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**The Gospel of Matthew –  
Between its Old Testament Roots and  
its Eschatological Perspectives**

Edited by

**Ioan CHIRILĂ  
Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA**



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## Introduction

### **The Gospel of Matthew – Between its Old Testament Roots and its Eschatological Perspectives**

**Ioan CHIRILĂ\*, Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA\*\***

The Gospel as the good news of eternal joy is a “divine reading,” an exceptional unrepeatable nature of this event, the Gospel expresses not self-sufficiency but gift-giving, sharing, and communion. The words of the Gospels are thus intimately tied to the twin notions of revelation and incarnation. The Gospel of Matthew begins precisely with the theme of the incarnation of the Word – the Advent of Immanuel – which could be seen as a “summary” of Matthew’s entire message. The apostolic mission described in the Gospel is the beginning of our inscription into the Trinitarian paradigm. When we speak of revelation, we refer to what God accomplishes to make Himself known – eternal and unchanging discoveries. Thus, the main point is to return to the heart of the matter: the events recounted in the Gospels are expressions of divine revelation embodied in words, illuminated by the Holy Spirit. It is not the multitude of textual variants that will grant you access to the authentic meaning of the good news, but the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is a joyous announcement of victory over sin and death, opening the gates of Paradise to humankind. The narratives, teachings, parables, and prophecies recorded in the four Gospels allow the divine pedagogy to shine through. God patiently stoops down to lift fallen humanity, remedying our failure and healing our nature by uniting it to

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His divinity in the incarnation of the Son. This revelation of Trinitarian love explodes all previously held notions about the relationship between God and man. The incarnation is a singular, unrepeatable event – not merely unique but utterly unlike anything else in human history. The enactment of divine providence in the advent of Christ cannot be replicated or recycled but blows open history and human experience to new dimensions.

The revelation of the Immanuel elucidates the purpose behind all creation, culminating with the cross and resurrection. The four Evangelists assemble layers of eyewitness testimony, prophecies, and inspired accounts – all illuminated by the Holy Spirit – to reveal God-made flesh walking among us, laying down His life for His friends out of measureless compassion. It is not manuscript variants that should distract us but the core message shining through. The good news of great joy for all people is that God with us has conquered death, and through baptism, we die and rise with Him to new life. The Gospel is an ongoing invitation to share in and proclaim this revelation incarnated in Jesus and transmitted across space and time by the Holy Spirit who animates Christ's Body, the Church.

The notion of incarnation is also tied to the revelation of the divine commandments as lessons for living to unite ourselves with Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>. Those who keep the commandments love the Savior and remain in His love, just as He loved the Father and remained in the divine love (Jn 14:15, 21; 15:10). And according to Mark the Ascetic<sup>2</sup>, those who fulfil the commandments have the Lawgiver Himself dwelling within them. This reality led us to see the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5-7) as an act of assuming the Law, like the Sinai event, the renewal of the covenant in Canaan, or the enthronement of an Israelite king<sup>3</sup> – even though we generally receive Matthew's antitheses as a possible hermeneutical guide or practical guide to embodying the commandments. The Sermon on the Mount represents a new covenant between God and His people, with Jesus as the mediator of this new covenant – bringing the Law to its fullness through His teaching, just as He said He came not to abolish but to fulfil the Law and Prophets (Mt 5:17). His blessing of those who follow His commands (Mt 5:3-12) resembles God's blessings for obedience at Sinai and in the land of Canaan (Dt 28)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kornmissionsverlag, 1969), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Marcu Ascetul, "Despre legea duhovnicească," [On the spiritual law] in *Filocalia* [Philokalia], vol. 1, trans. by Dumitru Stăniloae (Sibiu: Institutul de Arte Grafice „Dacia Traiană” S.A., 1947), 247.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Cairns, *Word and Presence. A Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, in *International Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 165-7.

<sup>4</sup> William Loader, *Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 165.

## INTRODUCTION

Yet here, Jesus speaks with an authority surpassing that of Moses – the authority of the Son of David who has come to assume the throne of an everlasting Kingdom.

The antitheses of Matthew 5 unpack the deeper meaning behind selected prohibitions of the Decalogue, moving from outer obedience to internal transformation by the power of grace. For instance, anger damages relationships like murder; lustful intent corrupts like adultery. Avoiding the swelling pride of oath-taking pleases God more than legalistic casuistry. Non-retaliation breaks cycles of violence by absorbing disorder into order – refusing to multiply evil for evil by the transforming reckoning of love. This getting to the root of sin and virtue in the human heart – cleaving to the love of God and neighbour – represents the true following of Jesus. He assumes the seat of judgment over the Law itself – not contradicting but radicalising<sup>5</sup> it, commanding us to be perfect as our Heavenly Father by conformity to the mind and heart of Christ. Thus, the Sermon inaugurates a new exodus – liberation from slavery to sin into the glorious freedom of the children of God. The divine pedagogy accompanies us through the purifying wilderness, up the holy mountain, into the transcendent cloud of unknowing – where faith grasps Truth through the veil of words and symbols. Contemplation of the Lawgiver transforms law into grace and grace into glory. We die and rise in baptism into this paschal mystery of incarnation where our life becomes hidden with Christ in God. United to His passion, we walk the way of the cross through death to resurrection. His life becomes our life when we lose ourselves in love for God and others. This follows the path Jesus lays down in the Sermon on the Mount.

An issue of interest is the zone of Matthean antitheses, constructed according to the pattern “You have heard that it was said to those of old... But I say to you...” (Mt 5). Notably, some international scholarship voices a particular definition regarding the Gospel of Matthew, considering that it can also be received as a manual introducing the interpretation of the prophets. This perspective represents a principle or even a sum of hermeneutical principles governing an exegetical act. Thus, we can say the Old Testament scriptural text, taken and used in the New Testament, is used or developed in an area of predictability, to show how what was announced in the past is fulfilled or accomplished at that moment. In this way, the exact term or phrase is rendered which gives the possibility to understand what the meaning and content of the act of fulfilment is. For instance, when Jesus says, “You shall not murder, but I

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<sup>5</sup> See details in: Élian Cuvillier, “Torah observance and radicalization in the first Gospel: Matthew and first-century Judaism: a contribution to the debate,” *New Testament studies* 55.2 (2009): 144-159.

say to you not to be angry with your brother” or “You shall not commit adultery, but I say to you not to lust,” He radicalizes the commandments by exposing the inner roots of outward sins in the human heart. The prohibition against oaths has intensified into a general prohibition against any swearing since we cannot make one hair white or black. What emerges is a pattern of deepening, expanding, and universalizing the Law’s commandments by focusing on the inner dispositions and intentions that bear good or bad fruit in actions. Jesus even dares to command perfection as our Heavenly Father is perfect, setting the bar impossibly high. Fulfilment translates the letter into spirit.

This new Lawgiver and Messiah came not to annul but complete the Law and the Prophets, revealing their inner unity and network of meaning centred on love for God and neighbour. Jesus lives out the perfect obedience humanity owes to the divine Pedagogue. Through His teaching with authority, Jesus forms a community of disciples who can interpret and apply the prophetic legacy capably with wisdom. The antitheses offer a master class in prophetic exegesis – In showing how Scripture bears ever timely fruits of renewal through discerning its spiritual senses and judging human acts accordingly.

We can say that Matthew presents a handbook for prophetic interpretation and messianic expectation against the horizon of eschatological hopes. By quoting a phrase of the Law and juxtaposing His contrary or intensified directive, Jesus pulls back the veil on the prophecies to showcase their deeper fulfilment in Himself. What had been merely suggested, hoped for, or partially manifested in the past now comes to light fully. Christ emerges as the key that unlocks all obscurity and nooks of potential meaning in the Hebrew Bible. Through intertextual references, His presence illuminates formerly hidden dimensions of the prophecies. Divine pedagogy gradually gives way to divine humanity. Figures and types melt into the substance of Incarnate Truth. This exegetical routine models how to interpret all Scripture about Jesus, through whom prophecy achieves its ultimate end and meaning.

From these considerations, the prophetic component and its use in the Gospel of Matthew aims to highlight the extremely generous theme of the unity of Revelation, the unity of Scripture, and the incorporation of all, regardless of the chronological stage of their existence, into what is called “the history of salvation.” This theological concept is understood as the structure of the history or histories through which humanity and creation move towards the establishment of the Kingdom of the Lord. This happens through understanding the prophetic landmarks and manifestations carried out in history through persons and the mystical Body of Jesus Christ, through the prophetic dimension and manifestation of the Church.

## INTRODUCTION

The Evangelist Matthew connects many events in the life of Christ to direct fulfilment quotations from the prophets, especially Isaiah and the Psalms. The Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, cannot be rightly understood except about this crowning moment of history and revelation. At the same time, who Jesus is and what He accomplished only makes sense when comprehended against the rich background tapestry of salvation history found in what Christians call the Old Testament. Matthew also presents Jesus as the New Moses<sup>6</sup> – One who delivers a new law from the mountain, feeds the multitudes in the wilderness, and reconstitutes the 12 Tribes in His appointment of the 12 apostles. Christ is also depicted as a New Solomon who is “greater than the temple” and “greater than Jonah.” He upends expectations by praising Gentiles like the magi and centurion while critiquing the Jewish leadership. God's favour extends to all who align themselves with Jesus and his Kingdom proclamation. The prophetic dream of an age to come where all nations stream to Zion is now dawning.

The risen Lord's final words commission the apostles to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:18-19) in fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise that through his seed all tribes would gain blessing. The Church emerges as a new Israel, the eschatological heir to the prophecies of old. All those who put their faith in Israel's Messiah and obey His teachings participate in the fulfilment of a prophetic trajectory finding its telos in Jesus. Through preaching this Gospel of the Kingdom, the prophecies continue to be actualized in new ways across ages and cultures whenever hearts bow to the Lordship of the glorified Son of Man. The Scriptures ultimately tell one story – that of humanity's fall and God's redemptive plan to divinize us once again through the paschal mystery of the God-Man. Jesus Christ emerges as the central figure holding this narrative arc together. The prophets point ahead to Him, and the apostolic witness interprets life considering His death and resurrection. This narrative incorporates all creation into its sweep through the proliferation of His mystical Body across time. The prophetic Spirit blows where it wills to incorporate ever more souls into Christ.

The interaction between the Old Testament background and the Gospel of Matthew has been the subject of much scholarly research<sup>7</sup>, as confirmed by the

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<sup>6</sup> Corneliu Sârbu, “Iisus Hristos ca supremul profet,” [Jesus Christ as the supreme prophet] *Mitropolia Banatului* 1-3 (1974): 19. See also Ioan Chirilă, „Moses and Jesus – on the Completion of Prophetism,” in Martin Tamcke, Constantin Preda, Marian Vild, Daniel Mihoc (eds.), *Scripture's interpretation is more than making science, Festschrift in Honor of Fr. Prof. Vasile Mihoc*, in *Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 62 (Göttingen: Lit Verlag, 2020), 23-29.

<sup>7</sup> Some examples: Andries van Aarde, “The First Testament in the Gospel of Matthew,” *HTS Theologiese Studies* 53.1-2 (1997): 126-145; Richard Hays, “The Gospel of Matthew: Reconfigured Torah,” *HTS Theologiese Studies* 61.1-2 (2005); James E. Patrick, “Matthew's Peshet Gospel Structured Around Ten Messianic Citations of Isaiah,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 61.1 (2010): 43-81; Francois P. Viljoen, “The Torah in Matthew: Still valid, yet to be interpreted

substantial literature on this topic. Over time, sufficient arguments have been offered to support the idea that the Matthean text was conceived and edited for Jewish communities. One example in this regard is a text written by the prophet Hosea (11:1) which was used by the Evangelist to validate the fulfilment of a prophesied event, namely the return of the Child and His Mother from Egypt. Given the summarizing perspective that the Apostle Matthew utilizes, a much closer examination is warranted of how this text was received in the Gospel. Such an approach must first be grounded in a critical analysis of the passage in question – does Matthew quote from the book of the prophet Hosea or interpret the section concerning the call from Egypt? Most researchers believe the Hosea text is cited quite literally, leading us to support the idea that the Evangelist knew the Septuagint version and therefore used the expression in this way. At the same time, we can state that all Old Testament texts used in the New are subsumed under theological themes that the New Testament authors employ. Therefore, a strictly literal approach to this topic is insufficient. In this case, a theological interpretation is also required. The literal fulfilment quotation from Hosea casts Jesus' return from Egypt as the inversion of Israel's exodus. The divine Son succeeds where God's children failed. Bringing this passage from the prophet sheds light on the nature of Jesus' mission and identity where Israel reduced its calling to the status of mere nationhood. It also reinforces Matthew's consistent theme of Jesus emerging as the true and faithful Israel.

While a surface-level reading of Matthew may focus only on direct prediction-fulfilment proofs regarding Christ, the use of the Old Testament in the first Gospel functions at a deeper theological level as well. The Evangelist arranges his material to show Jesus as the pinnacle episode of salvation history while also subtly undermining certain Jewish interpretations of texts concerning election, Temple and ritual worship, outreach to Gentiles, and the ultimate reign of God triumphing over human rulers. Jesus as the divine Son inverts human expectations about power, validating spiritual seekers like the Magi and centurion over the scepticism of officialdom. Hosea speaks poetically of God calling His "son" out of Egypt about the Exodus generation liberated from slavery. By taking this prophetic verse and applying it literally to Jesus, Matthew universalizes Israel's history to show God delivering all peoples through this new Moses. Further, Jesus recapitulates the trials of Israel even as He proves more faithful and obedient unto death. The theological lens of the Evangelist detects traces of

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alternatively," *In die Skriflig/In luce verbi* 50.3 (2016): 2-10; Wolfgang Treitler, "Toledoth Yeshu: A Jewish Critique of the Gentile Christian Transformation of Jesus Christ," *Cultural and Religious Studies* 8.2 (2020): 109-138; Ebenezer Fai, "The Old Testament in Matthew's Gospel," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 26.31 (2022): 1-17; Steve Moyise, "The Use and Reception of the Prophets in the New Testament," *Religions* 13.4 (2022): 2-8.

## INTRODUCTION

the Christ event even in the intricate typologies of Israel's sacred story. This interpretative model invites disciples to search the ancient Scriptures for glimpses of their crucified and risen Lord.

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The Gospel of Matthew was the object of research of the members of the Society of Romanian Orthodox Biblical Scholars during two annual symposiums held in Romania at Lainici Monastery (Gorj county) in 2022<sup>8</sup> and at Nicula Monastery (Cluj county) in 2023. In this volume, we publish the papers presented this year, except for one paper from the previous year. To familiarise the reader with their content, we will summarise the main ideas of each paper:

The intersection of the Gospel of Matthew and the *peshar* interpretation, a method utilized by the Qumran community, has intrigued biblical scholars since the 1950s. **Cristinel Iatan's** study probes whether early Christians, particularly Matthew's Gospel author, employed analogous exegetical techniques. Stendahl, in his groundbreaking 1954 work, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*, focused on Matthew's "formula quotations", asserting they contained *peshar* material, suggesting a radical reinterpretation of Old Testament passages considering Jesus. Scholars like Richard Longenecker supported this perspective by drawing parallels between Matthew's usage and Qumran *pesharim* commentaries. However, objections from scholars like Joseph Fitzmyer and Norman Hillyer emerged. Fitzmyer underscored distinctions between Qumran *pesharim* and Matthew's scripture usage, while Hillyer questioned whether the "fulfilment formula" indicated a distinct hermeneutic. Ulrich Luz emphasized that Matthew proclaimed fulfilment, not hidden meanings like *pesharim*. To contextualize the debate, understanding the broader Jewish exegesis during the first century is vital. Literal interpretation (*peshat*), midrashic methods, allegorical approaches, and *peshar* interpretation were diverse techniques employed by Jewish scholars. Literal interpretation, prevalent in the New Testament period, was evident in the Mishnah's examples, such as

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<sup>8</sup> The papers presented at Lainici Monastery are the following: Ioan Chirilă, *The Assumption of the Torah, the Toledots and the Prophecies in the Gospel of Matthew – quotation or exegesis?*; Alexandru Mihăilă, *The old-testamentary quotations from the Gospel of Matthew. New perspectives*; Stelian Pașca-Tușa, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps 21:1 / Mt 27:46) – the unspoken words of Adam (the old one)*; Alexandru Moldovan, *Mt 28:16-20 - hermeneutical key to the Gospel of Matthew*; Hrisostom Ciuciu, *Zechariah 9:9 – Matthew 21:5: Typology between already and not yet*; Ioan Sorin Bora, *The place of the Gospel of Matthew in the canon of the New Testament*; Ion Reșceanu and Mihai Ciurea, *The Greek Tetraevangelion of Craiova: The Gospel of Matthew and the Biblical Text of the Manuscript*. Some of these have been published in the journal *Orthodox Theology in Dialogue* 8 (2022).

the Shema prayer's literal application. The term “*peshet*”, rooted in the Hebrew “*pashat*”, evolved, signifying “stripping” or “preparing for battle” in the Qumran War Scroll. Tannaitic writings associated *peshat* with direct interpretation. *Peshet* interpretation, observed in Qumran manuscripts, applied Old Testament scripture to contemporary situations without considering the original context. While scholars argue for parallels between *peshet* and Patristic exegesis, challenges arise in applying *peshet* ideas to the New Testament. The disconnect between Qumran *peshet* and Matthew's fulfilment formula raises questions about compatibility. In conclusion, the exploration of *peshet* interpretation in Matthew's Gospel adds complexity to biblical scholarship. Stendahl's intriguing assertion of a Matthean “school” employing *peshet* requires nuanced evaluation. The ongoing discourse emphasizes the perpetual quest for a deeper understanding of the intricate tapestry uniting the Old and New Testaments.

Archdeacon **Olimpiu-Nicolae Benea**'s study analyses Matthew 23:2-3, where Jesus tells his disciples that the scribes and Pharisees “sit on Moses' seat” but cautions them not to emulate the Pharisees' behaviour. The study covers the historical and cultural context of the Pharisees, what “Moses' seat” means, the exegetical challenges in interpreting this passage, and how this passage fits into Matthew's overall message about righteousness. The study outlines that Jesus' statement about the Pharisees sitting on Moses' seat likely acknowledges their social/religious authority to transmit the Torah. Yet Jesus still condemns their hypocrisy in not practising what they preach. The study surveys various interpretations, from John Chrysostom's view that Jesus establishes the Pharisees' authority to speak God's words but condemns their conduct, to Mark Allan Powell's view that Jesus simply recognizes the Pharisees' role in society to quote Moses even though they don't properly interpret or teach the Law. To further interpret Jesus' message, the study analyses a related passage from Matthew 5 where Jesus contrasts true righteousness with Pharisaic righteousness. The study shows how Pharisaic righteousness stems from misinterpreting Scripture, using the example of lax divorce laws. Jesus clarifies God's standards and calls his followers to greater righteousness not just outwardly but in their hearts, attitudes, and motivations too. While acknowledging the Pharisees' social position, Jesus unequivocally condemns their hypocrisy and faulty righteousness stemming from misapplying Scripture. His disciples must obey the Word of God but not emulate the corrupt religious leaders of the day. This passage encapsulates a core aspect of Matthew's Gospel contrasting shallow external religion with the deeper righteousness and integrity God requires.

