords only on the express wish of Jesus, and it is improbable that Jesus would criticise them for following his instructions. A more plausible explanation of the fulfilment motif is that Jesus, as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, will find himself classified among the transgressors in his impending suffering and death. The transgressors are best identified with the criminals who are crucified alongside Jesus (cf Luke 23:32-3, 39-43).⁷

It still remains to be explained why the Lucan Jesus ordered the disciples to carry swords. Many scholars sidestep this question by arguing that the reference to swords in 22:36 is metaphorical rather than literal; it refers not to real swords, as the disciples infer in vers 38, but to the hardships which Jesus and the disciples will soon face.⁸ This interpretation, however, goes against the plain sense of the text. Jesus commands his disciples to purchase swords, and the disciples obey by producing two that they already possess. It is more probable that the narrative here has an ironic sense. Since Jesus is to be judged and

⁶ So according to *St Luke*, (London: A & C Black, 1976), p 271; R Tannehill, *Luke*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press; P S Minear, "A Note on Luke xxii:36", *NovT* 7 (1964), pp 128-34, esp p 132; A R C Leaney, *The Gospel* 1996), pp 322-3 and G W H Lampe, "The Two Swords (Luke 22:35-38)" in Bammel and Moule, *Politics*, pp 335-51, esp pp 341-7.

⁷ See Marshall, *Luke*, p 826 and J Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, (AB 28A and 28B; 2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981, 1985), II, pp 1432-3.

⁸ Marshall, *Luke*, pp 823, 825. For similar views, see Fitzmyer, *Luke*, II, p 1432; T W Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1949), p 341; L Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p 338; E Schweizer, *The Good News according to Luke*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), p 342.

executed as a criminal, then he and the disciples may as well play out this role in the events leading to his arrest.⁹ On this interpretation the Lucan Jesus does not criticise the disciples for bearing arms, though of course he does later berate the offending disciple for taking the charade too far and actually using the weapon at the time of the arrest in Gethsemane (22:50-1). If this understanding of this difficult passage is correct, then it bears directly on determining the extent of Luke's redaction in 12:51. Given that Luke was prepared in 22:35-8 to associate Jesus with swords, then we must accept that he would have allowed the same association in 12:51 had it been present in Q at that point. This is all the more probable when we take into account the metaphorical nature of the sword in Matthew 10:34.

The thesis that Luke has followed rather than emended Q in his use of "division" in 12:51 is strengthened by examining the issue from the other perspective. If it is unlikely that Luke would have removed the term μάχαῖρα from Q, it is just as improbable that he would have inserted διαμερισμός in its place. This word is clearly not a favourite term of the evangelist. While it is true that he uses the verbal cognate (διαμερίζω) on six occasions (11:17, 18; 12:52, 53; 22:17; 23:34), including two instances in the immediate context, this is the only occurrence of the nominal form in the two Lucan documents. It is possible, as some scholars have argued, that Luke introduced the noun in 12:51 to parallel the two verbal forms in the following verses, but there is no necessity to accept that this was the case; it is equally possible that this parallelism was already present in Q. It still remains problematic, on the hypothesis of Lucan redaction, that the evangelist replaces a word to which he has no aversion with a term which he fails to use again in his two lengthy documents.

All the evidence produced so far has suggested that Luke was not responsible for the presence of διαμερισμός in Luke 12:51. Let us now approach this issue from the opposite direction. What is the evidence that Matthew was responsible for the word μάχαῖρα in his parallel text? A glance at that evangelist's redactional proclivities speaks strongly in favour of this view. Matthew takes over all three instances of μάχαῖρα in Mark's story of Jesus' arrest (Matt 26:47, 51, 55//Mark 14:43, 47, 48). Of more importance, however, is that at 26:52 Matthew inserts a new sentence into the Marcan account. This redactional verse, "Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will die by the sword'", uses the word μάχαῖρα on a further three occasions. This evidence

⁹ So Evans, *Luke*, pp 807-8.

confirms that Matthew had some liking for the term and this alone is enough to suggest that he is responsible for its presence in 10:34.

Consequently, when we add together all the evidence – Luke’s tendency to reproduce μάχαιρα when it stood in his sources, his lack of inclination to use διαμερισμός, his indifference to associating Jesus with swords, and Matthew’s preference for μάχαιρα – then the weight of evidence suggests that Luke is faithful to the text of Q at this point and that the Matthean parallel is secondary.¹⁰ If this conclusion is correct, then we may now turn to our second subject for consideration. Why would Matthew change the Q text that Jesus brought division, and write in its place that he brought a sword? What did he mean by this particular motif? In order to answer these questions, it is essential to examine the symbol of the sword in the wider Jewish and Christian traditions. This will enable us to plot the influence(s) underlying this redaction of the evangelist.