Reverend **Ion-Sorin Bora**'s study analyses the attitudinal complex between pagans, tax collectors, and Jews in Matthew's Gospel, arguing it reflects tensions in the early Jewish Christian community before Gentile inclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

Matthew frequently associates tax collectors with pagans/Gentiles as groups religious Jews scorned. The study contends the injunction in Matthew 18:15-17 to treat an unrepentant sinner “as a pagan and tax collector” only makes sense in a solely Jewish church context before the Jerusalem Council welcomed Gentiles. The study details the social separation and contempt religious Jews held towards pagans/Gentiles and Jewish tax collectors. It centres on how association with either group, especially through meals, threatened Jewish identity and purity. Yet Matthew shows Jesus reaching out to and eating with such outsiders, scandalizing other Jews. The study also explores positive examples of pagans in Matthew whose great faith Jesus praises, though the text still does not depict them as fully included with Jews. In examining the tax collectors Matthew and Zacchaeus, the study notes different types of tax collectors, showing some were scorned more than others for serving Roman interests over Jewish ones. It highlights the tension Jesus eating with such collaborators caused. The study sees Matthew 18:15-17’s severe judgment of treating unrepentant sinners “as pagans and tax collectors” as only sensible in an early Jewish Christian context where such distinctions mattered, not later with Gentile inclusion. The summary statement at the end clarifies that while Matthew anticipates pagan salvation, his attitude contrasting lost Jewish brethren with pagans/tax collectors reflects early communal tensions rather than later Gentile-inclusive churches. Overall, the study utilizes a close reading of Matthew’s terminology for pagans and tax collectors to argue that his gospel originated from a solely Jewish church perspective wrestling with purity and identity concerns, evidencing an early, pre-Jerusalem Council date before 70 AD.

In his article, Rev. **Georgel Rednic** delves into the criteria for judgment outlined in the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30) and the Parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) in the Gospel of Matthew. The study aims to determine whether these parables refer to the judgment criteria for Christians and non-Christians, respectively. This study explores the eschatological and judgment context in Scripture, emphasizing the complexity of apocalyptic eschatology in Matthew’s Gospel. The author contends that the Last Judgment and the Second Coming are central themes in Matthean eschatology. The Parable of the Talents is presented as describing the judgment criteria for Christians, focusing on how they use God-given gifts and abilities to serve others. In contrast, the Last Judgment passage is argued to pertain to non-Christians, with key Greek words like “ethnos” (nation) and “adelphos” (brother) analysed to support this interpretation. The study addresses exegetical challenges, particularly in interpreting the Last Judgment parable. The author considers whether the judgment involves “unconscious Christians” or “anonymous Christians” but rejects these interpretations. Instead, the article proposes that non-Christians



are judged based on their acts of mercy towards Christ's disciples. Rev. Rednic concludes that, according to Matthew 25:31-46, non-Christians will be judged based on their love for those who confess Christ. Meanwhile, Christians are judged earlier, as implied in the Parable of the Talents, with their criterion being the use of the gifts received in the service of loving their neighbours. In summary, the article offers a nuanced interpretation of the Last Judgment criteria in Matthew's Gospel, distinguishing between the judgment of Christians and non-Christians based on their respective acts of love and service.

Rev. **Hrisostom Ciuciu**'s paper examines the interpretation of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31-46 about serving "the least" (*ἐλάχιστος*) – a passage that poses exegetical challenges. The central question is: Who are "the least"? Modern scholarship offers two main views: the "universalist" perspective which sees this as referring to all people in need, or the "specific" view which sees it as referring to Christians/missionaries. Each has limitations. The author argues to bring these together – embracing the universalist view yet from the spiritual perspective of the Church. A key issue is determining who is being judged in the passage. The text refers to "all nations" (*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*) – suggesting specifically Gentiles/non-Christians. Yet most interpret this as humanity universally. The author suggests the tension lies between exegesis and hermeneutics. Regarding the possible identity of "the least," Jesus uses related language in Matthew 10:40 about receiving His disciples. Yet here in chapter 25, while humility remains key, the scope may be broader. Considering Matthew's gospel, we see a trajectory from Jesus sending the disciples only to Israel, towards discipling all nations in 28:19. This development supports a universalist perspective. In the end, no purely literary analysis can definitively resolve the question. But emphasizing Church tradition, St. Chrysostom and Origen apply it to care for Christians and catechumens yet see Christ in all people. The author proposes harmonizing these views – "the least" are all dependents, for whom we bear responsibility. This accords with the inverted pyramid image of St. Sophrony, with Christ at the base bearing all things. Thus, rather than identifying the least, the focus becomes our call to be "least." In conclusion, a solely ethical interpretation falls short. our goal is Christlikeness and deification. Reading this text challenges, us to humble ourselves to the place of being "least." Though precise exegetical identification may not be possible, the call to serve all those depending on us resounds clearly.

Archdeacon **Alexandru Mihăilă**'s study examines the resurrection account in Matthew 27:51-54, where saints are raised from the dead after Jesus' death. It explores how this resurrection fits with the wider context of resurrection beliefs in early Judaism and Christianity. His study reviews interpretations by Church Fathers like Origen, Jerome, and Chrysostom. Some

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saw it as a one-time sign confirming Jesus' power over death. Others connected it to Christ's descent to Hades to preach to the dead. It outlines Jewish views on the resurrection. Pharisees believed in a future resurrection and judgment. Sadducees rejected this. Essenes saw the soul as immortal but rewarded or punished after death. Daniel 12 speaks of a future resurrection to rewards or contempt. The study contrasts the original Jewish idea of bodily resurrection with the later Christian spiritualized notion tied to Greek philosophy. But the Gospels preserve the idea of bodily resurrection, including in John 20. Finally, this paper proposes reconciling the tension between this Matthean resurrection and later Christian teaching. It suggests Matthew may preserve an early tradition of Messiah's victory over death. This gets reinterpreted in two stages – first Jesus' death then his resurrection. So, the saints' resurrection inaugurates the general resurrection now expected at the Parousia. This fits the early expectation of Jesus' imminent return. In summary, the study explores how Matthew's unique resurrection account relates to wider Jewish and early Christian ideas, proposing it shows the development of resurrection beliefs about Jesus as Messiah.

Rev. **Alexandru Moldovan's** analysis of Matthew 28:16-20 serves as a hermeneutical key to understanding the entire Gospel of Matthew. This pericope, considered a "key pericope" by many exegetes, holds theological significance as it concludes the Gospel and comprises Jesus' last words to the disciples. The study emphasizes the narrative and speech elements in verses 16-20, highlighting the disciples' encounter with the risen Jesus in Galilee and the commissioning to evangelize all nations. The choice of Galilee as the setting symbolizes openness to the Gentiles, fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. The mountain location signifies an encounter with God, mirroring key moments in Jesus' ministry. The disciples' worship and doubt illustrate imperfect faith, inviting readers to mature in their beliefs. Jesus asserts absolute cosmic authority from God as the basis for commissioning the disciples to a universal mission, correcting earlier limitations to Israel. The analysis delves into the disciples' actions and attitudes, underscoring their initial doubt and the subsequent promise of Jesus' perpetual presence. The text unfolds programmatically, presenting a model of mission that directs the Church's focus outward to the Kingdom of Heaven and humanity, rather than internal administrative concerns. The study emphasizes discipleship as the model and content of evangelization, with the eleven defined primarily by their status as disciples. Matthew portrays the Church as the "family of God", emphasizing divine sonship and ethical responsibility. The higher righteousness advocated by Jesus involves unity between confession and action, aligning with God's will. The missionary mandate to teach and baptize all nations corrects previous limitations, highlighting the universal dimension of the Christian mission. The study concludes with the assurance of Jesus' active presence in the

Church until the end of the age, inviting readers to seek and discover the Lord amid the challenges and uncertainties of their faith. In conclusion, the author's analysis of Matthew 28:16-20 provides a comprehensive hermeneutical perspective, elucidating the theological, contextual, and programmatic aspects of this key pericope in the Gospel of Matthew.

Rev. **Mihai Ciurea**'s article provides a detailed analysis of the Epistle of James, examining its intertextual connections to the Gospels, especially Matthew and Luke. It argues that while no explicit quotes are present, there are significant thematic and verbal echoes indicating James' familiarity with Jesus' teachings preserved in those Gospels. The analysis progresses section by section through James, highlighting parallels in ethical exhortations, wisdom themes, perspectives on wealth/poverty, the use of "woes", and other motifs. Examples include James 1:12's beatitude resembling Matthew 5:10-12; James 1:17's teaching on good gifts reflecting Matthew 7:11; and James 2:13's link between mercy and judgment echoing Matthew's Last Judgment scene. Clear parallels are also observed between the Beatitudes in Matthew/Luke and blessings/woes in James – particularly regarding the poor, the mournful, the hungry for righteousness, and the reviled/persecuted. While not exact quotations, keywords and ideas resonate across these texts. James appears to creatively interpret these teachings to address the context of suffering Christians. While a few potential Lukan echoes are noted (e.g. Jas 5:17 and Lk 4:25 on droughts), Matthew remains the dominant gospel influence. This includes the extended form of the Great Commandment in James 2, resembling Matthew more than Mark/Luke. It also includes verbal links between James 4-5 and Matthew 6 on wealth, storing up treasures, and the ephemerality of earthly comforts. In conclusion, while certainty is impossible, the cumulative case suggests James' familiarity with a set of blessings/woes akin to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. He adapts them to provide moral exhortation to Christians facing trials and injustice. This shows the diversity of gospel interpretation in early Christianity as different authors emphasized different applications. But through it all, Jesus' radical ethical teachings endured as a unifying reference point.

Saint Nicodemus of Tismana's Tetraevangelion, crafted in 1405, stands as the oldest preserved biblical manuscript originating from the territory of modern-day Romania. In this study, Rev. **Ion Reșceanu** delves into the objectives guiding Saint Nicodemus in creating this Tetraevangelion and seeks to comprehend its uniqueness among Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts. The investigation focuses on the manuscript's relationship with Bulgarian and Serbian counterparts from the late 14th to early 15th century. The study emphasizes three main objectives guiding Saint Nicodemus. First, it addresses

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the need to provide the Tismana Monastery with an updated Tetraevangelion that caters to contemporary liturgical requirements. The choice of Vodița Monastery as the probable place of composition is explored, influenced by the historical context and the political dynamics between Hungary and Wallachia. Second, Saint Nicodemus endeavours to update the biblical text linguistically, incorporating Greek elements into the Slavonic manuscript. This “Greekization” reflects Saint Nicodemus’ dual cultural background and Greek heritage. The study posits that he may have drawn from a Greek Tetraevangelion, such as the Codex Craiovensis, to accomplish this linguistic transformation. The third objective revolves around the modernization of the liturgical apparatus, aligning it with the ecclesial context of Romania and the specific needs of Tismana Monastery. Notably, the placement of the liturgical apparatus at the beginning, departure from traditional structures, and omission of certain elements signify Saint Nicodemus’ distinctive approach. Concerning the relationship with Bulgarian manuscripts, the study explores Saint Nicodemus’ connection to the Vidin region, where he founded monasteries. The cultural and ecclesiastical influences of Vidin, particularly its mixed spelling combining Bulgarian and Serbian norms, are considered in light of Saint Nicodemus’ potential exposure during his stay. The study also examines the Serbian influence on Saint Nicodemus’ Tetraevangelion, with a focus on the similarities and differences in the script, language, and liturgical apparatus. While Saint Nicodemus adopts a script reminiscent of the Rașca School, distinct features in the liturgical apparatus align with evolving trends in the early 15th century. In conclusion, Saint Nicodemus’ Tetraevangelion signifies a pivotal transition in Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts, bridging the late 14th and early 15th centuries. It reflects the multifaceted objectives of updating liturgical practices, linguistic adaptation, and preserving ecclesial culture in response to contemporary challenges, contributing to the rich tapestry of Eastern Orthodox manuscript tradition.



## The Gospel of Matthew and the *Pesher* Interpretation

Cristinel IATAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** This study explores the *pesher* interpretation, a method of biblical exegesis used by the Qumran community, and whether early Christians like the author of Matthew's Gospel employed similar techniques. Since the 1950s, scholars have analysed the so-called "formula quotations" in Matthew, finding parallels with the *pesharim* commentaries found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Krister Stendahl argued Matthew comes from a "school" using *pesher* to radically reinterpret Old Testament passages as fulfilled in Jesus. Others like Richard Longenecker also find Matthew employing this Second Temple Jewish method, especially in texts with "fulfilment formulae". However, objections have been raised. Joseph Fitzmyer notes the differences between Qumran *pesharim* and Matthew's use of scripture. Norman Hillyer wonders if the fulfilment formula indicates a distinct hermeneutic, not *pesher*. Ulrich Luz stresses Matthew proclaims fulfilment, not hidden meanings like *pesharim*. In conclusion, applying the ideas of *pesher* from Qumran to the New Testament raises problems. Similarities between *pesher* and Patristic exegesis are noted, but determining dependence requires examining the original historical meaning versus the contemporary application of prophecies. More analysis of whether early Christian use of scripture mirrors Qumran *pesher* or develops its fulfilment hermeneutic is needed.

**Keywords:** *pesher*, fulfilment, formula quotations, Midrash, exegesis, Qumran, Eschatology, Second Temple, Matthew's Gospel, hermeneutics

Since the 1950s, but especially since the discovery of the Qumran manuscripts, Western biblical scholars have been engaged in a new approach to the study of quotations and allusions from the Gospel of Matthew and the

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Pauline literature, namely the *peshet* interpretation. It seems that the *pesharim* genre was directly applied as an exegetical tool to several parts of the New Testament. One of the pioneers of this approach is Krister Stendahl, who in 1954 published *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* and discusses the so-called “formula quotations” (from the German *Reflexionszitate*) of about twenty Old Testament quotations from the Gospel of Matthew. What they have in common is the introductory formula “that it may be fulfilled...”. Stendahl argued that these quotations contain *peshet* material that was intended for the teaching and theology of the early Christian community<sup>1</sup>. To understand this method of interpretation and whether or how it was applied to passages in Matthew’s Gospel, we need to see what other Jewish methods of interpretation were used in the New Testament period.

Jewish exegesis of the first century can be roughly divided into four categories: literal (*peshat*), *midrashic*, allegorical and *peshet* interpretation<sup>2</sup>.

### **Literal interpretation (*peshat*)**

This is the one most familiar to modern exegetes of Scripture. It involves explaining the biblical text straightforwardly so that the text’s clear, simple and natural meaning is applied to the community’s situation. However, this often leads to inflexible, “wooden” interpretations. This method is frequently used when the authors of the New Testament refer to the Old Testament law, in which the commandments of the Law are interpreted literally<sup>3</sup>. Rabbinic literature contains several examples in which Scripture is understood directly, resulting in the clear, simple and natural meaning of the text being applied to people’s lives – particularly in the application of the Deuteronomic law. Often the interpretation is even quite literal.

For example, regarding the recitation of the Shema prayer, the teaching of the School of Shammai states that “when it is recited in the evening, all should stand bent to one side, and in the morning they should rise, for it is written,

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<sup>1</sup> Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*, coll. *Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis*, vol. 20 (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1954), 195-6 (I only had limited access to his work); Robert Horton Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew’s Gospel with Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 21999), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Lunde, “An Introduction to Central Questions in the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde (eds.), *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, coll. *Zondervan Counterpoints Collection* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 25.

«when you lie down and when you wake up» (Deut. 6:7) (commentary on the text in 6:6, «and let these words (those of the Shema), which I command you today, shall be in your heart, and you shall repeat them to your sons, and speak them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you're awake»). In contrast, the school of Hillel contradicts this view and says that „everyone may recite it in his way, for it is written: «and when you go by the way» (Deut. 6:7)” (*Mishnah, Berakhot* 1:3). The Hillelian interpretation seems closer to the truth in this case, but even here it still relies on an almost rigid use of the biblical text as the school of Shammai.

Another example that shows us how to apply literal interpretation (hyperliteralism) is the passage about dealing with a stubborn and rebellious son in Deut. 21:18-20: “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father and mother, and if they rebuke him, then his father and mother shall take him, and bring him out to the elders of his city to the gate of that place, and he shall say to the elders of his city: «This son of ours is obstinate and rebellious, he does not obey our voice, he is godless and drunk». The *Mishnah* interprets this as follows: «If one of his parents was lame, dumb, blind or deaf, their son will not become obstinate and rebellious, for it is written: «Let his father and mother take him» – so they were not lame (in the hand); «and bring him out» – so they were not lame; „and tell them» – so they were not dumb; «this son of ours” – so they were not blind; «they do not listen to our voice» – so they were not deaf” (*Sanhedrin* 8:4).

From the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards, the Hebrew word *peshet* was bound to literal interpretation, as opposed to more sophisticated interpretations. The word comes from the verb פָּשַׁט, *pashat*, which in the Old Testament means “to strip (a garment)” (Lev. 6:4) or “to pounce” (Judg. 9:33). In the intertestamental period, namely in the War Scroll from Qumran, it is used with its biblical meaning of “stripping” the slain (*1QM* 7:2) and “to prepare for battle” (*1QM* 8:6). In Mishnaic Hebrew it meant “to stretch, to extend, to clarify, to explain” (*Mishnah, Shabbat* 1:1, *Exodus Rabbah* 47:5) and was used as a synonym for the verb דָּרַשׁ, *darash*, “to interpret”, being associated with the Aramaic language.

In the Tannaitic writings (10-220 AD), *peshat* sometimes denotes a direct and natural interpretation of Scripture, although this is not always the case (e.g., the interpretation of Deut. 13:6 in the *Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin* 80b).

“If your brother, your mother’s son, or your son, or your daughter, or the woman of your bosom, or your friend, who is like your soul, secretly incites you (to serve other idols).”

Gemarah points out that a man cannot be alone with two women lest he sin with them, but a woman can be alone with two men.



“Where does it follow that it is forbidden for a man to isolate himself with women? Rabbi Yohanan says in the name of Rabbi Yishmael: Where does the allusion in the written Torah to the prohibition of isolating oneself come from? Because this is what it says about someone who incites others to worship idols: «If your brother, your mother's son... incites you secretly» (Deut. 13:7)”

Even when literal interpretations are offered, it does not always mean that they are *peshat* interpretations<sup>4</sup>.

### **Midrashic interpretation**

Another method of interpretation from the Second Temple period is *midrashic* interpretation, which involves a much more in-depth attempt to explain the meaning of a text. Midrash was a fundamental concept in rabbinic exegesis and in the Pharisaic exegesis of the New Testament period<sup>5</sup>. The word comes from the verb  $\Psi\text{ר}\text{ך}$ , *darash*, „to have recourse to, to search” (Deut. 22:2, Job 3:4), and figuratively, “to read repeatedly”, “to study”, “to interpret” (*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 1:5) and strictly speaking denotes an interpretative exposition of the text, regardless of how it is arrived at and what type of text is being considered (*haggadah* or *halakhah*).

From the time of the Tannaim until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, *midrashic* interpretation was confused with literal interpretation. From the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards, in the Babylonian Talmud, *midrashic* exegesis began to be definitively distinguished from literal exegesis. According to S. Horovitz, it refers to the interpretation that goes beyond the simple literal meaning, and attempts to penetrate the spirit of Scripture, to examine the text from all sides and, thus arrive at meanings that are not immediately obvious<sup>6</sup>. To do this, interpreters follow pre-agreed rules of interpretation, or *middot*, which range from obvious principles to those that allow for more novel interpretations. The basic motto of the midrash is „what is relevant here”, i.e., what is written in the Holy Scriptures is relevant to our current situation<sup>7</sup>.

The Talmud credits the great Hillel, who lived at the time of the New Testament, with establishing the seven basic rules (*middot*) of Jewish biblical exegesis, which are also believed to have been used by the authors of the New Testament:

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<sup>4</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 15-8.

<sup>5</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> S. Horovitz, “Midrash”, in Isidore Singer (ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. 8 (New York-London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-1906), 548.

<sup>7</sup> Lunde, “An Introduction”, 26.

1) *Qal wa-homer* (קַל וְחֹמֶר): i.e., “light and heavy”. According to this rule, what is true or applicable in a “light” (or less important) case is certainly true or applicable in a “heavier” (or more important) case.

“Look at the birds of the sky, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into litters, and your heavenly Father feeds them (lightly). Are you not far more than they? (hard)” (Matt. 6:26//Luke 12:24)

2) *Gezerah shawah* (גְּזֵרָה שְׂוָה), i.e., “similar category”. According to this rule, one verse/passage can be explained by another if similar words or expressions occur in both (verbal analogy). Christ justifies his apparent violation of the Sabbath by comparing himself to David, who once broke the Law by eating holy bread (1 Sam. 21:6).

“And Jesus answered them: Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those who were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the High Priest, and ate the shewbread, which only the priests were to eat, and gave it to those who were with him? And he said to them: The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man also is Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:23-28).

3) *Binyan ’av mikkathuv ’ekhad* (בְּנִיּוֹן אֶב מִכְּתוּב אֶחָד), i.e., “building a main rule/family (*av*) from a single passage”. If the same phrase occurs in more than one passage, then the idea found in one passage can be applied to all other passages that share the same phrase.

“I am the God of Abraham... This is my name forever; this is my memorial from generation to generation” (Exod. 3:14-15), implies that Abraham will be raised up by the God of the living!

4) *Binyan ’av misene kethuvim* (בְּנִיּוֹן אֶב מִשְׁנֵי כְּתוּבִים), i.e., „building a main rule/family (*av*) from two passages”. If a rule is formulated by joining two texts together, then it can be applied to other passages, or a principle can be applied to other passages if it has been formulated by joining two texts together.

From “thou shalt not bind the mouth of the threshing ox” (Deut. 25:4) and Deut. 18:1-8, where it says that priests may feed on the Lord’s sacrifices, it follows that “the labourer (preacher) is worthy of his food” (Matt. 10:10; cf. 1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18). Preachers and priests are compared to oxen that must feed on the fruit of the field.

5) *Kelal uferat uferat ukhelal* (כֶּלֶל וּפְרָט וּפְרָט וּכְלָל), i.e., “general and particular, particular and general”. A general rule can be restricted by a particularization in another verse, or conversely, a particular rule can be extended to a general principle. Thus, a rule can be restricted or expanded if it has been restricted or expanded in another verse.

Christ says that the greatest commandment (“expanded rule”) is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 6:4-5) and “your neighbour as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). This is how he summarizes all the “special” commandments (Mark 12:28-34).

6) *Kayote bo mimaqom 'akher* (כַּיּוֹטֶה בּוֹ מִמַּאֲקוֹם אַחֵר), i.e., “as it appears in another (similar) place”. Difficulties in a text can be solved by comparing it with another text that is similar in general, not necessarily in the words.

If the Son of Man/Messiah sits on one of the thrones set before “the Ancient of Days” (Dan. 7) and in another passage it is said that He sits at the right hand of God (Ps. 109:1, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies sit at Your feet”), then it can be concluded that when the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven (Dan. 7:13-14), He will sit at the right hand of God and judge His enemies. The meaning is evident from what Christ implied in his answer to Caiaphas (Mark 14:62, “And Jesus said: I am and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven”).

7). *Davar hallamed me'inyano* (דְּבַר הַלְּמֵד מֵעֵינָיו), i.e., “teaching word from the context/meaning given by the context”. This rule is exemplified by Christ’s teaching on divorce (Matt. 19:4-8).

“Answering, He said: Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning created them male and female (Gen. 1:27)? And he said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Gen. 2:4). So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. So, what God has joined together, let not man separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses’ command to give her a book of separation and to leave her? (Deut. 24:1-4). He said to them: Because of the hardening of your hearts Moses permitted you to leave your wives, but from the beginning it was not so”.

While it is true that Moses permitted divorce (Deut. 24:1-4), it is equally true that God never intended for the covenant of marriage to be broken (Gen. 1:27 and 2:4).

Some of these rules are common sense, while others have the possibility of deviating from the author’s intended meaning. From this *middot*, the exegetical characteristics of Pharisaic Judaism become clear<sup>8</sup>.

### **Allegorical interpretation**

The allegorical interpretation attempts to recognize a symbolic meaning in the text. It assumes that the obvious meaning of the text conceals a deeper and more complex meaning. The literal, historical meaning of the text is not denied, it is simply not important. In the New Testament, perhaps the most allegorical text is Gal. 4:21-31, in which St. Paul compares Hagar to Mount Sinai and the slavery of the law, which characterizes the Jews in the earthly Jerusalem, and

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<sup>8</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 20-1; Lunde, “An Introduction”, 27.

Sarah to the people of the promise, who belong to the heavenly Jerusalem. The apostle Paul does not seem to be dealing with historical reality here, apart from its ephemeral existence, but seems to be using them symbolically<sup>9</sup>.

The most important allegorist of the first century was Philo of Alexandria, whose commentaries on Scripture were written during the lifetime of Christ and in the early days of the early Christian Church. Although he was a Jew, he was a follower of Stoic and Platonic ideas, and although he was a harsh critic of the content of these philosophies, he consciously or unconsciously used their philosophical categories to represent what he believed to be the truth of the Torah.

Philo's attitude towards allegorical and literal exegesis is evident in several passages in his writings. He completely rejects any literal interpretation that speaks of a divine anthropomorphism and insists, for example, that Num. 23:19 clearly states that "God is not man" (*οὐχ ὡς ἄνθρωπος ὁ θεός*). In doing so, he attempts to protect the transcendence of God from anthropomorphism which, in his view, would inevitably arise in a literal treatment of anthropomorphisms. He also interpreted allegorically anything that might compromise the sanctity of God's inspired words: anything that seems absurd in the creation narratives, anything that is condemnable in legalistic texts, or anything trivial in the historical accounts of the Pentateuch. He also believed that the Old Testament is full of symbols given by God for the spiritual and moral growth of man and that it must be understood in a sense other than a literal and historical one. The *prima facie*/literal meaning must be set aside, even found offensive, to make room for the intended, hidden, spiritual meaning<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Pesher* interpretation**

The last type of interpretation, which is not necessarily in chronological order and is particularly evident in the writings discovered on the western shore of the Dead Sea, is the *pesher* interpretation. The term פִּשְׁרָא, *pesher*, is *hapax legomenon* in the Old Testament Scriptures, as it only appears in Eccles. 8:1, "who is like the wise and who knows the interpretation (*pesher*) of things (lit. word)?" *Pesher* is a borrowing word from Aramaic, which in turn derives it from the Akkadian *pišru*, "interpretation, hidden meaning"<sup>11</sup>, which is used there primarily in magical-astrological contexts. *Pesher* would therefore also have a hue of hidden, secret interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> Lunde, "An Introduction", 29.

<sup>10</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 30-1.

<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Biggs et al. (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vol. 12 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2005), 429.

So-called commentaries of the Qumran community are usually introduced with the word *peshar*. The Essenes considered themselves to be the last chosen community of this age, living on the threshold of the eschatological era. Therefore, all their zeal was directed towards preparing for the coming age. This led the entire community to attribute to themselves the fulfilment of several messianic prophecies that they believed related to their present situation and condition. They also believed that they were reliving in another age the experiences of their ancestors from the days of Moses and that although those prophecies, had probably been fulfilled in the past, they were being fulfilled or re-fulfilled accordingly in their own time. Moreover, some of the prophecies said that they referred exclusively to them, for the eschatological meaning hidden in the prophetic words was explained by the Teacher of Righteousness and even applied himself to him. In this sense, the Essenes follow the two-stage model of divine revelation, which is also illustrated by the book of Daniel, in which the dream revelation given to one community (in the past) is explained and understood through the interpretation given to another community (in the future):

“And God told Habakkuk to write down what should happen to the last generation, but He did not let him know the end of the world. And as for what it says: “That he who reads it may run (ebr. *qore*) with it” (Hab. 2:2). The interpretation (פְּשָׁרוֹ עַל, *pišro ‘al*) refers to the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God revealed all the secrets of the words of his servants, the prophets” (1QpHab 7:1).

In this context, Habakkuk speaks of a vision, i.e., a prophecy, with the content of which the one who reads it must run to proclaim it (see also Jer. 23:21, “I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied”).

According to the Essenes, the herald (ebr. *qore*) in Habakkuk’s prophecy was the Teacher of Righteousness, and not someone else in history, and they regarded such passages as referring exclusively to them! These passages are introduced with the formula *pišro ‘al*, which could be translated as “the interpretation of this text is..., this refers to..., this text means that...”.

The *peshar* starts from a contemporary event or person and traces it through history until it discovers it hidden in the Old Testament prophecies. Therefore, the full meaning of the text can only be understood in a revelatory context when prophecy and interpretation are seen together.

William H. Brownlee, one of the pioneers who researched the interpretative methods of Qumran, summarized their hermeneutical principles in 13 points – *pesharim*, or what he understood to be their principles of interpretation:

1). Everything a prophet wrote in antiquity has a veiled, eschatological meaning (which he calls “fulfilled eschatology”).

2). Since the prophet wrote in a codified form, the meaning of the prophecy must often be determined by a forced or different construction of the biblical text, such as *1QpHab*, which contains more than 50 different significant words, most of which also differ from the LXX or Targums.

3). The meaning conveyed by the prophet can be discovered by studying textual or orthographic peculiarities in the received text. The interpretation is therefore often based on readings of the quoted text.

4). A textual variant, i.e., a different reading from the one quoted, can also contribute to the interpretation.

5). The application of a Bible verse can be determined by an analogous circumstance or by

6). Allegorical adaptation.

7) The *sensus plenior* of the prophet’s words includes several meanings.

8). In some cases, the prophet has hidden the meaning of his words so much that it can only be understood by applying an equation of synonyms, attaching to the original word a secondary meaning of one of its synonyms.

9). Sometimes the prophet has hidden his message by writing one word in place of another, and the interpreter can recover the meaning of the prophecy by rearranging the letters of a word (equivalent to the biblical *atbash*, Jer. 25:26, 51:1) or by

10). Replacing one or more letters in the word of the biblical text with similar letters.

11). Sometimes the meaning of a prophecy can be restored by dividing a word into two or more parts and commenting on them.

12). Sometimes the prophet has hidden his original message in abbreviations so that the cryptic meaning of a word must be inferred by interpreting words or parts of words as abbreviations.

13). Other passages of Scripture can shed light on the meaning of the prophecy<sup>12</sup>.

These conclusions are like what we find in rabbinic exegesis, the *midrash*. For this reason, many scholars have labelled the major interpretive convention of the Qumran commentaries the *midrash pesher* and consider it comparable to the *midrash halakhah* and the *midrash haggadah*, from which it differs only in literary form and content<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> William H. Brownlee, “Biblical Interpretation Among the Sectaries of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 14 (1951): 60-2.

<sup>13</sup> Brownlee, “Biblical Interpretation,” 76.

## **Did the authors of the New Testament use these exegetical methods in their writings?**

This question has triggered numerous discussions for and against. Among those who emphatically answer this question in the affirmative is Richard Longenecker, who is quoted in this article. He argues that both Christ and the authors of the New Testament naturally and unconsciously appropriated the Old Testament in a way that emphasizes these methods. Furthermore, he believes that the *peshet* is the primary method by which the New Testament authors appropriated the Old Testament text. Any tensions that arise regarding the preservation of the meanings intended by the Old Testament authors must be resolved by recognizing the freedom that the Jews of that time had in interpreting Scripture<sup>14</sup>.

Other scholars agree that the New Testament authors used these methods, but in a way that distanced them from the approaches used in Second Temple literature. Conversely, some who are concerned about the implications of recognizing these methods seek to deny them altogether. What influences the positions of these groups are their assumptions about what the use of these methods means. This is easy to prove if by *peshet* we mean any direct application of an Old Testament text to a particular New Testament situation based on a revelatory statement<sup>15</sup>. They do not believe that the authors of the New Testament use the exegetical methods of Qumran to bring out the hidden eschatological meaning of the text (Gärtner, Marshall, Lindars)<sup>16</sup>.

## **Stendahl and the Matthean school of interpretation**

Krister Stendahl, a former Swedish New Testament scholar, received his doctorate from the University of Uppsala in 1954 and subsequently became professor and dean of Harvard Divinity School, then Bishop of Stockholm. In his doctoral dissertation, later published under the title *The School of St. Matthew*, Stendahl sought to explore the creative "Sitz im Leben" milieu of Matthew's Gospel, to discover the school of thought that wrote it and used it as a kind of manual for "study and instruction" in his Church. Stendahl cites the work of earlier scholars who claimed that the evangelist Matthew, a former rabbi who later became a Christian teacher, founded a school equivalent to that of the rabbis.

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<sup>14</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 28-78.

<sup>15</sup> Lunde, „An Introduction,” 31.

<sup>16</sup> Bertil Gärtner, "The Habakkuk commentary (DSH) and the Gospel of Matthew," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 8/1 (1954): 23; Lunde, "An Introduction," 31.

This school wrote the Gospel of Matthew, which was a theological textbook<sup>17</sup>. Stendahl also believes that the discoveries at Qumran reveal an alternative form of Jewish education and compares it to the so-called Matthean school, which used a type of interpretation like the exegetical method called *midrash pesher* found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. According to him, the *pesher* interpretation was a particularly imaginative type of exegesis that radically reinterpreted passages of Scripture by recontextualizing them and then applying them to the situation of the community at his time. This reinterpretation was seen as the esoteric or secret meaning of the text. Could the early Christian community have reinterpreted the same Old Testament texts as if they had been fulfilled in the person of Christ? If so, did they do so in a systematic way? The thesis of Stendahl's work is that the Gospel of Matthew is just that, a theological textbook and the literary creation of a school of interpretation, a school for future teachers and leaders of the Church<sup>18</sup>. To prove this, Stendahl attempts to show the close connection between the type of Old Testament interpretation found in a particular group of quotations from Matthew and the way the Qumran group treats the book of Habakkuk. So, as he analyses each quotation, he shows how he thinks Matthew, or his school exemplifies this interpretation<sup>19</sup>.

A foundational text that Stendahl thoroughly researches and analyses is Mic. 5:1, quoted in Matt. 2:6: "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means the least among the princes of Judah, for out of you will come forth the Ruler who will shepherd my people Israel".

He notes that the Qumran text differs significantly from the Hebrew version of the MT and the Greek version of LXX. Compared to the LXX, Matthew shares only six words<sup>20</sup>. This "manipulation" by Matthew is a *pesher*, basically an eisegesis that freely intervenes in the text to be interpreted, even beyond what could be a gloss or paraphrase, if it corresponds to the meaning that the interpreter means. So, if the Gospel of Matthew departs from the biblical text of the Old Testament in this as well as in other quotations to support the claim that Christ is the Messiah, we have strong evidence that the Matthean school used an interpretation like the midrash of the Qumran community<sup>21</sup>. This exegesis applies it first to several groups of Matthean quotations, some of which Matthew inherits from Mark, then to Matthew's quotations that contain the fulfilment

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<sup>17</sup> Potter Cain McKinney, *To Fulfill What is Written: Reconsidering the Fulfillment-Formula Quotations of the Gospel of Matthew* (BA Thesis) (Williamsburg: William & Mary, 2021), 7; Gärtner, "The Habakkuk commentary," 1; Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament*, 155.

<sup>18</sup> McKinney, *To Fulfill*, 8-10.

<sup>19</sup> McKinney, *To Fulfill*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> McKinney, *To Fulfill*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> McKinney, *To Fulfill*, 10.



formula, and finally to Matthew's quotations that are not accompanied by any fulfilment formula<sup>22</sup>. The fulfilment formula, according to the author, could be a kind of technical artifice used by Matthew to indicate the nature of the *peshet* quotation. He concludes that if his observations about the interpretation and how the quotations entered the Gospel are correct, they constitute an almost irrefutable argument for the existence of a Matthean school<sup>23</sup>.

### **Richard Longenecker and the *peshet* interpretation**

Similarly, Longenecker notes that although there are several instances in the Gospels where Christ uses literal and *midrashic* interpretations, as we have seen above, the most used method is *peshet* because the motif of fulfilment that is characteristic of it appears again and again in His words<sup>24</sup>. According to Longenecker, the *pesharim* material is not necessarily accompanied by the formula „that it may be fulfilled”.

He counts the following Matthean texts in the category of the *pesharim*:

1). Matt. 21:42 (//Mark 12:10-11//)

“Jesus said to them: You have never read in the Scriptures, «The stone which the builders neglected has become the cornerstone. Was this from the Lord, and is it a wonderful thing in our eyes?»”

Christ concludes his allusion to the well-known parable of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7) and His not-so-veiled rebuke of the people's rejection of the son by quoting Ps. 118:22-23. The text accurately reflects the LXX, and Christ is referring to the fulfilment of the psalmist's words in his rejection and glorification.

2). In Matt. 26:31 (//Mark 14:27) after the Last Supper, He quotes Zech. 13:7 in connection with His approaching death and the disciples' reaction: “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered”, the quotation is introduced by Christ with the formula “for it is written” (*γέγραπται*) and directly invokes a *peshet* motif, „x is y”, i.e., the disciples will be scattered because they will strike Him. To attribute the passage to Himself, Christ changes the tenses, number and words in the LXX from “strike down (*πατάξατε*) the shepherds (plural) and drive away (*έκσπάσατε*) the sheep” to “I will scatter (*πατάξω*) the Shepherd (singular, used as a title, perhaps alluding to the Teacher of Righteousness?) and the sheep will be scattered (*διασκορπισθήσονται*).

3) In Matt. 11:10 (//Luke 7:27, cf. Mark 1:2-3) Christ ascribes to John the Baptist the ambiguous texts of Mal. 3:1, “Behold, I send my angel before your

<sup>22</sup> McKinney, *To Fulfill*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> McKinney, *To Fulfill*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 54.

face, who will prepare your way before you". In Matthew's Gospel, Christ uses a typical *peshet* formula: "that it is he of whom it is written" (οὗτός ἐστιν περι οὗ γέγραπται). The text form of the quoted passage has also been changed. Mal. 3:1, quoted by Jesus, appears as follows: "I send (ἀποστέλλω) My angel before your face, who will prepare (κατασκευάσει σου) the way for you (σου), but the LXX has "I will send (ἐξαποστέλλω) my angel and he will seek (ἐπιβλέψεται) the way before my face (μου)".