3. THE SWORD IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES, LATER JEWISH WRITINGS AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

As we might expect, most references to swords in the Hebrew Scriptures advert simply to the weapon of war used by humans, but there are many texts in which this motif has a more symbolic term of reference. In these passages God is said to possess a sword for the purpose of inflicting punishment on wrongdoers. The sword therefore represents in some sense the judgement and punishment of God. This judgement can fall on the enemies of Israel, including Assyria (Is 31:8; Ezek 32:22-3; Zeph 2:12), Babylon (Jer 50:35-37), Edom (Is 34:5-6; Ezek 25:13; 32:29), Egypt (Jer 46:14, 16; Ezek 29:8; 30:4, 24-5, 31:17-18; 32:10-12, 20-1, 31-2), Ashkelon (Jer 47:6), Elam (Jer 49:37; Ezek 32:24-5), Tyre (Ezek 26:6, 8, 11), Sidon (Ezek 28:23; 32:30) and other nations (Deut 32:41-2; Ps 17:13; Is 41:2; 66:16; Jer 46:10; 48:2; Ezek 30:5-6, 17; 32:26, 28; 35:8),¹¹ but in most texts it applies to the judgement

¹⁰ In agreement with R H Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn 1994), p 199. More tentative proponents of this view are U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, (EKKNT; 3 vols.; Zürich: Benziger, 1985, 1990, 1997), II, p 134 and S C Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew*, (SNTSMS 80; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p 167.

¹¹ The sword is also an instrument of punishment for supernatural adversaries. In Isaiah 1 God is said to punish Leviathan with God’s great and strong sword.

of the people of Israel themselves as punishment for their rebellion against God. In these cases the sword can be either the sword of God (Ex 5:3; 22:24; Lev 26:25, 33; 1 Chron 21:12; Job 19:29; Ps 7:12; Is 1:20; 65:12; Jer 12:12; 25:16, 27, 31; 27:8; 31:2; Ezek 5:2, 12, 17; 6:3, 8, 11-12; 11:8, 10; 12:14, 16; 14:17, 21; 21:3-5; 9-16; 32:10; 33:2-6; 33:27; Am 4:10; 7:9, 11, 17; 9:1, 4, 10; Mic 6:14; Nah 2:13; 3:15; Zech 13:7), or the sword wielded by the nations which attack and oppress disobedient Israel (1 Chron 21:12; Ps 78:62, 64; Jer 6:25; 15:9; 18:21; 19:7; 20:4; 21:7, 9; 25:38; 33:4; 33:4; 39:18; 43:11; Ezek 7:15; 16:40; 17:21; 21:19-20, 28; 23:25, 47; 24:21; 28:7; 39:23; Hos 7:16; 11:6; 13:16), though in some of these texts it is not easy to decide between these two categories (cf Jer 5:12; 9:16; 11:22; 14:12, 13, 15, 16, 18; 15:2-3; 16:4; 24:10; 27:13; 29:17-18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; 42:16-17; 44:12-13, 18, 27-8). This distinction, however, is in fact an artificial one. As Ezekiel 21:9-16 and 30:24-5 make clear, God gives God's judgemental sword to the nations who dominate Israel or other peoples so that they might execute God's divine punishment. The opposite use of this motif appears in Psalm 149:6-9, which expresses the hope that the Jews will be given two-edged swords to wreak vengeance on the nations and to execute the judgement of God. In many of these texts, especially the earlier ones, the judgement of God symbolised by the sword is to occur (or has occurred) in history, but in other passages, particularly those in the prophetic books, God's judgement has a more eschatological orientation. The sword in these texts represents the judgement and punishment of God at the end of the current age.

The Jewish texts written after the "Old Testament period" developed the eschatological focus of the prophets, and certain themes – such as the doctrine of the two ages, the end-time woes as definitive signs of the end, the final and universal judgement, the eternal salvation of the righteous and the eternal punishment of the wicked – began to take more concrete form. The symbol of the sword also underwent development in this period, and it emerged as a stock image of the end-time. It is important to note, however, that the sword motif in this period was not uniform. The Jewish literature which was composed around the turn of the eras shows great diversity in its use of the sword as an eschatological symbol, and these various uses need to be carefully spelt out. This is easier said than done in some cases, because apocalyptic language and imagery are often notoriously difficult to pin down, and it is not always a simple matter to decide to which category a given reference should be assigned.