4). In Matt. 13:14-15, Christ quotes Isa. 6: 9-10 to explain to the apostles the reason for using parables for the people and introduces the passage with the words "and it is to them (those who refuse to listen) that the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, saying" (ἀναπληροῦνται αὐτοῖς ἡ προφητεία Ἡσαίου ἡ λέγουσα) and applies the prophet's words to His ministry, in a *peshet* way.

5) In Matt. 15:7-9, He paraphrases Isa. 29:13 (possibly also Ps. 78:36-37) and rebukes the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem. Here, too, it should be noted that He introduces the quotation with a fulfilment formula: "well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said" (καλῶς ἐπροφήτευσεν περι ὑμῶν Ἡσαΐας λέγων) and applies the passage, in a *peshet* way, about His rejection by the Jewish leaders<sup>25</sup>.

### Joseph Fitzmyer and the *peshet* interpretation

In 1961 Joseph Fitzmyer also wrote a study on the explicit use of the Old Testament quotations of the Qumran literature and the New Testament. Recognizing that the problem of Old Testament usage in the New Testament is a broad one, complicated by secondary issues of existing textual variants and the related question of the relationship or harmony between the two Testaments, the author focuses his attention rather on explicit quotations from the Old Testament as found in both the New Testament and the Qumran literature, and not examining the *pesharim* literature (commentaries such as *1QpHab*, *1QpMic*, *4QpNah*, etc.) and the *testimonia* texts. He acknowledges that there is no corresponding New Testament counterpart to the *peshet* and defines them as a unique type of *midrash*. There is no book or any fragment of a New Testament book that is a pure *peshet*<sup>26</sup>. After a careful and thorough examination of the explicit quotations, Fitzmyer concludes that there are four generic uses for them: literal or historical, modernized, adapted, and eschatological. These approaches can also be illustrated by the numerous quotations from the Old Testament in the

<sup>25</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 54-6.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, „The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies* 7/4 (1961): 297-8.

New Testament. Moreover, the introductory formulae in the Qumran texts seem to have no parallel in the Mishnah, despite the common use of the verbs “to say” and “to write”, while many Qumran expressions turn out to be the exact Semitic equivalents of New Testament formulae. The exegetical practices of the New Testament authors are thus quite like those of the contemporary Jewish authors, which is best illustrated by the Qumran literature.

In some isolated explicit quotations, Fitzmyer also finds some of the specific exegetical mechanisms of the *pesharim* (e.g., the actualization of the text, the atomistic interpretation of the text, i.e., the one that does not consider the context, the use of textual variants, wordplay, and deliberate manipulation of the text to better fit the new context). All this, he claims, was not used exclusively by the *peshar* interpretation. The *peshar* was essentially a kind of concise *midrashic* commentary on a fragment of a prophecy or other Old Testament text. Fulfilment formulas are conspicuously absent from the Qumran texts, which is why Fitzmyer questions whether it is appropriate to continue to speak of *peshar* quotations or *peshar* interpretations unless these are more precisely defined and limited to well-defined cases. Moreover, there is no evidence at Qumran of a systematic and unified exegesis of the Old Testament. The same text is rarely interpreted in the same way (e.g., the different versions of the Damascus Document chap. 7 and 19 and the use of the text of Num. 24:17 and Amos 9:11 in different contexts)<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusions

Several biblical scholars of the last century have argued that the evangelist Matthew uses the Old Testament in a similar way to the rabbis of the New Testament period and that Matthew interprets the Old Testament using the *peshar* when, for example, he applies the text of Hosea 11:1 to Christ’s sojourn in Egypt. Similarly, the Qumran community updates the Old Testament (through the *peshar* interpretation) by claiming that the scriptures apply to their situation. It must be said, however, that the *peshar* is an eisegesis method that is hostile to the notion of objective interpretation. The *peshar* method, i.e., “exegesis”, is an application of Old Testament scripture to other historical circumstances with little or no regard for the context of the passage originally quoted. Interpreters using the *peshar* method assume that the authors of the Old Testament were only addressing a contemporary audience. The interpretations are generally detached from the source context and appear to be *ad-hoc*, with

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<sup>27</sup> Fitzmyer, „The Use of Explicit,” 330-1.

no coherent methodology. The *peshet* was an attempt to explain the prophecies and biblical texts in the age of the interpreter, not to understand the original historical meaning of the time in which they were recorded.

In the *peshet* on Habakkuk, the authors simply take ancient references to the Chaldeans and apply them to the Romans without bothering to justify this choice. The historical context of Habakkuk seems to be of little interest to them. In the same commentary, all the bad deeds described by Habakkuk are attributed to the Wicked Priest, while all the good things are attributed to the Teacher of Righteousness<sup>28</sup>. Here, too, the interpreter is not concerned with justifying the fact that he has replaced the characters of the original text with characters from his community.

Norman Hillyer says of the introductory formula of the quotations, "that it may be fulfilled", that it may be a kind of technical phrase used by Matthew to indicate the *peshet* type of quotation, and it is precisely the quotations which differ from all the texts known to us which are preceded by the formula expressing fulfilment<sup>29</sup>.

Ulrich Luz raises several other objections and points out the differences between the Qumran *peshet* and the fulfilment formula *πληρῶ* in Matthew. He points out that the *peshet* begins with the text, which he then interprets, whereas the *πληρῶ* formula begins with the historical event and understands it as a fulfilment of prophecy/foretelling. The evangelist Matthew uses the Old Testament Scriptures as fulfilment, not as a *peshet*. This type of interpretation and Matthew's hermeneutics are therefore distinct not because of an inherent hermeneutical method implicit in each word, but because of the way the Old Testament words are used in their original and interpreted contexts<sup>30</sup>.

The abstraction of the *peshet* interpretation from the Qumran manuscripts and its application to the Old Testament interpretation by the New Testament thus raises numerous problems, as we have seen<sup>31</sup>. Some twenty years ago, Matthew Black dismissed the alleged *midrash peshet* genre as an invention of modern biblical scholars "which is better be forgotten"<sup>32</sup>. If we accept the *peshet* interpretation, it appears that the Old Testament prophecy is only fulfilled in the *peshet*, because the *peshet* is not interested in the historical fulfilment of biblical prophecy.

<sup>28</sup> Gärtner, „The Habakkuk commentary," 13.

<sup>29</sup> Norman Hillyer, "Matthew's Use of the Old Testament," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 36/1 (1964): 16-7.

<sup>30</sup> J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Conceptualising Fulfilment in Matthew," *Tyndale Bulletin* 59/1 (2008): 86-7.

<sup>31</sup> See especially Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament*, 155-9.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy H. Lim, *Pesharim*, coll. *Companion to the Qumran scrolls*, vol. 3 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 82-3.

I would like to conclude with a brief comment and a challenge. There is a danger today that the today meaning of the Old Testament prophecies will be a *peshar* if we do not try to search in history its fulfilment and see on purpose Christ in every text or word without considering the historical context of the prophecy. Based on this observation, I wonder if the Patristic interpretation is also largely just a *peshar*?

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## “The Seat of Moses” – The Responsibility of Interpreting the Law in Matthew’s Gospel

Nicolae Olimpiu BENEĂ\*

**ABSTRACT.** The presentation will analyse the possible interpretative solutions proposed by the exegetes to the *crux interpretum* of Matthew 23:2-3. The Saviour’s statement that the scribes and Pharisees “sit on the seat of Moses” is not intended to be an endorsement of their authority to interpret the Law, but, recognizing the reality in which the disciples lived and were to serve, they must fulfil and learn the commandments, they must know what Moses says. The scribes and Pharisees, although they were the keepers of the Torah in the social and religious environment in which these disciples lived, no longer had the authority to teach because it was given to the Church.

**Keywords:** The Seat of Moses, Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, Law, Scribes, Pharisees

### Introduction

Matthew 23:2-3 continues Jesus’ criticism of the scribes<sup>1</sup> and Pharisees<sup>2</sup> throughout Matthew’s Gospel, revealing their hypocritical attitude toward

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<sup>1</sup> See Edward Andrews’ approach, *Introduction to the Text of the Old Testament: From the Authors and Scribes to the Modern Critical Text* (Cambridge: Christian Publishing House, 2023); Craig Evans, *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture*, vol 2 (London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Eugene Ulrich, John Wright, Philip Davies, Robert Carroll (eds.), *Priests, Prophets and Scribes. Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). According to Israel P. Loken (“Scribes”, in *Faithlife Study Bible*, electronic ed.): “the basic duty of scribes in the New Testament period was to make sure that every Israelite was acquainted with the law’s rules and regulations”.

<sup>2</sup> See the perspective outlined in recent years more and more strongly in the space of the Catholic approach: Franciscus, *Address to teachers and students of the Pontifical Bible Institute and participants in the meeting “Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reexamination”*

keeping the law of Moses. The study of this passage involves a detailed analysis of how Jesus expresses His disagreement with the Pharisees. He emphasizes their hypocrisy by pointing out that although they occupy positions of authority and teach the Law of Moses, they do not live according to the teachings they teach. Interpreting this text involves researching the historical and cultural context of the Pharisees and understanding the Law of Moses and associated expectations. We will also examine the entire Gospel message that Jesus delivers to his disciples, focusing on concepts such as integrity, humility, and consistent practice of spiritual teachings. The study will also include various theological approaches, explaining how the passage fits into the general theology of Matthew's Gospel and how Christian teachings influence the moral and spiritual behaviour of believers. The essential aspect will focus on reading issues<sup>3</sup> and the interpretation of Matthew 23:2-3, where Jesus tells his disciples that “Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι”. Therefore, disciples must do (ποιέω) and keep (τηρέω) everything these religious leaders tell them (λέγω), but disciples need not do (ποιέω) according to the deeds (ἔργα) of these leaders. Because the scribes and Pharisees speak (λέγω) but do not do (ποιέω), burden people whom they do not want to help, and do (ποιέω) all their deeds (ἔργα) to be seen by others.

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(9 May 2019), <https://infosapientia.ro/stiri/papa-francisc/discurs-adresat-profesorilor-si-studentilor-de-la-institutul-pontifical-biblic-si-participantilor-la-intalnirea-isus-si-fariseii-o-reexaminare-interdisciplinara-9-mai-2019/>, accesat 10 noiembrie 2023. See also his approach Michel Remaud, *Creștini în fața lui Israel. Slujitor al lui Dumnezeu* (Târgu Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2018), subchapter “Notă istorică despre Isus și Farisei”, 113-126.

<sup>3</sup> For the problem of a superficial reading of this text, see an extensive analysis in its study Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep what Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 419-435. He points out that superficial reading considers the passage to state three things. First, by saying that the scribes and Pharisees “sit on the seat of Moses,” Jesus gives them authority to teach. Second, by telling his disciples to do and keep everything the scribes and Pharisees say, Jesus recommends obeying the teaching of these religious leaders. Jesus’ disciples should respect the authority of these teachers and live according to their interpretations of Scripture. Third, by telling His disciples not to do “according to their works,” Jesus indicates that the real problem with these religious leaders is that they are not living according to their own teaching. Thus, following the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus’ disciples will do God’s will to an extent that the scribes and Pharisees themselves do not.

Contextually, we are in Jesus’ fifth and final discourse in Matthew’s Gospel (23:1 – 25:46)<sup>4</sup>. As many exegetes say<sup>5</sup>, the discourses in the *Gospel of Matthew* (5-7; 10; 13; 18 and 23-25) are thematic collections of the evangelist, in which are gathered pericope of Jesus on that theme. Such a statement is easily verified by comparing the Synoptic Gospels. As for this final discourse of Jesus, through the load of “woes,” the content of chapter 23 seems to be the summary of all the elements of condemnation that Jesus uttered throughout His ministry against the Pharisees and scribes. In this chapter, Jesus brings to light and condemns the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, warning of the imminent fire of God’s judgment. He had already pronounced a verdict on them in chapter 13:

καὶ ἀναπληροῦται αὐτοῖς ἡ προφητεία Ἡσαΐου ἢ λέγουσα· Ἀκοῆ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε, καὶ βλέποντες βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε. ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου, καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν, καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν· μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν, καὶ ἴασομαι αὐτούς (13:14-15).

As David Hill states<sup>6</sup>, chapter 23 is the introductory part to the last of Matthew’s five discourses (5-7; 10; 13; 18 and 23-25). What is said in this chapter seems to be aimed directly at the scribes and Pharisees. However, considering the first verse, we can say that along with the rest of the discourse (ch. 24-25) it nevertheless constitutes a final attempt to save the disciples and the people from the nets of Pharisaic teaching and authority. “Jesus condemns not only conscious hypocrisy but also the mistakes inherent in the Pharisaic approach to religion, even in its best forms. Even the most scrupulous of Pharisees promoted a system that led people to understand righteousness in terms of increasingly meticulously enforced legal prescriptions and could completely distort what it meant to please God.”<sup>7</sup>

The chapter can be divided into two parts. The first twelve verses are addressed by Jesus to His crowds and His disciples. In the verses 13-36, He turns to the scribes and Pharisees and addresses them with eight “woes,” which

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<sup>4</sup> A pertinent approach see at Patrick Schreiner, *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe. The First Gospel and Its Portrait of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 138.

<sup>5</sup> See H.N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, trans. by Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1987), 421; R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 323; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 308.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 308.

<sup>7</sup> France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 323.



resemble the “woes” of the Old Testament prophets<sup>8</sup> and whereby Jesus not only exposes the futility of Pharisaic righteousness but also announces the approaching punishment of God that will fall upon them. The eight “woes” correspond to the eight “beatitudes” in *the Sermon on the Mount*<sup>9</sup>. If by “beatitudes” Christ’s righteousness is defined, by “woes” is defined as Pharisaic righteousness, a righteousness that serves nothing when it comes to entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

The parallels with *the Sermon on the Mount* are not difficult to see<sup>10</sup>, which underlines the summarizing nature of this speech. In a way, given where we are in the unfolding of the gospel, this speech can be considered, says Ridderbos, to be a “farewell speech to the leaders of Israel and also to the people who refused to obey the teaching of Jesus.”<sup>11</sup> This is explicitly stated in verse 39: “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ με ἴδητε ἀπ’ ἄρτι ἕως ἂν εἴπητε· Εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου”.

### The Pharisees and scribes sit on Moses’ chair

Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν τοῖς ὄχλοις καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ<sup>2</sup> λέγων· Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι.<sup>3</sup> πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε, κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν μὴ ποιεῖτε, λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν.<sup>4</sup> δεσμεύουσιν δὲ φορτία βαρέα καὶ ἐπιτιθέασιν ἐπὶ τοὺς ὤμους τῶν ἀνθρώπων, αὐτοὶ δὲ τῷ δακτύλῳ αὐτῶν οὐ θέλουσιν κινῆσαι αὐτά.<sup>5</sup> πάντα δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ποιοῦσιν πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πλατύνουσι γὰρ τὰ φυλακτήρια αὐτῶν καὶ μεγαλύνουσι τὰ κράσπεδα,<sup>6</sup> φιλοῦσι δὲ τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις καὶ τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς<sup>7</sup> καὶ τοὺς ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς καὶ καλεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· Ῥαββί. (Matt. 23:1-7).

<sup>8</sup> On the nature of prophetic oracles and the function of Old Testament “prophetic woes,” see Benjamin Fărăgău, *Nădejde în întineric*, vol. I (Cluj-Napoca: Logos, 1992), 68-72.

<sup>9</sup> The best manuscripts of *Matthew’s Gospel* seem to lack verse 14 of chapter 23, says R. T. France (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 327). Nor is this verse included in the Nestle-Aland texts of the Greek New Testament. This is why most exegetes speak of only seven “woes.” However, all these texts mention verse 14 in the footer, because it is found in other textual authorities and cannot simply be neglected.

<sup>10</sup> We can compare, for example, 23:5-7 / 6:1-3; 23:13 / 5:20; 23:16-22 / 5:33-37; 23:23-24 / 5:17-19.

<sup>11</sup> Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 421.

Jesus’ speech is very curiously worded. At first, He seems to make a deep reverence for the scribes and Pharisees, acknowledging their authority: “Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι” (2). This has implications that need to be seriously considered: “πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἔαν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε” (3).

Immediately afterwards, Jesus surprises His hearers because, although He tells them to do what the Pharisees tell them, He forbids them to do what they do: “κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν μὴ ποιεῖτε, λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν” (3). The approach resembles Jesus’ answer to those who came to tempt Him with the question of tribute. As then, and now, Jesus respects existing political, social, and religious authority and structures. The manifestation of His kingdom did not need revolutions to change these structures, because it worked mysteriously, from the inside out. It was precisely by the power of self-denial and self-sacrifice – power completely alien to the kingdoms and structures of this age – that the seed had within it the power to overcome the death of the earth, and to transform the dust into thirty, sixty, or a hundred other seeds like itself.

However, this did not prevent Jesus from exposing the rot that was eating away at the entire Pharisaic religious system. If the first level of their guilt is not living according to the precepts they taught others, the second level of guilt must be sought within the scope of their motivations: “<sup>5</sup>πάντα δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ποιοῦσιν πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· πλατύνουσι γὰρ τὰ φυλακτήρια αὐτῶν καὶ μεγαλύνουσι τὰ κράσπεδα, <sup>6</sup> φιλοῦσι δὲ τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις καὶ τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς <sup>7</sup> καὶ τοὺς ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς καὶ καλεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· Ραββί!” (5-7).<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, considering the whole passage, this seemingly commendable introduction – “The scribes and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses” (23:1) – takes on an entirely different connotation. In the tone of Jesus’ voice one can distinguish anger and irony: – To you, He seems to have said to His peoples and disciples, the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, don’t they? So, listen to them! Do what they tell you if you can! For they bind heavy loads to carry on your shoulders, tasks which they do not move even with their little finger. But take a closer look at their attitude and motivations! In addition to not doing what I tell you to do, even what I do, I do it in plain sight and just to get applause. Look at the wide phylacteries and long tassels at the foot of the garments! Watch them go after the first seats in the banquets and the first seats in the synagogues!

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<sup>12</sup> In *the Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus condemned such righteousness (see 5:20; 6:1-7:6), exposing the sins in the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees, the sins hidden in the sphere of motivations and attitudes. In fact, Pharisaic righteousness was spiritual prostitution. Things that rightfully belonged to God, such as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, were scattered before men to gain their favour and appreciation.

Watch how they beg for people's bows and how they take pride in themselves when people call them "Rabbi"!

Through His sharp statements, Jesus is stripping the scribes and Pharisees of all the authority He seemed to give them by the statement in verse 1. And this was His very intention, because the people were paralyzed by false Pharisaic authority and righteousness, and because of this they could not receive the truth.

We find such an approach in St. John Chrysostom: "I mean, that lest anyone should say, that because my teacher is bad, therefore am I become more remiss, He takes away even this pretext. So much at any rate did He establish their authority, although they were wicked men, as even after so heavy an accusation to say, 'All whatsoever they command you to do, do.' For they speak not their own words, but God's, what He appointed for laws by Moses. And mark how much honour He showed towards Moses, again showing His agreement with the Old Testament; since indeed even by this doth He make them objects of reverence. 'For they sit,' He saith, 'on Moses' seat.' For because He was not able to make them out worthy of credit by their life, He doth it from the grounds that were open to Him, from their seat, and their succession from him. But when thou hearest all, do not understand all the law, as, for instance, the ordinances about meats, those about sacrifices, and the like for how was He to say so of these things, which He had taken away beforehand? but He meant all things that correct the moral principle, and amend the disposition, and agree with the laws of the New Testament, and suffer them not any more to be under the yoke of the law."<sup>13</sup>

Mark Allan Powell's conclusion, however, is much more concrete, going beyond an approach to rhetorical discourse. By saying that the Pharisees and scribes sit on the seat of Moses, Jesus can simply acknowledge the strong social and religious position they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate, and copies of the Torah are not abundant. Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will depend on the scribes and Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject. Considering such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit on the chair of Moses, that is, when they transmit the words of the Torah itself. The first activity of the scribes and Pharisees, the one Jesus praises, is not about teaching or interpreting Moses, but simply about quoting Moses<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel According to St. Matthew", trans. by George Prevost and M. B. Riddle, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. X (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 436.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, "Do and Keep what Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7)," 419-435. Powell argues that this apparent contradiction can be resolved by understanding that Jesus did not want his disciples to do literally "everything" that the Pharisees taught. Rather, he meant that they were to *obey*

One may wonder whether such an understanding can be found in the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. For illustration, given the context of our approach to this study, we will limit ourselves to one aspect of the Sermon on the Mount.

### **A Pharisaic righteousness**

*The Sermon on the Mount* has three large parts. The first sixteen verses (5:1-16) speak of Christian character, verses 5:17-7:6, of Christian conduct, and the conclusion (7:7-29) emphasizes the relationship between them: character determines the conduct or nature of the tree determines the nature of the fruit, while also offering us a solution for fulfilling the extraordinary requirement Jesus faces: “Ask... search... and knock.” Verses 5:17-20 constitute a passage, a link between the first two parts. What Jesus is about to say next (5:21-7:6) was to constitute a harsh condemnation of the so-called kingdom of God that the Pharisees of His time were building. This is why Jesus begins by stating His position on God’s law:

17Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι<sup>18</sup> ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἕως ἄν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἴωτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἄν πάντα γένηται.<sup>19</sup> ὃς ἐάν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν ὃς δ’ ἂν ποιῆσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν.<sup>20</sup> λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐάν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. (Matt. 5:17-20).

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*their teachings on the Torah and halakhah in principle, a fact supported by Jesus' own attitude toward oral tradition. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees not because of their halakhah, but because they had abandoned the commandments of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. On one level, the Pharisees really wanted to keep the Law. Through oral tradition, they strove to keep the Torah at the centre of Jewish life and worship. As those who sat in the Seat of Moses, the Pharisees provided the Jewish people with practical answers and specific instructions on how to fulfil the commandments of the Torah. On a deeper level, however, the Pharisees' inner motives betrayed them, and their zeal for the Torah frequently became interesting. When Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in the section on woes in Matthew 23, He reveals that their erroneous teachings were a manifestation of their wrong motivations. In their hearts, these Pharisees longed for people's praise, but in their minds, they believed they were honouring God. They meticulously paid their tithes of dill and cumin but neglected the more important provisions of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23).*

Nevertheless, in this text, Jesus does more than state His position on God's Word; He emphasizes that the Kingdom of God can only be built on this Word, understood, and applied correctly, while also emphasizing that the problem of the Pharisees stems precisely from the way they interpret and apply the Law. This is why they came to make a sterile and useless righteousness regarding their entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The structure of the text is marked by the connectors in it. Verse 17 contains a statement – “Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι” – which raises a question: Why are the incorruption of the law and its fulfilment so important? The answer comes in the next verse and anchors itself in the eternal nature of the Word: “ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἰῶτα ἐν ἡ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται” (18). The kingdom of God is built on the Word of God, not on the word of men, and the Word of God once spoken does not pass without being fulfilled. The exact fulfilment of God's Word depends on God's faithfulness.

Matthew the Evangelist told us that Jesus began His ministry by walking through Galilee, “διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρῦσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας” (4:23). He was competing with the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the Law because they were also preaching a gospel of the kingdom. Jesus states from the beginning that the dispute between Him and them will be fought in the realm of interpretation of the Law. The true Kingdom of God can only be built on the true Word of God or on the Word of God understood and applied correctly, “ὃς ἐὰν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν· ὃς δ' ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν” (5:19).

This last verse (19) contains both warning and good news. The warning is that he who breaks even one of these commandments and teaches others will be called the least into the kingdom of heaven. The good news is that the Kingdom of Heaven is not reached based on the accuracy with which the Law is interpreted. Both he who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others so and he who does not, will both be, Jesus says, in the kingdom of God. One will indeed be called small, and another, great. This is in harmony with the doctrine of salvation in 5:3<sup>15</sup>. The Kingdom of God is not obtained based on what we have, or what we achieve, but based on what we do not have, based on our poverty in spirit, on the recognition of our total inability to deserve or gain the Kingdom. This is what Jesus said to His disciples frightened

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<sup>15</sup> “Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν!” (5:3).

by the statement He made looking at the rich young man who was walking away: "Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πλούσιος δυσκόλως εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν· πάλιν δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, εὐκοπώτερόν ἐστιν κάμηλον διὰ τρυπήματος ῥαφίδος εἰσελθεῖν ἢ πλούσιον εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ" (19,23-24). "Τίς ἄρα δύναται σωθῆναι;" – the disciples asked Him. "ἐμβλέψας δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Παρὰ ἄνθρωποις τοῦτο ἀδύνατόν ἐστιν, παρὰ δὲ θεῶ πάντα δυνατά" (19,25-26). So, entering God's kingdom is a special work of God, and this work will be done through His Son. So unique is this work of the Son of God that only those who recognize their utter poverty, in other words, their total dependence on the work of the Son, will have the kingdom of God.

However, the verse immediately following – "For I say unto you, unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, *ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" (20) – speaks not of one's position in the Kingdom – small or great in it – but of one's position in it: in it or outside it. At first glance, such a statement would seem to contradict the statement in 5:3: "Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν!" In resolving this apparent contradiction, we must start from what is written. Jesus spoke both verse 19 and verse 20; therefore, when we speak of being or not being in God's kingdom, we must keep both verses in mind. The resolution of this contradiction is found in what we understand from the discourse on the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are not a list of disparate issues, but a collection of profound truths carefully woven into a coherent theological whole. If the first of the "Beatitudes" contains the "text" of the doctrine of salvation, all the others can be the "commentary" of this text. So, the correct understanding of poverty in spirit is possible only in the light of the other "beatitudes." The truly poor in spirit will prove this by his tears, that is, by the courage to weep over his sins.

But only gentleness, that is, only the courage to get out of the competition of self-affirmation, is confirmation of the veracity of our repentance. In turn, meekness is tested by hunger and thirst for righteousness, not for Pharisaic righteousness, but for true righteousness. The hunger and thirst for such righteousness are not a passive hunger and thirst, but an active hunger and thirst, a seeking, a pursuit of things other than when we were competing for self-affirmation. Here is what Paul says in *Colossians*:

1 Εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθημένος·<sup>2</sup> τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,<sup>3</sup> ἀπεθάνετε γάρ, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ·<sup>4</sup> ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ. (Col. 3:1-4)

If until now we were chasing after earthly things, from the moment we were comforted by God and received the power to withdraw from the competition of self-affirmation, we begin to yearn for the heavenly things, for that state according to God's will, called justice, in other words, we entered a different competition, we climbed on a different arena: in the arena of affirmation, of glorifying God. What else does Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:31 mean: "Εἴτε οὖν ἐσθίετε εἴτε πίνετε εἴτε τι ποιεῖτε, πάντα εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ ποιεῖτε," or what he says in Colossians 3:17: "καὶ πᾶν ὃ τι ἐὰν ποιῆτε ἐν λόγῳ ἢ ἐν ἔργῳ, πάντα ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ δι' αὐτοῦ"? However, the proof that we hunger for true righteousness, and not for Pharisaical righteousness, is precisely the power to loosen our fists and give to others what God has given us, the power to treat others as God has treated us. Moreover, if our hearts are not pure, then even our charity is defiled. Furthermore, how do we know that our hearts are pure and that we have seen God? From the fact that our heart began to beat for what God's heart beats: for people. Jesus descended to our planet to save what was lost. He called His disciples to make them fishers of men, and before the Ascension, He sent them into the work of appeasement. But only the price we are willing to pay for the new reality of God's kingdom into which we have entered and tasted will be the measure of our real poverty in spirit.

The circle closes with the eighth "beatitude", whose reward is identical to that of the first "beatitude": "theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (5:3,10). But this means that the first "beatitude" cannot be separated from the others, just as verse 5:19 cannot be separated from the following verse: "λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν" (20). What Jesus is saying is that the first "beatitude" checks itself in the others.

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus challenges the entire Pharisaic system, declaring it null and void as to the possibility of one entering the kingdom of heaven. What exactly did this system consist of? What are the principles that govern it? To understand this, we will dwell on a detail from Matthean antitheses.

### **A misinterpretation of Scripture leads to misapplication**

*The Sermon on the Mount* (5:1-7:29) is organized around a fundamental principle that governs the reality of God's kingdom: character determines conduct. In the first 12 verses, Jesus placed the Christian character before us, practically making His self-portrait. Verses 13-16 warn us of two great dangers: the first is the danger of contamination with the world, which leads to the loss of the taste of salt, of its power to salt. The second is the danger of isolation, which

ultimately has a similar effect on the world to tasteless salt: a null effect. The warning continues in verses 17–20, where Jesus clearly says: “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν” (20). But for such a warning to be meaningful, Jesus tells us how such righteousness is born and therefore how it is to be avoided. 5:21-48 confronts the *scribes' misinterpretation of Scripture*. 6:1-7:6 exposes *the misapplication or mispractice of Scripture*. *The Sermon on the Mount* concludes with a series of warnings (7:7-29), which confirm the fundamental principle of the Kingdom: character determines conduct.

As John Stott, text block 5:21-48 states “It consists of six parallel paragraphs (21-26, 27-30, 31-32, 33-37, 38-42, 43-48), which illustrate the principal Jesus has just propounded in verses 17 to 20 of the perpetuity of the moral law, of his coming to fulfil it and of his disciples’ responsibility to obey it more completely than the scribes and Pharisees were doing. Each paragraph contains a contrast or ‘antithesis’ introduced by the same formula (with minor variations): *You have heard that it was said to the men of old ... But I say to you ...* (21, 22).”<sup>16</sup> Through the six contrasts, Jesus corrects the scribes’ interpretation of Scripture in six areas of life: murder (21-26), adultery (27-30), divorce (31-32), vows (33-37), vengeance (38-42), and love of enemies (43-48). In each of these six areas, the interpretation of Scripture is clarified by moving things from the level of deed to the level of words, attitudes, and motivations.

To illustrate these nuances, we will briefly address some aspects of the antithesis of divorce. On the issue of divorce, Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:31-32 are direct and to the point: “Ἐρρέθη δέ· Ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, δότω αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον. <sup>32</sup> ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὃς ἐὰν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται” (31-32). But His statement must be judged in the context in which it was said.

The Pharisees had legislated divorce upon request. How was he thinking among them is also apparent from the question they ask Jesus in Matthew 19: “Καὶ προσῆλθον αὐτῷ Φαρισαῖοι πειράζοντες αὐτὸν καὶ λέγοντες· Εἰ ἕξεστιν ἀνθρώπῳ ἀπολύσαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν?” (3). Their question was based on the Pharisaical interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Here is what Moses said: “Ἐὰν δὲ τις λάβῃ γυναῖκα καὶ συνουκῆσῃ αὐτῇ, καὶ ἔσται ἐὰν μὴ εὖρη χάριν ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ ὅτι εὗρεν ἐν αὐτῇ ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα, καὶ γράψῃ αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ δώσει εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς, καὶ ἔξαποστελεῖ αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ.” (Deut. 24:1).

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<sup>16</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Leicester: IVP, 2020), 76.



The condition under which, considering the Law of Moses, a book of separation could be given was that the man had found “something shameful” in the woman he had married, and because of this, she would have no passage before him. Perhaps it was not very clear what that “shameful thing” was, the Pharisees and scribes generalized it to “every cause.”<sup>17</sup> Here, for example, is what we read in the Mishnah about how this text was interpreted:<sup>18</sup> “The House of Shammai say, ‘A man should divorce his wife only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity since it is said *because he has found in her indecency in anything* (Dt. 24:1)’. And the House of Hillel say, ‘Even if she spoiled his dish since it is said *because he has found in her indecency in anything*’. E. R. Aqiba says, ‘Even if he found someone else prettier than she since it is said, and it shall be if she finds no favour in his eyes (Dt. 24:1)’.”<sup>19</sup>

Jesus was confronting and condemning positions like those of Hillel’s school and Rabbi Akiba. Jesus expresses His position by emphasizing the seriousness of the implications of divorce – “ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ

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<sup>17</sup> In his commentary on *The Book of Deuteronomy*, P. C. Craigie states that “in precise terms, there is only one piece of legislation in this passage (24:1-4), that contained in v. 4a. The first three verses, which form the grammatical protasis, specify exactly the conditions that must apply for the execution of the legislation in v. 4 (the apodosis). Thus, strictly speaking, the legislation relates only to particular cases of remarriage; the protasis contains incidental information about marriage and divorce but does not specifically legislate on those matters. The verses do not institute divorce, but treat it as a practice already known, which may be either a matter of custom or of other legislation no longer known. The procedure for divorce is contained in vv. 1, 3; the statement is so succinct that all the details are no longer clear. The woman does not *find favor* in the eyes of the man; the reason for this lack of favor is because there is *something indecent in her*. *Something indecent* (‘*erwat dābār*’) may have been a technical legal expression; the precise meaning is no longer clear. The same expression is used in 23:14, where it suggests something impure, though the words do not seem to have normal connotations. In this context, the words may indicate some physical deficiency in the woman, though this meaning is uncertain” P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids. MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 304-305.

<sup>18</sup> “We know”, affirms John Stott, “that a current controversy about divorce was being conducted between the rival rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai. Rabbi Shammai took a rigorist line and taught from Deuteronomy 24:1 that the sole ground for divorce was some grave matrimonial offence, something evidently ‘unseemly’ or ‘indecent’. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, held a very lax view. If we can trust the Jewish historian, Josephus, this was the common attitude, for he applied the Mosaic provision to a man who ‘desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever’ (*Antiquities*, IV. Viii. 23). Similarly, Hillel, arguing that the ground for divorce was something ‘unseemly’, interpreted this term in the widest possible way to include a wife’s most trivial offences. If she proved to be an incompetent cook and burnt her husband’s food, or if he lost interest in her because of her plain looks and because he became enamoured of some other more beautiful woman, these things were ‘unseemly’ and justified him in divorcing her” Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Mishnah*, Ghittin, 9.10 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 487.

ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὅς ἐάν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται" (Mat. 5,32) – thereby emphasizing the *sanctity of the marriage relationship*. His position is then elaborated in Matthew 19:1-9, where Matthew 5:32 is found almost identically as a conclusion to His speech:

<sup>4</sup> ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν Οὐκ ἀνέγγνωτε ὅτι ὁ κτίσας ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτοὺς <sup>5</sup> καὶ εἶπεν Ἐνεκα τούτου καταλείψει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ κολληθήσεται τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν; <sup>6</sup> ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ σὰρξ μία. ὁ οὖν ὁ θεὸς συνέζευξεν ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω. <sup>7</sup> λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· Τί οὖν Μωϋσῆς ἐνετείλατο δοῦναι βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ ἀπολυσαὶ αὐτήν; <sup>8</sup> λέγει αὐτοῖς ὅτι Μωϋσῆς πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν ἐπέτρεψεν ὑμῖν ἀπολυσαὶ τὰς γυναῖκας ὑμῶν, ἀπ' ἀρχῆς δὲ οὐ γέγονεν οὕτως. <sup>9</sup> λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσας μοιχᾶται. (Matt. 19:4-9)

First, Jesus associates Matthew 5:31-32 with verses 27-30 precisely to help His hearers reassess the issue of divorce and consider the guilt of the other party, in our case, considering the man's guilt. Understanding things should have cured the man of the drive for divorce "for any cause."

Second, we saw that Jesus does this to point out that even if a man has found "something shameful" in his wife – the cause of fornication – *divorce is not obligatory*. Considering the whole context, Jesus exhorts us to forgiveness and acceptance. And sometime later in *the Sermon on the Mount*, He would say to His hearers: "ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος <sup>15</sup> ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν" (Mat. 6:14-15). And such a statement makes divorce not an easy option for one who believes in God and His wrath "Ἀποκαλύπτεται ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων" (Rom. 1:18).

Nevertheless, there are situations when, because of hardness of heart, reconciliation is impossible, because one of the parties involved does not want it. When fornication is not resolved by repentance, but continued, God cannot overlook it either. Even He gave Israel a book of separation. However, such action must be considered as *a last resort*.

Jesus stated in *the Sermon on the Mount* that divorce is an occasion for adultery. That is why, although He accepts a legal clause for divorce, namely "the cause of fornication", He nevertheless tries to convince His hearers that,

through His character and example, God teaches us that forgiveness and acceptance are preferable to divorce. His statements must be understood in the context in which they were said, in which context the man considered himself free and entitled to give his wife a parting card *for any cause*.

For the correct interpretation of Jesus' words, it is important to understand that Matthew 5 and 19 and Deuteronomy 24 are to be considered both the Word of God. No matter why God gave the derogation in Deuteronomy 24, however, this text has authority because of Him who gave it. By stating that the "shameful thing" of which a man can accuse his wife is only "the cause of fornication," nothing else, Jesus takes away from the Pharisees the right to generalize things and thus lower the standards of faithfulness in the marriage relationship.

The statements in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 that he who marries a man commits adultery must be understood in conjunction with Deuteronomy 24:1-4. And such a statement raises, first, a problem for God. Considering His law in Deuteronomy 24, once man fell into sin and thus the relationship between man and God was broken, there was no way God could receive us back. To solve this problem, God gave His own Son to die for us and in our place. Thus, Christ's death became the objective basis for our reconciliation with God and our reconciliation with one another.

The implications of assuming the relationship with God in the Church lead to the strengthening of this relationship, not to its weakening because the one who has been forgiven much is also obliged to forgive accordingly.

Here is how John Stott summarizes Matthew 5:31-32: "The Pharisees were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce; Jesus with the institution of marriage... The Pharisees called Moses' provision for divorce a command; Jesus called it a concession to the hardness of human hearts... The Pharisees regarded divorce lightly; Jesus took it so seriously that, with only one exception, he called all remarriage<sup>20</sup> after divorce adultery". So, he concludes: "Speaking personally as a Christian pastor, whenever somebody asks to speak with me about divorce, I have now for some years steadfastly refused to do so. I have made the rule never to speak with anybody about divorce until I have first spoken with him (or her) about two other subjects, namely marriage and reconciliation. Sometimes a discussion on these topics makes a discussion of the other unnecessary. At the very least, it is only when a person has understood and accepted God's view of marriage and God's call to reconciliation that a possible context has been created within which one may regretfully go on to talk about divorce. This principle of pastoral priorities is, I believe, consistent with the teaching of Jesus."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This is, we believe, about returning to the wife whom the man divorced, because otherwise Jesus would have blatantly contradicted the text of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

<sup>21</sup> Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 94-98.