In some texts the sword represents the instrument of divine punishment wielded by the Jews against the enemies of God. It has precisely this sense in the two parts of *1 Enoch* that were composed during the Maccabean uprising against the Seleucids, the *Apocalypse of Weeks* (*1 En* 93:1-10; 91:11-17) and the *Book of Dreams* (*1 En* 83-90). According to the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, which divides history into ten periods or weeks, a sword will be given to the righteous in the eighth week so that they may execute punishment on the sinners (*1 En* 91:12). This is a direct reference to the successful campaigns of the Maccabean revolt. The giving of the sword in the early part of the eighth week sets off a chain of eschatological episodes. At the conclusion of the eighth week the righteous will be given wonderful things, including a new Temple (v 13), and weeks nine and ten (vv 14-17) complete the turning of the ages; the final judgement by the heavenly angels will take place and the sinners will be sent to eternal destruction. Heaven will pass away, a new heaven will replace it and the new age will be characterised by righteousness. A similar picture appears in the *Book of Dreams*, especially in the vision of chapters 85-90. Using animal imagery this apocalypse traces the history of Israel from creation to the Maccabean rebellion. The final section of the historical review details the Maccabean campaigns up to the success at Beth-Zur (90:9-14; cf 2 Macc 11:6-12). From here the narrative moves from historical description into the realm of eschatological speculation. Verses 15-19 relate that God will step into the fray, thus ensuring final victory for the righteous. The victory will be complete when God gives the sheep, the Maccabean army, a great sword which they then use to vanquish their enemies (v 19). Following this comes the true arrival of the eschaton with the final judgement (vv 20-7) and the establishment of a new Temple (vv 28-36).

The motif of the sword in both the *Apocalypse of Weeks* and the *Book of Dreams* plays much the same role. The giving of the sword has eschatological implications, since it signals the imminent arrival of the end-events. Moreover, the sword of God is given to the righteous Jews, the Maccabees, in order that they might execute God's wrath on Jewish apostates and the oppressive Gentile nations. In this respect the role of this weapon as an instrument of divine punishment closely approximates its general usage in the Hebrew scriptures, though its closest parallel is Psalm 149:6-9 which prophesies that the Jews will execute the judgement of God. The tradition of the eschatological sword in these Maccabean apocalypses finds an interesting parallel in 2 Macc 15:12-16. In this text Judas Maccabee had a dream in which he was given a holy sword, a gift of God, to strike down his ene-

mies. Although the motif of the sword in these early apocalypses has an eschatological referent, it does not allude in either case to the final judgement. The Maccabees execute the punishment of God firmly within the realm of history, albeit right at its conclusion, and the final judgement is a separate event which follows soon after.

The Qumran scrolls reflect an important development of this theme. The Qumran community also believed that a great war would constitute the final event of this age (cf 4QFlor 1:18-19; 1QH 13:34-6) and that it would be followed by the judgement and the complete turning of the ages. This eschatological conflict is most clearly described in the War Scroll (1QM), but it is important to note the differences between the final war described there and the conflict depicted in the two sections of *1 Enoch*. First, the battle is not an event of the immediate past, but is still to happen. Secondly, the participants in this final conflict are not confined to the human realm; this war is truly cosmic and includes supernatural beings in addition to humans. On the one side stand the human righteous and the holy angels led by Michael, and they do battle against the wicked humans and the fallen angels led by Belial. The scenario of a cosmic battle between the forces of righteousness and their evil counterparts in this document reflects the developed dualism of the Qumran community, which is evident elsewhere in its literature.¹² Towards the end of this war God will intervene and secure the victory for the righteous (cf 1QM 1:14-15; 14:15; 18:1-3). The sword of God plays an important role in this eschatological conflict. Whereas in the past disobedient Israel had been delivered up to the sword (CD 1:4, 17, 21; 8:1), in the final battle between good and evil the sword of God will deal a mortal blow to the enemies of God and God's faithful remnant. The sword of the God of Israel has been summoned (1QM 16:1) in order to strike the nations and consume guilty flesh (1QM 12:12; 19:4; cf 1QH 14:29). The importance of this myth of the cosmic end-time war between God and Belial (Satan), in which both humans and angels participate, will become apparent later.

Other Jewish texts use the theme of the sword with an entirely different eschatological sense. In these documents the sword represents one of the terrifying eschatological woes, which conclude the current age and signify the arrival of the new age. In *2 Baruch* 27:1-15 the final time of tribulation is divided into twelve parts. The first three parts see the beginning of the tribulations, the slaughter of the great and the death of many, while the

¹² For further detail, see J J Collins, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp 38-51.

fourth part involves the drawing of the sword (v 5). The eight remaining parts involve a whole series of calamities, including famines, earthquakes and the appearance of demons. The meaning of the drawing of the sword in the fourth part is not clearly explicated, but it presumably refers to great violence and murder and perhaps even warfare. The theme here is different from the notion of the final eschatological battle found in the Qumran War Scroll. In this case the warfare is not the final and decisive battle between the forces of good and evil, but conflict among the nations which constitutes one part of the eschatological woes as the universe and human society progressively break down. This motif is found in other texts. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* 30:2-8 refers to the ten plagues which will be brought against the heathen nations before the final judgement. These plagues include famine, pestilence, earthquakes, fire hail and snow, but also present will be death by the sword (30:6, 8). In the *Psalms of Solomon* famine, death and the sword will be the lot of the wicked in the last times, but the righteous will be protected (13:2; 15:7).