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## The Pagans and the Tax Collector of the Gospel According to Matthew

Ion Sorin BORA\*

**ABSTRACT.** The attitudinal complex existing among the groups of people mentioned by St. Matthew the Evangelist is strikingly similar to the situation existing in the Church before the Gentiles shared and inherited the Gospel. The clear distinction between “gentiles” and “publican” is not justified in the second part of the apostolic age, when the Gentiles were the majority in the Church. The belief that the Aramaic version of the Gospel of Matthew was written before the Apostolic Council is based on these everyday realities of the Jewish Christian world, revolving around the Temple, religious parties, rabbis, etc. Dating the writing after 70 AD, as presented in most modern commentaries, does not justify several verses mentioned only in the first canonical Gospel, including Mt 18:15-17. The erring brother may ultimately end up as a pagan and a publican. For the disciples, as for the Jewish Jerusalemite Christians, the Saviour's command was actual, something not at all necessary for later majority Jewish Christians. It would also justify taking the fragment from other Matthean sources or the hypothetical Q if it were to be found in other evangelists. It is just that it is the proper place of the Gospel of Matthew. That is why we consider the Gospel of Matthew to be the first writing of the New Testament in its Aramaic form, intended for Jewish Christians, constantly concerned with preserving ethnic purity and the Abrahamic heritage.

**Keywords:** Pagans, Tax Collector, Jesus, Gentiles, Church, Matthew

### Introduction

The attention that the Evangelist Matthew gives to the tax collectors and pagans is only justified if he wrote the Gospel before the Apostolic Council and

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if he addressed the Palestinian Christian community. The text called “fraternal correction” corresponds to a set of rules of conduct of the Christian community in which pagans had not entered but resented the tax collectors.

In a chapter on forgiveness, Jesus teaches his disciples how to deal with one who does wrong: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican” (Mt 18:15-17) <sup>1</sup>.

There is a clear difference between a personal, forgivable mistake<sup>2</sup> and a mistake that can only be forgiven by a radical change in the person who persists in the mistake<sup>3</sup>.

The addition is also influenced by Peter's question about forgiving the brother who has wronged him: while the first mistake can only make him after three attempts to forgive the brother as “a heathen and a publican”, the second, personal mistake must be forgiven “seventy times seven”. Thus, “the two consecutive fragments have nothing in common but the theme of forgiveness.”<sup>4</sup>

After Judas Iscariot, the New Testament records many mistakes and condemnations of the brothers who erred: Ananias and Sapphira, Simon Magus, the incestuous man of Corinth, but none of them became to the brothers in the Church like a pagan and a publican. Besides, Christians beyond the borders of pre-Apostolic Judaism did not notice the negative charge of the terms “pagan” and “publican”. We therefore set out to find out what the speakers of Matthew's Gospel meant by “heathen” and “tax collector”, and to show that this text is a clear argument in favour of the traditional dating of Matthew's Gospel in 44 AD.

### **St. Matthew, between pagans and tax collectors**

Biblical Jews learned to remain united around moral and religious values, through constant disassociation from people and customs that could lead them away from God and His commandments. In Matthew's Gospel, there

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<sup>1</sup> “Matthew 18:15-17 represents perhaps the most familiar and foundational passage concerning discipline in the New Testament.” David L. Burggraff, “Principles of Discipline in Matthew 18:15-17,” *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 4 (1988): 4.

<sup>2</sup> The addition “he has wronged you” can only be justified by assuming the text of Luke 17:3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 93-102.

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Matthieu*, Vol. 1 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1923), 353.

are several categories of people whom the Saviour's contemporaries avoided and condemned because of their idolatrous religion, heavy sins and injustices done to the people. Of these, the pagans and tax collectors "benefited" from the fiercest hatred that the Jews of Matthew's Gospel share among themselves, as a common heritage, handed down with sanctity from generation to generation, until the names of the wicked become a memory<sup>5</sup>.

Jews did not accompany them on journeys, conversations and even more so at meals. At the same time, financial collaboration becomes an attitudinal standard: whoever opens his purse to help the Jews is "righteous" (Acts 10:22) and "son of Abraham" (Lk 19:9-10), otherwise the tax collectors are accused of injustice (cf. Mt 20:13; Lk 16:8,10; 18:6; Acts 1:18; 8:23). The pagans, strangers to the chosen people and therefore to their religion, are Roman soldiers and rulers, the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon, the Canaanites, then the Samaritans and the Idumeans. The disciples of the Saviour also cultivated this attitude towards the Gentiles until around 50 AD: "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and any city of the Samaritans enter ye not" (Mt 10:5)<sup>6</sup>.

The Gentiles inflict suffering on the Jews: "And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles" (Mt 10:18). The Saviour Himself suffered at their hands: "and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again" (Mt 20:19). The authority of the "Gentiles" over the Christians (cf. 1 Cor 6:1) will be seen especially in the governmental and imperial tribunals in which the disciples are to be judged after the Saviour Himself has been judged by the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate<sup>7</sup>.

Most of the pagans and tax collectors of Matthew's Gospel become mere "sinners" in the parallel places in Luke: "for if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" (Mt 5:46) while Luke writes "For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again" (Lk 6:32-34). The speakers of Luke's Gospel were not so much interested in the Jewish tax collectors as in sinners.

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<sup>5</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup> century the association between the pagans and the pagans is unanimously accepted. Joachim Jeremias, C.H. Cave, F.H. Cave, *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus: an investigation into economic and social conditions during the New Testament period* (London: Blackwell, 1969), 310-22; Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 93-4.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, the disciples will use routes other than those practised by the pagans, or those that lead to the cities of the pagans, so as not to expose themselves to danger. Lagrange, *Gospels*, 196.

<sup>7</sup> Lagrange, *Gospel*, 203.



If the pagans could be avoided, the customs officers, employed by the Romans to tax the Jews<sup>8</sup>, are much better known and condemned by them. From the meals Matthew, Levi and Zacchaeus organized, we understand that they were of great material status, ate and drank much, and consorted with sinners (themselves unreservedly called sinners), pagans and harlots (cf. Mt 21:32)<sup>9</sup>. Their wealth was very great, yet at most one-eighth of Zacchaeus' wealth came from unrighteousness (Lk 19:8)<sup>10</sup>.

The Saviour is accused of having sat at the table with the tax collectors, of being their friend and of adopting a diet like theirs: "Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?" (Mt 9:11), "a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners." (Mt 11:19)<sup>11</sup> The diet of the tax collectors and their friends involved eating and drinking wine in a different way from that of the other Jews, i.e. they were greedy and drunkards<sup>12</sup>. In the same way they are also associated with harlots, encouraged by the immorality and money of the sinful tax collectors<sup>13</sup>.

The history of taxation for the Empire begins in 67 BC, when the Jewish aristocracy, Jewish priests and representatives of the Sanhedrin were collecting taxes.<sup>14</sup> In the time of Herod the Idumean, this task was performed by slaves, with the status of royal officials.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the tax system was so unbearable that after Herod the Great's death, the people demanded the abolition of taxes

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<sup>8</sup> Customs officials remain mere tax collectors, in Romans: "Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour" (Rom 13:7). Whether hostile to Christians or not, customs officials are representatives of God's will: " (the rulers) are God's servants, continuing in this service unceasingly" (Rom 13:6).

<sup>9</sup> The term *publicans*, from the Greek *τελώνης*, may be the imperfect Aramaic translation of *telane* (from the verb, *telal*, "to play, sport"; cf. *tul*, "to walk about, to be at leisure, to enjoy one's self"). Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bibli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: Pardes, 1950), 538, cf. 537, 523. This was not a tax collector, but a lover of sport with a sinful life: "the contemporary term, *playboys* might be a fairly close equivalent". Wm. Walker, "Jesus and the Tax Collectors," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97. 2 (1978): 237.

<sup>10</sup> If we accept that "the number of those who were afflicted by Zacchaeus was very great". Vasile Mihoc, *Predici exegetice la duminicile de peste an* (Sibiu: Teofania, 2001):224, it means that Zacchaeus' wealth was truly colossal.

<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to appreciate the view that the tax collectors were Jews who willingly gave up their ancestral lineage and faith to become pagans. If they had apostatized, they would have been neither impressed by Christ nor so closely watched by the Pharisees. John Donahue, "Tax Collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1971): 40.

<sup>12</sup> Walker, "Jesus," 226.

<sup>13</sup> Walker, "Jesus," 229.

<sup>14</sup> Donahue, "Tax Collectors," 44.

<sup>15</sup> Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities*, 17, 307.

levied on purchases and sales of goods<sup>16</sup>. Depending on the political situation in the regions of Palestine, taxation was supervised by the empire's representatives in the territory. Under these circumstances, the tax collectors were not pagans, as in Judea, but Jews from the entourage of the ruling Jewish kings Antipas, Agrippa I and Agrippa II<sup>17</sup>. The Jews' hatred of the tax collectors was therefore increased by their betrayal of the national cause, of those who had the power to throw off Roman oppression<sup>18</sup>. The hatred of the tax collectors was also increased by their greed, but also by the regular violation of the customs of the elders by bringing sinful foreigners close to the Jews: "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles" (Gal 2:15). The "unrighteous" tax collectors in need of repentance are associated with the "sick" sinners who are described as "sick" and in need of a doctor. Yet Jesus eats with them at the table<sup>19</sup>, without fear of becoming sick or contaminated by their impurity<sup>20</sup>.

### **The spiritual frontier of Jewish Christians**

Can pagans be equated with sinners? Sinners are pagans: "Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Mt 26:45). The association of tax collectors with sinners in Matthew's tax collector's house is clear: "and it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples." (Mt 9:10). The Pharisees' accusation is obvious, but not virulent: "And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (9:11-13). The accusation of this kind of life, which includes eating and drinking wine, will hang

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 124-6.

<sup>17</sup> Donahue, "Tax Collectors," 45.

<sup>18</sup> There is no greater hatred than that between zealots and customs officers. The former were the defenders of the national cause, while the customs officers were the traitors to that cause. However, in the group of disciples, these two types of people meet without hating each other. Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1956), 22.

<sup>19</sup> We consider unjust any theory that denies the authenticity of the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees over the meal served in Matthew's house as an "artificial composition". Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 47 or as a late Church explanation of the Saviour's words.

<sup>20</sup> In a similar way, Jesus sits at a table with the tax collectors in the guesthouse of Zacchaeus, whose name translates as "the righteous one" or "the pure one," which contrasts strikingly with his designation as a "sinner" and one of the "lost." Walker, "Jesus," 234.

over Jesus, but will not be the subject of the accusations at the end of his earthly life: “The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children” (Mt 11:19).

The Christians to whom St. Matthew addresses the Evangelist have a wealth of knowledge about the Jewish environment, about the active honouring of the temple, and especially about how the Jews kept themselves at a distance from the unclean world around them. The author groups the Savior's words thematically, so identifying the place and time in the Savior's life in which He speaks these words is almost impossible.

The Apostles, like the Christians of the Apostolic Age, are particularly interested in the relationship they should have with those outside their group, which defines the boundary of the spiritual realm. The “chosen”, “separated”, “consecrated” status of which most Jews were aware.

One of the most famous Pharisees will mention God's command to separate the elect from all that is evil: which the Pharisees had crystallized around the command “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor 6:17). Such a commandment must have caused the Pharisees to *separate* themselves even from their Jewish brethren who did not keep the Law, whom they would consider cursed: “But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed” (Jn 7:49).

Under these circumstances, we can speak of a veritable spiritual boundary between *saints* and *pagans* which the Jews strictly guarded, even if they allowed the pagans to approach them as proselytes, even in the temple courts of Jerusalem.

Under the Roman occupation, the borders that demarcated the territories inhabited by the Jews had no power to separate the “chosen ones” from the nations of the earth, but they could quantify the movement of people *to* and *from* the holy places on the great feasts of Judaism. The only territorial boundary, relevant to the separation of Jews from Gentiles, was the inscription placed between the 'court of the Gentiles' and the 'court of the Jews' in the Temple.

But the real boundary between Jews and Gentiles was attitudinal, the latter “benefiting” from a consciously assumed contempt from the Jews like that which the Pharisees provided to the other Jews for their poor observance of the prescriptions of the Law.

Thus, they avoided the nearness of pagans, tax collectors, harlots, sinners, the wounded and the dead, to keep themselves clean and pleasing to God.

The book of *Acts* gives us clear information about how the early Christians, exclusively Jews, kept the border between Judaism and Gentiles holy. The Jerusalemite Christians were strikingly like those who received the Matthean version of the Gospel: they were very familiar with the Law and the Temple, strictly observed all the commandments, including the rabbinic ones, but at the same time lived in communion and breaking of bread. For all these Christians, “tax collectors” and “pagans” were everyday realities, as was the collective Jewish attitude (whether the Jews were Christians or not) towards these repugnant people.

### **The salvation of pagans and tax collectors**

The Gospel of Matthew allows us to believe that tax collectors together with Gentiles can inherit the kingdom of heaven. The Centurion of Capernaum, whom St Luke tells us built the synagogue of the Jews in that city, whose servant was healed by word alone, and the Canaanite woman, whose daughter Jesus healed as he spoke to her, are eloquent examples of the fact that God's love is not exclusively within the borders of the Jewish world. The faith of the Centurion and the faith of the Canaanite woman are praised by the Saviour in comparative assessments which did not do credit to those who considered themselves children of God: “I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel” (Mt 8:10), and “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt” (Mt 15:28)<sup>21</sup>.

In the case of these pagans who have been saved by the Lord, we see a previous preparation and an assumption of their condition as pagans, with humility. The family context in which the families of the Gentiles know their need of God is also compared to Abraham's family, in which his children sit at a separate table from the Gentiles, or at most the Gentiles (like dogs) feed on the crumbs that fall from their masters' table (Mt 15:27).

Therefore, even if they have partaken of God's mercy, these exemplary pagans do not sit at a table with the Jews and cannot be considered heirs of the kingdom of heaven: “many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 8:11-12)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> This woman could be compared to the Moabitess Ruth, who became a Jewess known for her faith and determination to devote herself exclusively to her mother-in-law.

<sup>22</sup> The Gentiles are not the lost sheep of the house of Israel, for whom Christ became incarnate, but are the people to whom he will turn his face only after a persistent request from the Apostles, as representatives of the Church. Glenna Jackson, “Enemies of Israel: Ruth and the Canaanite woman,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 59.3 (2003): 789.

This prophecy has not been fulfilled. The Gentiles do not sit at a table with the Jews even after they become Christians, and the former's adoption will be conditional on faith. The systematization of the teaching about the reception of Gentiles into the Christian Church, which was composed exclusively of Jews, was done in the middle of the apostolic age, based on the most familiar definitions of the chosen people.

Ethnic exclusivism, based on Abrahamic filiation, entitles Jews to inherit the Kingdom. The Apostle Paul demonstrates that Abraham had other sons promised by God, who are his descendants, true sons because they have faith, like their father: "They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son." (Rom 9:8-9).

The children of the flesh, though born in his house, to the extent that they do not become Christians, are not his true sons, because they do not have faith like their father. So, Christians, though not Jews and circumcised, are true sons of Abraham: "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph 3:6).

In this context, it can be seen that the most sensitive point in the coexistence of Jews and non-Jews is the meal. A Jew can easily be defined by "what he eats", but also by "with whom he sits at the table."<sup>23</sup> The two categories of people could share the same faith if they could keep the unity of the meal.

There were clear rules about cleansing, for unforeseen situations of excessive closeness to those of another nation: "Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28), through ritual cleansings, washings specific to the Coshier laws. But the prohibition against dining with Gentiles is clear and imputable. Thus, St. Ap. Peter, after having baptized the Suzanna Cornelius in Caesarea Palestine, was rebuked by the brethren simply for having eaten with pagans: "And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them" (Acts 11:2-3)<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Tomson, "Jewish food laws in early Christian community discourse," *Semeia-Missoula* (1999): 193.

<sup>24</sup> The testimony about the pagans was radically changed through food. When a hungry Peter prayed to God, he received in a vision a tablecloth with animals he considered unclean, a symbol of the pagan Gentiles who used these foods. Peter's opposition "for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth" (Acts 11:8) receives the divine command not to consider unclean the food *and people* God has cleansed. Tomson, "Jewish food," 207.

While approaching Gentiles is permitted and recommended, if it is of material benefit to the Jews (whether they are Christians or not), sitting at a table with the “uncircumcised” is strictly forbidden.

The same Apostle, by the name of Kefas, made himself a servant in Antioch of Syria and separated himself from those who sat at Paul's table, when “some from James” came. Thus, the concern to preserve Jewish ethnicity, in the context of the threat of imminent pagan contamination at the Eucharistic table, causes a separation of Christian worship into two altars: that at which Paul serves, on the one hand, and that at which those of James serve.

This is the first challenge to which the Church had to respond: either decide that all Christians should be circumcised, thus becoming true Jews, or reconsider the situation of Judaism and welcome the uncircumcised to the Christian Liturgy without reservation.

In the Gospels, tax collectors are depicted in pejorative colours. For example, the greatest of the tax collectors in Capernaum, named Zacchaeus<sup>25</sup>, is perched on a sycamore tree, perhaps just at the time of fruit ripening. The customs officer, Levi, sits at the customs house and won't let anyone through without paying the fee. So, we identify the tax collectors as those who collected taxes for the empire, as direct imperial taxes, or for Herod's family<sup>26</sup>.

Other tax collectors are not as stigmatised. For example, those who collect the money needed for the relief of the famine-stricken people, for cultural activities, the newly instituted taxes (corban) and the temple offering: “And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute?” (Mt 17:24).

The humblest publican we know is St. Matthew. He declares himself a tax collector, assuming the status of traitor to the national cause by collecting taxes.

The conversion of the tax collector Matthew is the moment when the fundamental difference between the mass of Jews, in communion with one another, strictly separated from any mixture with pagans, including tax collectors, is observed. “And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him. And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his

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<sup>25</sup> Jesus sits at a table with the tax collectors in the guesthouse of Zacchaeus, whose name translates as “the righteous one” or “the pure one,” which contrasts strikingly with his designation as a “sinner” and one of the “lost.” Walker, “Jesus,” 234.

<sup>26</sup> Taxing the fishing on the Sea of Tiberias was to benefit Herod's family. The Mediterranean Sea brought income to the king. K.C. Hanson, “The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (1997): 100.

disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mt 9:9-13).

So, the salvation of the tax collectors and pagans is possible. The meal, as a sign of the communion of the chosen people, but also the foundation of the unity of the Church, in a Eucharistic context, is only possible for the Jews before Pentecost. For the Gentiles as well as for the Jews, Baptism is the Mystery that opens the way to salvation.

### Church discipline

From the very beginning, the Church has made clear rules for maintaining order in the early Christian community. Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 4), the incestuous man of Corinth, are some clear cases in which ecclesial authority was shown to restore discipline.

The Saviour's command to restore fellowship with the erring brother is surprising (cf. Mt 18:15-17)<sup>27</sup>. We note that Matthean ecclesial discipline is pre-synodal. Any condemnation of sinners by the Church in the Acts is much more radical and omits the two means of reconciliation (between you and your brother, then with two or three witnesses).

Is this an argument for the late writing of the Gospel of Matthew, influenced by the opening of the Church to the Gentiles in the early second century? On the contrary, we believe that this kind of discipline, in which members of the Church are punished in a similar way to tax collectors and pagans, only fits the exclusively Jewish Christian community, possible only before 44 AD. Also, given Luke's frequent use of "sinners" in places where "tax collectors" or "Gentiles" appear in Matthew, it demonstrates that the Lucan version is posthumous to the Matthean: "The problem of the chronological and literary relationship between Matthew and Luke cannot here be treated, but, on the face of it, it seems more likely that the later tradition would have substituted *sinners* for *tax collectors* and *Gentiles* than vice versa."<sup>28</sup>

*What kind of sin is targeted here?* Sin does not directly concern the brother who oversees, but another brother (cf. I Cor. 6:1), the Saviour's words are addressed to those who have the power to establish justice among the brethren. Trying to identify the sins that the "brother" does to be considered a pagan and a

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<sup>27</sup> Ἐὰν δὲ ἁμαρτήσῃ [εἰς σέ].

<sup>28</sup> Walker, "Jesus," 225.

fornicator, we can find in the writing of another Jewish hagiographer,<sup>29</sup> the following references to the sin of fornication and not only: “these, dreaming, defile the body, despise the lordship and blaspheme (heavenly) greatness” (Jdg. 8), “they despise what they do not know, and what they know by nature, like the beasts of the earth, they find their destruction in” (Jn 10).

Sin is the cause of separation from the other brothers, which is especially noticeable at family meals: “in relation to his countrymen, for whom the preservation of purity/separation from sin, and especially the separation from idolatry and its decadent temptations, had proved to be truly a *stumbling block*, Moses showed not only steadfastness in faith, but also much zeal and effort to acquire a greater closeness to God.”<sup>30</sup>

One issue that has not been thoroughly researched is the association between “a pagan and a tax collector” which becomes the attitudinal model for the lost brother. Was it not enough to be like a pagan, or like a tax collector? Why did he have to become like a heathen and a publican? The answer can be given by the conjunction *καί*, which can have an associative, explanatory or hierarchical role. To delineate the worst in the association of the two categories of people, a “brother” could thus end up without the chance of recovery, remaining lost forever (cf. Mt 18:15).

## Conclusions

“Jesus and the life of the Matthean community are in continuity with the traditions and promises of Israel's history. Indeed, as a result of this distinctive use of Scripture by Matthew, Jesus - and through him the Matthean community - is depicted as the fulfillment of that very history and tradition. This constitutes both a defense of Matthew's community and a challenge to the opposition.”<sup>31</sup>

Even though St. Matthew offers the prospect of salvation for the Gentiles, they are not overlooked for their great sins, the greatest of which is crucifying the Savior Christ.

The greatest mistake ever committed by anyone, in the view of Christians on the eve of Pentecost, is condemning the Savior Christ to death, being handed over to sinful men to be crucified. The Saviour's prophecy is thus rendered by

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<sup>29</sup> The author of the Jude “is a Jew, since in ancient literature and inscriptions the name never appears as that of a pagan”. Mihai Ciurea, *Epistola sobornicească a Sfântului Iuda. Introducere, traducere, comentariu și teologie* (Craiova: Mitropolia Olteniei, 2018): 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ion Reșceanu, „Fasting in the Old Testament: a means of Penitence for restoring man's relationship with God,” *Orthodox Theology in Dialogue* (2021): 156.

<sup>31</sup> J.A. Overman, *Matthew's gospel and formative Judaism: The social world of the Matthean community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990): 78.



Matthew: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again." (Mt 20:18-19). In the Acts we find that Peter rebukes the Jews for crucifying Jesus: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it" (Acts 2:23-24).

So, the blame for the death of the Saviour is shifted almost exclusively after Pentecost to the Jewish authority, Pilate remaining "washed" of sin, as are the soldiers and all those who laid hands on Christ, of course without piety<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, the appreciative condemnation of the lost brother as a "heathen and a publican" has no correspondence in the Christian Church of the second half of the apostolic age and refers to the common faults of the two categories of people, towards whom the entire contempt of the Palestinian Jewish community is directed.

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<sup>32</sup> The brother's fault is not compatible with anger "That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." (Mt 5:22).

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## Who are “the least?” *Ἐλάχιστος* (Mt 25:31-46) – a hermeneutical reconsideration

Hrisostom CIUCIU\*

**ABSTRACT.** The present paper deals with the interpretation of one of the Matthean texts that still raises problems to modern exegesis, namely the one relating to the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46), and this because of a term – *ἐλάχιστος* (v. 40) – translated with “the least”. The question to which the author tries an answer is: “Who are the little ones?” The approach of the work is not so much one of an exegetical nature, but it is of a hermeneutical nature. Beyond the difficulties that modern exegesis seems to have failed to overcome, the real challenge is the spiritual interpretation of this text, an interpretation which depends very much on identifying those who are “the least”.

This work attempts to harmonize the textual exegesis with the patristic interpretation, having the stated purpose of applying this text to the spiritual life, both relating to the person and community.

**Keywords:** *ἐλάχιστος*, the little ones, the least, the Gentiles, reversed pyramid.

### Introduction

One of the Matthean texts that still raises problems to modern exegesis is the one relating to the Last Judgment (Mt 25: 31 46), and this is because of a term – *ἐλάχιστος* (v. 40) – translated with “the least”. The word used here for “the least” is *ἐλάχιστος* (least in rank or estimation<sup>1</sup>), which is used as the superlative of *μικρός* (small)<sup>2</sup>. The latter is used by Matthew in 10:40, which is,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry George Liddell et al. eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 530.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Arndt et al. eds., *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 314.

as U. Luz states, “the closest parallel to 25:40”<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, this is the fact that presents to us the first problem in interpretation, because in 10:40 it is very clear that the evangelist refers to Jesus’ disciples, and no one can argue against this. So, here in 25:40, “the question is whether He means those who are hungry, sick, or in prison, and is giving a standard by which, He will judge all (Mt 5:3-10), or whether He is identifying Himself with the fate of the disciples and making their affliction His own (Mt 10:40-42)”<sup>4</sup>.

The exegetes did not agree on the identity of “the least”, primarily because of the lack of textual proofs. That makes things more difficult for universalist approach supporters because the Matthean use of *ἐλάχιστος* (2:6 and 5:19) cannot clarify the situation, thus giving more credit to those who extend the meaning from 10:40 to 25:40.

### **The two major interpretations: the “universalist”, and the “specific” ones**

Several directions of interpretation have tried to answer this question, but all of them can be summated in two directions: “universalist” – which translates this phrase with “all people” and “specific” – which translates this phrase with “the Christians” (either the missionary or all the Christians). The answer I propose in this paper will try to bring them both together, although it leans more towards the universalist one.

The truth is that only by literary means one cannot support convincingly one or another position. In our interpretation, we can only try to speculate, starting with the developing narrative in Matthew’s Gospel.

It is very clear that humility is the way of God, and that must be also the criteria of growth, both as an individual and as a community. As M. Silva says, “The kingdom of God is not attained by quarrels over precedence and lust for greatness but by being least, by self-effacing service, and by poverty, which relies entirely on the sufficiency of God’s help. The sayings about the little grain of mustard seed that becomes a great tree (Mt 13:31-32 par. Mk 4:30-32; Lk 13:18-19), the little flock (Lk 12:32), and those who are ‘least in the kingdom of God’ (Mt 11:11 par. Lk 7:28) are also to be interpreted from this standpoint.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, in Helmut Koester ed., *Hermeneia – a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 281.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Otto, “μικρός (ἐλάττων, ἐλάχιστος),” in Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, & Gerhard Friedrich eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., vol. 4) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 656-7.

<sup>5</sup> Moisés Silva ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 303-4.

Although he didn't emphasise that, we can draw from his observation that we can observe in Matthew's Gospel a development of his spiritual care for his community, taking as an analogy, the mustard seed. So, we can observe an evolution, a kind of crescendo, sustained by a few details. In the first place, we must observe the transition from the diminutive *μικρός* to the superlative *ἐλάχιστος*. Then when for the first time Jesus sent his disciples, He was very specific, telling them *not* to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans (10:6), but in the end, they were sent to all the nations (28:19), although they doubted (v. 18). Also, first time the disciples were told nothing about teaching the people of Israel, whereas in the end Jesus began exactly with teaching: "Go therefore and teach all nations" (Mt 28:19).

I think that this is something that helps us make a convincing case for the "universalist" approach. It is true that in 10:40 Jesus refers to the disciples or maybe, as Savas Agourides considers, to "a group of young disciples who were not held in great esteem in some circles in the church"<sup>6</sup>. Although Agourides said that "Matthew's aim everywhere is to establish their function and ministry in the church,"<sup>7</sup> this can be applied with success only to 10:40, and not so much to 25:40.

Origen's allegorical approach is a "specific" one, emphasizing the responsibility of the Christians for catechumens: "Those who are newly born in Christ are small, or those who remain such without growth as if they were newly born, for whom spiritual milk is necessary, who still belong to the flesh, as the apostle says, and are little ones in Christ incapable of taking adult food (1 Cor 3:1-2)."<sup>8</sup> D.E. Garland, who doesn't seem to like very much the ethical interpretation (although he didn't "negate the imperative to attend the needs of hungry, naked, and imprisoned that resounds throughout Scriptures"), agrees with the fact that "the least" are Christian missionaries. So, their proclamation would be the criteria for the judgment, stating that "those who scorned and despised Christians will discover that they scorned and despised the son of man who has all authority in heaven and earth."<sup>9</sup> These points of view raise another important question, very relevant to our purpose.

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<sup>6</sup> Savas Agourides, "'Little Ones' In Matthew," *The Bible Translator* 35.3 (1984): 329-34, at 334.

<sup>7</sup> Agourides, "'Little Ones' In Matthew," 334.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *The Commentary Of Origen On The Gospel Of St Matthew*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 421.

<sup>9</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001), 249.

## Who are those to be judged?

One might think that the answer is obvious, given that this parable is regarded as an image of the Universal Judgment. But the text does not support this fact, mainly because of the term *τὰ ἔθνη*, which, it is clear, refers to the “Gentiles,” that is, to those outside the Church. However, how this text is being accepted, at least nowadays, is beyond doubt. Because it is the Universal Judgment we speak about, then all will be judged. If those on trial are only the “Gentiles,” then it would follow that “the least” are Christians in general or the disciples or missionaries. This is the “specific” perspective.

If those being judged are all people – the universalist perspective – then “the least” can also be all those who – regardless of their position towards the Church – need help. This approach is also called the ethical perspective.

It is important to note that the verb “to inherit” *κληρονομήσατε*<sup>10</sup> from v. 34, can only refer to those who follow Christ and receive what rightfully accrues to them as sons. However, that implies only the quality of the addressees of that parable, without directly involving the “the least,” who may be in any category, in part or in general. I say all of this, to highlight the impasse from which exegesis fails to come out satisfactorily. What I want to point out here is that the existing tension is not testing either exegesis or hermeneutics alone. The tension exists *between* these two.

The exegetes did not agree on who was “the least,” mainly due to a lack of textual evidence. This makes things more difficult for the advocates of the universalist approach since the Matthean use of *ἐλάχιστος* (2:6 and 5:19) cannot clear the situation, indirectly giving more credit to those who extend the meaning from 10:40 to 25:40. To remain true, it becomes quite clear that only by literary means one cannot hold convincingly onto one position or another. In our interpretation, we can only try to speculate, starting with the developing narrative in the Gospel of Matthew.

Sherman Grey, although considering that “‘the least’ are Christians in general and not any specific group of Christians,”<sup>11</sup> sees that one of the “obvious points of the parable is that those who are gathered are the ones who are separated and judged.”<sup>12</sup>

Making a standing point from the parallel place (10:40-42), U. Luz argues the universalist approach, stating that we cannot have a case by saying

<sup>10</sup> *κληρονομέω* – v.imper.aor.act.2nd pers.

<sup>11</sup> Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31-46: A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Pr., 1989), 358.

<sup>12</sup> Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 353.

that those who will be judged are the Gentiles or the Jews who failed to accept the Christians. On the contrary, the word of God is mandatory for everyone, including Christians because "they also belong to 'all the nations,' and they will be judged by the same criterion as all other people. ... Thus, there is for Matthew no special group of the 'lowliest brothers' who have a special place and who are not subjected to judgment. In terms of the image of the parable, for Matthew, the 'lowliest' are mixed in with the others."<sup>13</sup> Here, U. Luz's point of view emphasizes that the Christians are the first responsible.

So, from the perspective of the judgment, *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη* (Mt 25:32) has a universalist interpretation, but is also clear that no one can make, and convincingly so, a clear interpretation (based on the text only) of this problem of the identity of "the least". This is the reason why I agree with the universalist approach but seen from the Church's spiritual perspective.

### **The orthodox response to an exegetical crux**

As I stated before, it is very clear that no one, relying solely on the text, can convincingly make a clear interpretation of this problem of the identity of the "the least," especially from a Matthean point of view. This is the main reason why, exegetically speaking, I agree with the universalist approach, but continued with the spiritual approach of the Church, more because, as Sava Agourides insisted, there is a major mistake that even modern interpreters make, ignoring the context that positions everyone the text speaks of, within the limits (of the Church)<sup>14</sup>.

The patristic interpretation extracts from the answer to the question put in Matthew, chapter 18 (answer given in vv. 3-4), the quality of humility, interwoven with innocence, and cleanliness. Modern exegetes, remaining faithful to the historical-critical approach, add to what the Holy Fathers said and their willingness to accept the insignificant position that children routinely held in Jewish society.

St. John Chrysostom says that "'the Gentiles' refer to all the people on earth."<sup>15</sup> But St. John does not stop here, but continues, basing his ending on the fact that Christ calls these "the least," his brothers: "What do you say, Lord? Are they your brothers? Then what do you call them "the least" for? That's why are they, my brothers. They are humble because they are discarded and disregarded.

<sup>13</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 281-2.

<sup>14</sup> Agourides, *Little Ones*, 330.

<sup>15</sup> Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Matei*, in *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 23, trans. by Dumitru Fecioru (București: IBMO, 1994), 896.



One of these is called brothers by Christ; people that the world does not want to know about, whom the world despises. I speak not only of these monks and of those who dwell in the mountains, but of every believer; even though he lives in the world, if he is hungry and dies of hunger, if he is naked and alien, Christ wants him to enjoy all this care. Baptism and communion with the Holy Sacraments make us brothers.”<sup>16</sup>

Also, Origen, as expected, develops from this text, an allegorical interpretation by which we emphasize the responsibility of all of us in the Church to give to the needy the spiritual goods with which we have been endowed by God<sup>17</sup>, leaving us to understand – as we have shown above – that the addressees are nevertheless those within the Church.

We’re all responsible for someone in the Church. We all have the same goal – to approach (all of us!) the Holy Chalice and unite with Christ. All those who depend on someone are actually “the least” in comparison with him because their growth depends on his actions. Both approaches can be applied here: universalist and specific. The expression can be applied – at the same time – to the disciples of Jesus<sup>18</sup>, who towards Him (being in direct relation of dependence on Him) are “the least,” but also to all Christians who, because in the Church they are seated in hierarchical levels, depend on those on the upper level (both hierarchical and spiritual). Again, at the same time, they can apply to all those within the Church, but also to those outside the Church, because the expression is uttered in the context of the Last Judgment, at which time the Gospel was already preached to everyone. Also, in 5:44-48, Matthew shows the same universalist point of view, and we can recognize here the “ripple effect” I was talking about. In all these cases, those who are judged are those who are on the higher levels (hierarchical and/or spiritual), because they are the ones who carry the burden of responsibility (Lk 12:48). Of course, this “rule” also applies in the case of those outside the Church. In this case, everyone *inside* the Church – all Christians – are judged, because they are first asked to fulfil (by imitating Jesus) God’s desire, “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). This imitation – in love – of Jesus is the one described in Jn 13:1, 14-15. It is obvious that “the least” are those who are “needy”, as Origen (and other exegetes as well), but it is equally obvious that we are not all on the same level in terms of need, and these needs can be met by others (Ps 133:1-3).

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<sup>16</sup> Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omiliile la Matei*, 897.

<sup>17</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 72*, in Manlio Simonetti ed., *Matthew 14-28*, coll. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 233.

<sup>18</sup> So, Luz, who understands the phrase as referring to those who are in the ministry of teaching. Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 265-66.

The perspective that I propose in this paper is not a simple answer to the initial question – otherwise, it has been seen from what has been said so far that such an approach is almost impossible – but tries to unite in a less usual way, the two perspectives – universalistic and specific. The “the least” may be forgotten, and disregarded by all, but at the same time being “the least” is also a calling, an ideal that Christ puts before us. Only an ethical solution would be simply not enough for a true Christian. Of course, seeing Christ in every man is a good and necessary thing. But, being a “brother” of Christ, becoming like Him and uniting with Him... Here is the real call! It is a reversal of hierarchical principles, an overturning of the paradigm that Christ, through Holy Evangelist Matthew, is proposing to us.

My thesis is that “the least” are all “the dependents”. It is almost the same thing as saying that “the least” is “the needy”, but from a different perspective. The emphasis here is put on the responsibility. A “dependent” is someone who, at some point, is someone’s responsibility. This is an important nuance because it answers the question: Who are those to be judged? This approach states that everybody will be judged, because, to some extent, we all are responsible for someone, and at the same time everyone is someone’s responsibility, regardless of their beliefs (5:44-48). What is important here is that our responsibility has a “ripple effect”, beginning from those very close to us – who depend on us to a higher degree – and stretching towards those who are further away from us and, consequently, depending to a lesser degree upon us.

### **Saint Sophrony Sakharov’s inverted pyramid**

There is a way to corroborate all the aspects previously presented to this point and concentrate them into an image of the Church – which we know about from Saint Sophrony Sakharov – as an inverted pyramid resting on the shoulders of Christ himself. On his shoulders stood the patriarch and above them the metropolitans, the bishops, the clergy, and people, directed upwards; each rank bearing the burdens of those above him. This image will lead us eventually to the conclusion that we shall consider that the “little ones” are all those who, relying on our help, are above us: “Our Lord took this pyramid and inverted it, and put Himself at the bottom, becoming its Head. He took upon Himself the weight of sin, the weight of the infirmity of the whole world. ... Christ alone holds the pyramid, but His fellows, His Apostles, and His saints come and share this weight with Him.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Archimandrite Zacharias Zaharou, *The Enlargement of the Heart* (Mount Thabor Publishing, 2006), 199-20.

Reading these words of St. Sophrony, we see much clearer the paradigm shift proposed by Matthew. Moreover, instead of asking ourselves, “Who are the least?” we now ask ourselves “How could we become the least?”