An alternative tradition refers to the sword solely in terms of the final judgement, and usually as an instrument of punishment. In *Wis 5:17-20* God's zeal is God's armour, God's righteousness is a breastplate, God's impartial justice is a helmet, God's holiness is an invincible shield and God's wrath is his sword. A clearer example of this use of the motif appears in the *Parables of Enoch* (*1 En* 37-71). At one point the idea is presented that at the judgement God shall use the sword to force the kings and governors to perform a sacrifice (62:12), while another text states that in the place of eschatological punishment the sword will abide amongst them (63:11). Another section of *1 Enoch*, the *Epistle of Enoch* (*1 En* 91-107) makes much the same point. In 99:18 it is said that on the day of judgement God will arouse the anger of God's spirit and destroy the sinners with the sword.

A number of other Jewish texts seem to combine the two functions of the eschatological sword as both an element within the eschatological calamities as well as the instrument of divine judgement. The book of *Jubilees* is a case in point. The final evil generation of Jews will be punished by sword, captivity and destruction before their repentance (23:22; cf 23:20), while 9:15 states that God will judge the sinners with a sword and with fire on the day of judgement. A number of these themes are found as well in the book of *Sirach*. Here sinners will receive a whole host of terrible things, such as bloodshed, sword, famine and plague (40:9), but the book also specifies that God has created the sword

for vengeance and destruction (39:30) and that the sinner is prepared for the sword (26:28). The third book of the *Sibylline Oracles* also refers to the sword in this dual sense, although the situation is more complicated. Along with war, fire and rain, the sword is an integral component of the end-time woes (3:689-90), but other swords, more supernatural in nature, play a part in this process as well. According to 3:796-807, the signs which point to the end of the present era are the arrival of dust which blocks the light from the sun and moon, blood dripping from rocks, a major battle taking place in the heavens and swords which appear in the heavens at night. These celestial swords seemingly perform an important function in the final judgement, where one of the major punishments of the wicked involves the falling of fiery swords from heaven (3:672-4).¹³

The motif of the sword is also found in variant forms in the early Christian tradition. In most cases these Christian usage's correspond to the Jewish usage's noted above, but there are two exceptions. A non-eschatological instance of this symbol, which has no Jewish parallel, appears in Ephesians 6:17. In this text the author echoes the military imagery of Wis 5:17-20 by advising his readers to stand against the evil powers by girding their loins with truth, putting on the breastplate of righteousness, shodding their feet with the gospel of peace, taking the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation, and by taking the sword of the Spirit which is identified with the word of God.

The motif of the sword as a symbol of the word of God is also found in the epistle to the Hebrews. According to 4:12, the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. The image here represents a common Jewish tradition that the sharpness of words can be compared to the damage inflicted by a sharp sword; the symbol can be applied to human words (cf Ps 52:2; 55:21; 57:4; 64:3; Prov 12:18; 30:14; Is 49:2) or divine words (cf Wis 18:15-16).

Of those Christian texts which parallel the general Jewish tradition, we might begin with Rom 8:35, which speaks of tribulations, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword. Here Paul seems to reflect the image of the sword as a component of the eschatological woes. A further important text in this regard is *6 Ezra*, the second century

¹³ The fourth book of the Sibylline corpus also reflects a tradition of a sword associated with the eschaton, though in this case the precise meaning of the imagery is not clear. At the end of the age God will destroy the world in a great fiery conflagration (vv 173-8). At the same time there will be a very great sign with sword and trumpet at the rising of the sun (vv 173-4).

addition to 4 *Ezra* in chapters 15-16. This tradition also knows of the image of the sword associated with the terrible events preceding the end. The sword can refer to battles between nations (15:15) or conflict between individuals (15:19), but most texts refer to the sword of God. God will use the sword to punish those who have shed innocent blood (15:22, cf 15:57; 16:3), and this sword is often coupled with famine, poverty and pestilence (15:5, 47; 16:21-2) or with tempests and floods (15:35, 41).

The most important Christian text is the canonical book of Revelation, where the symbol of the sword plays an important role in its complex eschatological scenario. Some texts represent the tradition that the sword will be an integral part of the eschatological woes prior to the end. In the prophecy of the first beast in 13:1-10, John proclaims that the beast from the sea will have all authority and will make war with the righteous. The seer then warns that armed resistance is futile and unacceptable by stating that any (Christian) who kills with the sword will be slain in turn by the sword (13:10b; cf Jer 15:2; 43:11 and Matthew 26:52), and he concludes with an exhortation to endurance and faith in the face of the beast's onslaught (13:10c). On the other hand, the wicked are also tested and slain by the sword as part of the eschatological events. The section describing the four horsemen who wreak havoc upon the earth (Rev 6:1-8; cf Zech 1:8-11; 6:1-8) specifies that the second horseman is given a great sword in order to take peace from the earth (6:4), and that the fourth rider is ordered to kill one fourth of the earth by famine, pestilence, wild beasts and sword (6:8).

The Christian Apocalypse also employs the symbol of the sword to represent divine punishment. In his initial vision John witnesses the heavenly Jesus in his full glory, and sees a sharp two-edged sword (ῥομφαία) issuing from his mouth (1:16). Given that in the Apocalypse Jesus is described as the word of God (19:13), this image might have the same sense as it does in Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12; the sword symbolises Jesus as the word of God. But it is clear from further texts that this interpretation is not by itself sufficient. This sword is also an instrument of divine vengeance. In the message to the church of Pergamum, the one with the two-edged sword (2:12) threatens to war against the Nicolaitans with the sword of his mouth (2:16). This aspect of the sword motif is more clearly delineated in the important section in 19:11-21. Here the author of Revelation provides a Christian version of the final eschatological battle between the forces of good and evil. While there are considerable differences with the Qumran War Scroll over points of

detail, the general theme is remarkably similar. This text begins by describing the return of Jesus at the end of the age. After the heavens open Jesus appears on a white horse, and his military status is unmistakable. He is described as the one who makes war, and he leads the heavenly armies against the beast and the kings of the earth. The sword which issues from his mouth is used as an instrument of eschatological punishment; the heavenly Jesus makes use of this weapon to slay the rebellious nations (19:15, 21). This eschatological battle is eventually followed by the universal judgement (20:11-15). The parallels between Revelation and the Qumran War Scroll are clear.¹⁴ Both texts represent a version of the myth of the final and universal cosmic battle, and each uses the motif of the sword to represent God's bloody punishment of his enemies prior to the final judgement.

We may draw some provisional conclusions from our review of the relevant Jewish and Christian texts. In the Hebrew Scriptures the motif of the sword represents in general terms the judgement and punishment of God, either in this age or in the age to come. In later Jewish texts and in the early Christian literature, this theme underwent substantial development. With the exception of Hebrews and Ephesians, the symbol of the sword has a wholly eschatological orientation. For the most part, it still represents the judgement and punishment of God, but it is represented in a variety of ways. The sword can symbolise the punishment of God meted out by the faithful in an eschatological conflict against the wicked. In the *Apocalypse of Weeks* and the *Book of Dreams*, this war is fought between human participants only, the righteous Jews led by the Maccabees against Jewish apostates and the wicked Gentile nations. Yet in other texts, the Qumran War Scroll and the book of Revelation, this final conflict can assume cosmic proportions whereby the heavenly and evil angels join their human counterparts in the battle. The sword can also refer to the eschatological woes, which signify the breakdown of society as the end of the age draws towards its inexorable conclusion. In this sense the sword usually refers to warfare in general between nations, not the final war between good and evil, though it can allude to conflicts on a smaller scale. When the wicked are afflicted by this conflict, then the image of the sword carries the meaning of God's divine punishment, even though it might be followed by

¹⁴ See D C Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*, (SNTSMS 88; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp 43, 44-5. This point has been noted by other scholars. M Black, "Not Peace but a Sword", p.293 describes the book of Revelation as a "kind of 'War Scroll' of Christianity". So too R Bauckham, "The Book of Revelation as a Christian War Scroll", *Neotestamentica* 22 (1988), pp 17-40, though the point made by Bauckham is quite different from that presented here.

the final judgement and future punishments. On the other hand, the righteous can be caught up these events and suffer as a result. In this case, however, there is no suggestion that the righteous deserve this treatment or that they are being punished by God. Their unhappy fate is usually explained as part and parcel of the end-time woes, when the righteous must undergo a period of suffering prior to their final vindication. Still a further meaning of the sword motif is found in some texts, where it represents the final judgement and the subsequent punishment of the wicked. Bearing all of this in mind, we may now turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew.

4. THE SWORD MOTIF IN MATTHEW

In attempting to determine which of the above-mentioned Jewish and Christian traditions influenced the evangelist,¹⁵ a couple of options may be excluded from consideration. It is inherently unlikely that Matthew was reflecting the non-eschatological sense of the sword motif found in Ephesians and Hebrews, and was making the point that Jesus brings (or is) the word of God.¹⁶ The context of the whole pericope in 10:34-6 is clearly eschatological. The division within families as attested by Mic 7:6 was seen in both Jewish and Christian circles as a sign of the end-time woes (cf *1 En* 56:7; 100:1-2; *Jub* 23:16, 19; Mark 13:12; Matt 10:21; cf *4 Ezra* 5:9; 6:24), which suggests that the sword in 10:34 must have an eschatological term of reference.

One eschatological tradition which can also be ruled out is that represented by the two apocalypses in *1 Enoch*. These two texts enjoin the use of arms and violence to execute the judgement of God against the ungodly, but it is certain that the Matthean Jesus was not speaking of the sword in this particular sense. Matthew's Jesus is no zealot or revolutionary; on the contrary, he has clear pacifistic tendencies which simply do not cohere with this

¹⁵ It should be noted that R H Gundry attributes the evangelist's introduction of the sword motif into this pericope about family divisions to the influence of one text, Ezek 38:21b. This prophetic text reads; "every man's sword (LXX μάχαιρα) will be against his brother", and so contains the dual themes of a sword and conflict within the family. See Gundry, *Matthew*, p 199. Cf too Barton, *Discipleship*, p 167. While Gundry's suggestion is certainly possible, it is by no means conclusive. There is nothing in Matthew 10:34 which points definitively to this text in Ezekiel. On the other hand, the list of family disputants in Matthew 10:35-6 would appear to speak against any such influence. Where Ezek 38:21b sets a man against his brother, the evangelist remains close to Mic 7:6 by mentioning a man and his father, a daughter and her mother, and a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. If we are to determine which texts and traditions influenced Matthew at this point, then we need to cast our net more widely.

¹⁶ So correctly Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II, p 218.

interpretation. He blesses the peacemakers (5:9), commands that evil not be resisted (5:38-42) and emphasises that enemies must be loved and persecutors prayed for (5:43-8). Moreover, as noted above, it is the Matthean Jesus who castigates the violent disciple at his arrest by reminding him that those who take the sword will die by that weapon (26:52). Given this consistent portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, it is impossible to believe that the sword he brings in 10:34 symbolises the call to armed conflict against the oppressors of Israel during his mission.¹⁷

When we examine which of the above-mentioned eschatological senses of the sword might be applicable to the text in question, there are three possibilities. The first one to discuss is that which affirms that the sword is a symbol of the persecution and martyrdom which accompanies the end-time. This hypothesis is the most favoured by Matthean commentators, and it is well illustrated in the majestic commentary of W D Davies & D C Allison. These commentators note the complex background to the sword image, and they argue that it has the meaning of persecution and martyrdom. The sword in Matthew 10:34 therefore makes the point that the time of Jesus and the Christian church heralds a time of tribulation rather than a period of peace.¹⁸ This is brought out more fully in the material dealing with divisions in households. At one level the sword metaphorically depicts the separation of family members. Davies & Allison write; "As the sword splits in half, so does Jesus divide families".¹⁹ But the division within families is merely symptomatic of a much more general situation of tribulation. Davies & Allison note that the theme of family conflict in the end-time was common in both Jewish and Christian circles (see above), so the sword which Jesus brings represents the eschatological woes and trials which the righteous must face before the end.²⁰ In noting the parallel with Revelations 6:4, which also contains

¹⁷ A number of scholars make this point; Gnlika, *Matthäusevangelium*, I, p 394; Schweizer, *Matthew*, p 251; R T France, *The Gospel according to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p 188; D J Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Sacra Pagina 1; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), p 150; M Davies, *Matthew*, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p 85 and D E Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p 118.

¹⁸ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, II, pp 218-19. For similar views, see Schweizer, *Matthew*, p 251 and Gnlika, *Matthäusevangelium*, I, p 394.

¹⁹ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, II, p 219. So too Gundry, *Matthew*, p 199; France, *Matthew*, p 188 and F W Bear, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p 249.

²⁰ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, II, pp 219-20. Cf too Luz, *Matthäus*, II, pp 137-9 and D A Hagner, *Matthew*, (2 vols; WBC 33A and 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1993, 1996), I, pp 291-2.

the antithesis of peace and sword, they conclude their discussion of Matthew 10:34 with the words; "The absence of peace and the presence of the sword is a sign of the great tribulation".²¹

This interpretation of the sword motif in this Matthean verse has much in its favour. It interprets the sword according to one of its contemporary senses, and it is certainly consistent with the following material which speaks of eschatological division within families. I would suggest, however, that the argument can be strengthened even more. In my study of Matthew's apocalyptic eschatology, I argued in some detail that Matthew constructs a clear timetable of the end events in 24:4-14.²² The initial events mentioned in vv 4-9 – wars, famines, earthquakes and the appearance of false Christs – belong to the past from the perspective of the evangelist and his readers, while those referred to in vv 9-12 refer to the present time of the Matthean community. These events include tribulation, martyrdom, hatred by all the nations, apostasy, and internal betrayal and hatred within the community. In attempting to identify precisely which events the evangelist had in mind, I suggested that the social setting of his community was particularly complex. The evidence of the Gospel strongly suggests that, as a result of the Jewish war, this group came into conflict with formative Judaism, the Gentile world and law-free or Pauline Christianity.²³ Since Matthew believed that he and his community were living in the midst of the eschatological upheaval and conflict, the likelihood increases that in 10:34 the sword, one of the more common symbols of this end-time tribulation, refers to this situation.

But as satisfying as this common interpretation of the sword motif might be, it is not the only available explanation of this theme. Matthew's interest in eschatological matters extends far beyond the end-time tribulation experienced by his community. The evangelist has a developed apocalyptic-eschatological perspective, and he is keenly interested in the future end-time events which are fast approaching, especially the return of Jesus from hea-

²¹ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, II, p 220. On the other hand, Luz, *Matthäus*, p 138 denies any parallel between Matthew 10:34 and Revelation 6:4.

²² Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 160-8.

²³ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp. 181-221. For more detail, see my later study, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community*, (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

ven and the final judgement over which he presides.²⁴ Recognition of these aspects of the evangelist's eschatological scheme opens up further possibilities for interpreting the sword motif in Matthew 10:34.

A second possible understanding of this symbol is that it represents the punishment of God's enemies in the cosmic battle right at the end of the age. The first thing to be noted here is that the evangelist's developed apocalyptic-eschatological scheme shares clear affinities with those within the Christian Apocalypse and the Qumran literature in general.²⁵ He too has a decidedly dualistic interpretation of the cosmic order. The universe is engaged in a great battle between the forces of good and evil. On one side stand Jesus, God, the holy angels and human righteous, and they are opposed by Satan, his army of demons and their wicked human allies.²⁶ It therefore comes as no surprise to find in Matthew yet another account of the final eschatological war. Just like the accounts in 1QM and Revelation, this war is fought between human and supernatural armies as the final event in history. I have discussed this end-time conflict in Matthew's eschatological scheme in some detail elsewhere,²⁷ so only the main points of that discussion need be repeated here.

At the very end of this age, the antichrist will appear in the Temple ruins in Jerusalem (24:15), which causes the righteous to flee for their lives (24:16-20). The arrival of the antichrist results in unparalleled tribulation (24:21). This tribulation is occasioned by the appearance of the supernatural powers of evil from the underworld (16:18), who form an unholy coalition with the occupying Romans (24:28). Immediately after this tribulation occur a number of cosmic signs as creation itself grinds to a halt (24:29), and then Jesus the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven accompanied by a host of holy angels (24:30; cf 16:27-8). In Matthew the returning Son of Man is depicted as a military figure. He arrives with a military standard (24:30a) and a (military) trumpet call (24:31a), and the angels who accompany him comprise the heavenly army (cf 26:53). Matthew therefore portrays the returning Jesus as the commander of a military force, which arrives to engage the human

²⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of Matthew's apocalyptic eschatology, see Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 73-177.

²⁵ See Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, esp pp 78-81, 89-90, 105, 107-8, 109, 139, 177, 245.

²⁶ On the subject of Matthew's comprehensive dualism, see Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 75-87.

²⁷ Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 99-108.

and supernatural forces of evil at the very end of the age. For reasons that are not entirely clear Matthew, unlike Revelation 19:11-19 and the Qumran War Scroll, does not describe the ensuing war which takes place.

Matthew's depiction of this eschatological battle between the heavenly armies led by Jesus and the forces of evil led by Satan opens up further possibilities for interpreting the symbol of the sword in Matthew 10:34. Although the evangelist does not mention any sword in 24:15-31, it is certainly possible, in the light of the parallels in Revelation and 1QM, that he believed that Jesus would bring the sword of God in order to inflict God's just vengeance on his enemies. On this understanding of Matthew 10:34, the Matthean Jesus is stating that he brings not peace but a sword of divine punishment in the final cosmic battle in history.

It is interesting to note that such an understanding of this passage is not new. M Black argued for this interpretation of Matthew 10:34, though he attributed this view to Jesus rather than to Matthew.²⁸ After examining a number of relevant texts, Black concluded; the sword he (i e Jesus) foretold in our text was the sword of the Lord of Hosts ... While not a political Zealot, Jesus could perhaps be claimed as an apocalyptic Zealot, proclaiming a final impending war against Belial and all his followers in heaven and on earth, even in the same family. The sword would then be an image of this terrible prelude to the last judgement, the manifestation of the wrath of God by the armies of heaven.²⁹

Black's contention that Jesus himself intended the sword motif in Matthew 10:34 to be taken this way falters on the likely proposition, which was defended above, that the reference to the sword has its origin in Matthew's redaction and not in the ministry of Jesus. Moreover, the evidence is clear that it was Matthew more than Jesus who was heavily influenced by the contemporary apocalyptic-eschatological tradition. Black's thesis is therefore more appropriate for the Matthean Jesus rather than the historical Jesus.

The third possible meaning of the symbol of the sword in this Matthean passage is that it represents the final judgement and its aftermath. That Matthew has a keen interest in the judgement is well-known, and it is true to say that no New Testament document, with the possible exception of the Apocalypse, is so concerned with this particular eschatological

²⁸ Black, "Not Peace but a Sword", pp 291-294.

²⁹ Black, "Not Peace but a Sword", pp 291-292.

event.³⁰ Following the resurrection of the dead and the regeneration of the cosmos, Jesus the Son of Man will sit on his throne of glory and preside over the universal judgement (25:31-46; cf 19:28). Those who are saved will be transformed into angels and live in a state of bliss for eternity,³¹ while those who are condemned will be punished in the severest way. The wicked, both human and angelic, will be sent to Gehenna where they will be tortured by fire forever.³² This rather vengeful view of the fate of the wicked could well be symbolised by the sword in Matthew 10:34. Jesus does not bring peace to the earth but rather the wrath of God in his capacity as the eschatological judge. In bringing the sword, he is foreshadowing his utter condemnation and merciless punishment of the wicked in the new age.

Which of these three possible interpretations of the sword motif did Matthew intend in 10:34? As noted above, most scholars opt for the first interpretation, and it is true that this view best fits the immediate context of 10:34-6. But the second and third interpretations should not be dismissed out of hand. As we have seen Matthew places particular emphasis on the final judgement and the punishment of the wicked, and this was the most common meaning of the sword motif in the Hebrew Bible and the texts contemporaneous with the evangelist. It would therefore be unusual if Matthew did not intend this symbol in 10:34 to represent the punishment of the wicked, either in the final conflict between good and evil or at the universal judgement. Since these three views are not mutually exclusive, it is quite conceivable that the evangelist introduced the sword motif with more than one meaning in mind. In favour of this possibility is the fact that the three eschatological events in question are all interrelated.

The historical appearance of Jesus initiates the period of the eschatological tribulations, including the division within families. These divisions, based upon whether one believes in Jesus or not, have further eschatological implications. According to Matthew's strict dualism, those who reject Jesus necessarily stand in the camp of Satan. Consequently, they will be defeated and punished when Jesus returns from heaven leading the angelic army against the forces of Satan, and they will suffer eternal torments after Jesus condemns them

³⁰ For detailed discussion of the relevant texts, see Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 110-28.

³¹ See Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 140-5.

³² Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, pp 129-40.

at the final judgement. We might then interpret the sword motif in Matthew 10:34 in the following way. Jesus brings the sword which cuts families in half as an integral component of the eschatological woes. He will also bring the sword (of God) at his parousia when he completely defeats his enemies in the final battle of history. Finally, he brings the sword to the final judgement, where he condemns the wicked and assigns them to eternal torment in the fires of Gehenna.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the views of most scholars, this study has argued that the motif of the sword in Matthew 10:34 does not reflect the original wording of Q but is more probably the result of Matthean redaction. In determining the meaning of this symbol for the evangelist, it was found that Matthew's intentions were perhaps more nuanced and more complex than scholars have recognised. As is normally acknowledged, the sword is not a literal sword which the Matthean Jesus brandishes to call his followers to an uprising against the Romans; on the contrary, it is a symbol which has eschatological overtones.

The consensus view that the sword represents the tribulations of the end-time, especially the divisions within families prophesied by the prophet Micah, is doubtless correct, but it seemingly does not exhaust its meaning in the context of the Gospel. Like the Qumran texts and the Christian book of Revelation, Matthew has a developed apocalyptic-eschatological perspective, and he too embraces the myth of a final, cosmic war between the armies of righteousness and evil at the very end of the age. Since the sword (of God) symbolises the defeat of the enemies of God in both the War Scroll from Qumran and Revelation, it is likely that the symbol of the sword in 10:34 carries this meaning as well. At the time of his mission Jesus brings the sword which initially makes divisions in families, and at the end of the age he wields the sword of punishment for those who fall on the wrong side of this division. But more than this, it is quite possible that the sword also represents, as it does in other contemporary texts, the eternal punishment of the wicked in the post-judgement era. The evangelist has a very keen interest in the event of universal judgement and the final fate of the wicked.

The sword motif in Matthew 10:34

In the final analysis it is difficult to ascertain with any certainty precisely how Matthew intended the sword motif in Matthew 10:34 to be taken. The multivocal interpretation offered here is more suggestive than definitive, but it is built upon the indisputable facts that the symbol of the sword had a variety of meanings in the contemporary literature and that the evangelist had a variety of eschatological interests.