Father Sorin Bora brings forth a very relevant interpretation. Speaking of “the strong” in 1 Cor 8-10, he highlights the connection that the Holy Apostle Paul makes between knowledge/experience and power<sup>20</sup>, which together are the subject of love. If the matter of knowledge begins with me, he says, the matter of love begins with the other<sup>21</sup>. This, Rev. Ion Bora suggests, reminds us that being “strong” (or in our case “the least”) can become a matter of personal choice, for the love of Christ. Also, he argues that “the little ones” can be those from the Gentiles, who are potentially Christians, those who want to come closer to God<sup>22</sup>. I think that this perspective is a “sample” (to say the least) of an orthodox approach.

## Conclusion

In this parable, it seems that Christ reminds us that our goal was from the beginning to earn likeness to Him. Why then should we not interpret this parable – more so as it seems to be a truly final one – from the perspective of deification? From the point of view of biblical theology, I believe that the ethical interpretation is at least insufficient. That is why I propose this ending which combines reading in a universalist key – adopted by most experts – with the application of this perspective on a very personal level. I think it is the reading that St. John Chrysostom proposes.

Of course, just a simple analysis of the Scriptural text, cannot unquestionably support what I have said. However, as we saw, no exegete manages to do this. It is enough, a modern exegete would say, not to dangerously distance yourself from the text, so that your interpretation will alter its primary meaning. Honesty therefore requires us to recognize that moving apart from the is necessary to gain a vantage point, and this is rarely just for us, but for all those “dependents” to us. This is my conviction and testimony: reading the parable of the Last Judgment we are always challenged. And the smaller we become, to the point of being “the least,” the more challenged we are.

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<sup>20</sup> Ion-Sorin Bora, “‘Cei tari’ și ‘cei slabi’, după 1 Corinteni 8-10,” *Altarul Banatului* 7-9 (2012): 58-79, at 64.

<sup>21</sup> Bora, “‘Cei tari’ și ‘cei slabi’,” 65.

<sup>22</sup> Bora, “‘Cei tari’ și ‘cei slabi’,” 71.

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## Criteria at the Last Judgment from Matthew 25:14-46

Georgel REDNIC\*

**ABSTRACT.** This study analyses the criteria for judgment presented in the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30) and the Parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) in the Gospel of Matthew. It explores whether these parables refer to the criteria for judgment of Christians and non-Christians, respectively. After providing background on eschatology and judgment in Scripture, the study examines the usage of key Greek words like “ethnos” (nation) and “adelphos” (brother) to support the interpretation that the Last Judgment passage refers to non-Christians. It highlights exegetical difficulties in viewing this as a judgment of “unconscious Christians” and proposes that non-Christians are judged based on acts of mercy towards Christ’s disciples. In contrast, the Talents parable is presented as outlining the criteria for judgment of Christians – namely, their use of God-given gifts and abilities to serve others. So, while non-Christians are judged by how they care for Christ’s followers, Christians face judgment for how well they use their unique gifts. Together these parables present a complex picture of the diverse criteria, for both Christians and non-Christians, at the final judgment.

**Keywords:** Eschatology, Judgment, Parable of the Talents, Parable of the Last Judgment, Christians, Non-Christians, exegesis, ethnos, criteria

### Preliminaries

The Last Judgment is an event which, together with the Second Coming of Christ, the Resurrection of the Body, the End of the World and its Transformation and Eternal Life, but in conjunction with the entire history of mankind, forms

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what is received in theology as Eschatology<sup>1</sup>. It is certain that “those from the beginning (πρωτολογία), and the whole history of salvation cannot be understood without their ultimate fulfilment (τὰ ἔσχατα)”<sup>2</sup>, so that neo-patristic ecclesiologies within Orthodox Christianity have oscillated between understanding the Church either eschatologically or protologically<sup>3</sup>.

Given that in newtestamental eschatology “there are both things that have already been fulfilled and things that have not yet been fulfilled from the promise made,” and that “there is a realized aspect and a future aspect” some theologians have spoken of an “inaugurated eschatology”<sup>4</sup>. In this context, we can ask ourselves whether, when it comes to judgement, we can speak of a present judgement, but also of a future judgement, a judgement that has begun and a final judgment. Drawing on texts such as Jn 8:50; Rom 1:18, 22, 26, 28; Rev. 18:8, it has been stated that “as in the Old Testament, God’s judgments are not limited to the future, but are already at work in the life of man in the present time ... therefore, the judgment of men is already at work, because they show by their evil deeds that they *love darkness and not light* (Jn 3:19)<sup>5</sup>”. At the end of the ages there will be universal judgment and one of its criteria “will be the practice or non-practice of the love of man, which has its firm foundation in the vision of God through man, in his rootedness in God, in the understanding of his fellow man as the image of God<sup>6</sup>”. The one who will judge will be Christ Himself,

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<sup>1</sup> Father Brie points out that “eschatology should not be confused with the end of the world, nor should it be limited to the description of the events that accompany the second coming of Christ: the resurrection of the dead, judgment, heaven and hell. Eschatology refers to a new order of existence, an ultimate state of transfiguration, beyond history, which is the object of Christian prayer and hope: Thy kingdom come (Mt 6:10), but which is already present here and now, and which confronts present history: the kingdom of God is among you (Lk 17:21)”. See Ioan Brie, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă* (București: IBMO, 1994), 155.

<sup>2</sup> Marian Vild, *Eshatologia Paulină* (București: Ed. Univerității, 2017), 27.

<sup>3</sup> For a broader overview see Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Apostolic al primelor secole* (Sibiu: Deisis/Stavropoleos, 2008), 51-3. Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas argues that “the Church begins at Pentecost, understood as the eschatological event of the gathering of the new People of God by the Holy Spirit around the Risen Christ, the Son of the Father, surrounded by apostles as the icon of the future Kingdom”, while Professor Ioannis Karmiris writes of the Church “protologically as a divine-angelic-human, universally pre-existent organism with the divine Creator Logos as its Head”. Professor Nikos Matsoukas goes further and combines the two views saying, “as a mystery, the Church cannot be defined, but only described; it is not a mere institution but has the dimensions of creation and an eschatological dynamism, it is a theoanthropocosmic organism”.

<sup>4</sup> R.J. Bauckham, “Eshatologie,” in *Dicționar Biblic*, trans. Liviu Pup and John Tipei, ed. J.D. Douglas (Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 1995), 405.

<sup>5</sup> B.A. Milne, “Judecată,” in *Dicționar Biblic*, trans. by Liviu Pup și John Tipei, ed. J.D. Douglas (Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 1995), 720.

<sup>6</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 3 (București: IBMO, 1997), 288.

for “the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (Jn 5:22), so that “the one who will judge will be everything: and witness and proof and Judge. He knows them all well that *all are empty and uncovered before His eyes* (Heb 4:13)<sup>7</sup>”.

If we were to limit ourselves only to the Gospel of Matthew, apocalyptic eschatology is a complex worldview in which the focus is on the final judgment and its consequences, all developing within a framework of dualism and determinism<sup>8</sup>, so that the Parousia and Judgement were seen as the culminating points of Matthean eschatology<sup>9</sup>.

### **The general context of the two parables in Mt 25:14-46 and their connection to eschatology**

The disciples in the vicinity of the temple in Jerusalem are impressed by its walls and draw the Savior's attention to their greatness Mt 24:1. In this context He predicts the destruction of the temple (Mt 24:2), and the disciples associate this event with the second coming and the end of the age (Mt 24:3)<sup>10</sup>. Thus, Jesus must not only strengthen them but also come up with some clarifications/signs about what will happen after his passion, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven and until he comes again (Mt 24:4-31). The disciples are urged to recognize the signs that foreshadow his return (Mt 24:32-5), but also warned of the imminence of his second coming (Mt 24:36), using various parables to this end, urging them to be prepared and awake (Mt 24:37-25:13).

If we consider only the Parable of the Talents Mt 25:14-30, we can also see in its elements of judgment: *συναίρει μετ' αὐτῶν* / “has dealt with them”

<sup>7</sup> Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur, *Omilia la Matei*, in *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 23, trans. Dumitru Fecioru (București: IBMO, 1994), 654.

<sup>8</sup> Apocalyptic eschatology can be broadly defined as a comprehensive worldview which emphasises the final judgement and its aftermath within a dualistic and deterministic framework. This distinctive and often vengeful vision of reality was vigorously adopted by Matthew and dominates his gospel. David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), in introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Schanckenburg in his commentary identifies several highlights within the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 16:13-20; 28:16-20). Likewise, when he analyses the end times he speaks of two climaxes: the first the Second Coming (Mt 24:29-31) and the second the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46). Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Matthäusevangelium 16,21-28,20* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1987), 248.

<sup>10</sup> St. John Chrysostom says that the disciples “eagerly desired to know the day of his coming, for they longed to see that glory which was the cause of many good things.” Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Matei*, 848.



(v. 19)<sup>11</sup>; ἄρατε / “take” and δότε / “give” (v. 28); ἐκβάλετε / “throw away” (v. 30)<sup>12</sup>. Commentators have pointed out that “Matthew 25:31-46 is not the only Matthean pericope which offers a description of the judgement”, so that in addition to the dialogue between the Son of Man as Judge and the wicked in general, we can also find the dialogue between Jesus as Judge and the false Christian prophets (Mt 7:21-23), as well as the fact that the disciples, “in the restoration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory... shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Mt 19:28). Even if it is unlikely that Saint Matthew sought a theological systematization of the judgment, the question may be raised as to whether in his “envisage one judgement for the church (7:21-3) and another for the gentiles (25:31-46) over both of which the Son of Man presides, and a third judgement of Israel by the disciples (19:28)?”<sup>13</sup>

Both the parables of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30) and of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) spoken in the context of the judgment at the end of the ages<sup>14</sup>, can be interpreted eschatologically even if they “do not focus on the event of Jesus' return, but on the use of the time before his return”. Given that the two parables follow one after the other, and that an analysis of the second raises serious exegetical questions about who is being judged, it has been argued that in the first parable, “it is only the disciples” and in the second “only the non-disciples”, so that in the first “the disciples are held accountable” and in the second “those who have done good to the disciples are rewarded”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Referring to this expression some commentators say “this is obviously a figure for the eschatological judgment” Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33b (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1995), 735. Gerhard Maier after the introductory excerpt in which he clarifies to whom the judgment in the two parables is addressed says referring to these words “Christians also must give an account”. Gerhard Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, vol. 1-2 (Krontal: Lumina Lumii, 2000), 860.

<sup>12</sup> The imperative forms themselves betray a decision of a judge. Commentators have argued that “der zurückkehrende Mann ist Christus bei seiner Parusie. Ähnlich wie in Jungfrauengleichnis werden bestimmte Metaphern und Motive aufgenommen: der in die Ferne reisende Mann, das Auftraggeben, das Rechenschaf-Ablegen, Lohn und Strafe, Freundemahl und Finsternis der Hölle”. Schnackenburg, *Matthäusevangelium*, 245-6.

<sup>13</sup> Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 126-7. On the other hand, it was pointed out that “will be two judgments in the End-time: that which The Man will execute upon the continuing community, the Church, which is properly The Man's Kingdom, and is in Matthew conceived of as temporary, and the judgment which the Father will execute upon all men, accepting The Man's judgment upon his own Kingdom.” W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), C.

<sup>14</sup> If we are to relate to this event exegetes have pointed out that “the judgement by Jesus the Son of Man is one of the most important elements in Matthew's gospel”. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 110.

<sup>15</sup> Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, 857.

## Arguments in favour of interpreting the parable of the talents as a criterion of judgment

The existence of a judgment of God on all men at the end of the ages is an undeniable reality for Christians and is closely related to other eschatological events<sup>16</sup>. In the Old Testament God appears to us as “the Judge of all the earth” (Acts 18:25); as the One who “knows works and thoughts” and who “will gather all nations and languages” (Is 66:18); as “the One who does not look for gifts in the face and does not receive them” so that when he judges he “does justice to the stranger and the fatherless and the widow” (Dt 10:18); as the One who “will pronounce judgments against” those whose way does not lead to purity and holiness (Jer 4:11-12).

In the New Testament God appears to us as the “Judge of all” (Heb 12:23), therefore “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God/Christ” (Rom 14:10) “that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practised, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). Since God “the Father judge anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son” (Jn 5:22) at the final judgment “all the nations will be gathered before Him” (Mt 25:32). The expressions “days of the Son of Man” (Lk 17:22 f.s.), “Day of the Lord” (2 Pt 3:10; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Thes 2:2), “day of Christ” (Phil 1,10) or “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14; 5:2) only reinforce Who it is That will do the judging and what its effect is “the unrighteous under punishment for day of judgment” (2 Pt 2:9), and the righteous “no one shall snatch them out of My hand” (Acts 10:28).

Even though so far we have emphasized that there is a day of future judgment, it should not be neglected that “like the Kingdom of God, it is already present, but not fully, somehow the latter judgment is already present through God's care<sup>17</sup>”. John the Baptist testifies about the One who comes after Him that He will execute judgment because “the winnowing fan is in His hand, And He will thoroughly cleanse His threshing floor and will gather His wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn up whit unquenchable fire” (Mt 3:11-2).

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<sup>16</sup> Father Stăniloae says: “The universal judgment is placed by Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers in close connection with the end or renewal of the world and the resurrection of the dead, which are also simultaneous with the coming of Christ, or caused by it”. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică*, 286.

<sup>17</sup> Vild, *Eshatologia Paulina*, 233. Rev. Professor Stelian Tofană writes in the same vein “each generation of people is imminently living the realities of eschatological time, not yet fulfilled, but on the way to its fullness. From this point of view, every human being is contemporary with the finality of eschatological time, in its fullness”. Stelian Tofană, *Evangelhia lui Iisus – Misiunea cuvântului* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, <sup>2</sup>2018), 352.

The Saviour warns those who listen to Him that “he who believes into Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe has been condemned already” (Jn 3:18), He “judges as He hears” from the Father (Jn 5:30) and with Him (Jn 8:16), He is giving Him “authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man” (Jn 5:27). That the judgment is not only a distant event, but also a present one, the Saviour Himself testifies: “now is the judgment of this world; now shall the ruler of this world be cast out” (Jn 12: 31), and the Holy Spirit, until the end of time, has the mission “to convict the world... concerning judgment” (Jn 16, 8) so that not only the ruler of the world has been judged, but also the world that has placed itself at his disposal<sup>18</sup>.

Based on the reality of the judgments, but also on the words that “the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thes 4:16) and the context in which they were spoken, it can easily be said that there is a resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ<sup>19</sup>, before the resurrection of sinners and those who have<sup>20</sup>. Once they were resurrected and “meet the Lord in the air, and thus we will be always with the Lord” (1 Thes 4:17), so “when the Son of Man comes in His glory” (Mt 25:31) their judgment was fulfilled, and they will “judge the world” (1 Cor 6:2) together with Him whom they served while they lived in the body.

In the context of the above, but also in an attempt to overcome the exegetical difficulties raised by the text of Mt 25:31-46, there have been biblical scholars who affirm that the parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30) refers to the judgment of Christians, therefore the way we handle the gift received, together with the practice of love, will be a criterion of judgment, and the text identified

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<sup>18</sup> In this context “Jesus is not talking about the Last Judgment. He is talking about the process of judgment that the cross represents. That is where this world is judged. What does that mean? By Jesus hanging on the cross, the guilt of all men is revealed ... He Himself thus undergoes judgment and dies an atoning death in our place”. Gerhard Maier, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, vol. 6-7 (Korntal: Lumina lumii, 1999), 547-8.

<sup>19</sup> “The apostle refers here, however, only to those who have fallen asleep in Jesus (4:14), or in Christ (4:16), that is, only to Christians”. Vild, *Eshatologia Paulina*, 113.

<sup>20</sup> Saint Theophylact of Bulgaria in his explanation says bluntly that first, the “faithful and righteous Christians will rise, since they will be caught up by the clouds on high to go to meet the King of Christ ... unbelievers and sinners will rise after them”. Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Epistolelor către Tesaloniceni, Timotei, Tit și Filimon*, trans. Florin Stuparu (București: Sophia, 2019), 55-6. We find the same idea in Saint John Chrysostom's interpretation of this verse “when a king enters a city triumphantly, the righteous come out to meet him, and the condemned wait for the judge inside. In the same way, when a loving parent arrives home, his children and those worthy to be his children are carried out in a chariot to see and kiss him, and those of the family members who have upset him remain inside.” Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur, *Comentariu la Epistola întâi către Tesaloniceni*, trans. Izabela Grigoraș (București: IBMO, 2022), 181.

as the last judgment to the judgment of non-Christians<sup>21</sup>. Considering that inerrancy in both parables, whether Christian or non-Christian, leads to eschatological punishments<sup>22</sup>, even the loving action of Christians, weighed using gifts, or non-Christians will have eternal reward.

### **Textual and exegetical arguments for understanding the text of Mt 25:31-46<sup>23</sup> as a judgment of non-Christians**

That it is about the final judgment in this parable is something accepted by all commentators, but not so when it comes to the importance and how we should relate to its teachings<sup>24</sup>, or on the interpretation of words *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη* that can refer to 1) all human beings; 2) all Christians; 3) all non-Christians and non-Jews; 4) all non-Christians; 5) all non-Jews<sup>25</sup>, or *τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν*

<sup>21</sup> In this regard see Milne, "Judecată," 721-2; Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, 857, 870, 874. He draws attention to the fact that "occasionally it is said that here (Mt 25:31-46) it is about the judgment of the Gentiles". In Orthodox circles, we find the interpretation that after Christ's ascension to heaven He "will entrust to Christians certain goods and gifts, which they are to administer by careful work for the benefit of their neighbour and to the glory of God". Serafim Papacostas, *Parabolele Domnului*, trans. Teodosia Zorica Lațcu and Serafim Popescu (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2022), 439. Therefore, if we integrate the parable in the context of the universal judgement, then Christians are judged within it. Rev. Professor Stelian Tofană, having in mind this parable, suggests for reflection the idea that "the judgment will be according to the same criterion" of measure "the Lord ... gives us His wealth". Tofană, *Evanghelia lui Iisus*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> "Once again Matthew not only makes the overall point that actions within the community incur eschatological punishments, but he stresses as well that these sanctions will be the same as those which non-community members will receive (cf. 8:12; 22:13)." Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 238.

<sup>23</sup> The difficulty of interpretation is also because "the passage is unique to Matthew, being drawn from the evangelist's special source. The only partial parallels are to its opening and close". Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 740.

<sup>24</sup> On the one hand it has been stated that the text is a parable and not a direct biblical teaching and therefore in interpreting it we are not allowed to reach "conclusions in clear contradiction with many other clear sections of the Bible in general and the teachings of Jesus in particular". Milne, "Judecată," 721. On the other hand, it was said that "this narrative is based not on a fictitious story but on the description of a very real, though future, event. Despite some clear parabolic elements, the passage with its future tense forms is more properly categorized as an apocalyptic revelation discourse". Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 740.

<sup>25</sup> Hagner lists these concerning S.W. Gray who has analysed them in detail, grouping the last three as referring to pagans and showing that there is no place where any group is excluded. The second interpretation is based on the difficulty of understanding the judgment of non-Christians by standards they do not know, and the first has the advantage of being consistent with Mt 28:19. For more details see Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 742.

ἐλαχίστων which may concern 1) anyone belonging to mankind; 2) all Christians; 3) Christian missionaries; 4) Christian Jews<sup>26</sup>.

Since the same word ἔθνος<sup>27</sup> can refer to different realities we will try to group the meanings of this word in the New Testament (it is used 162 times):

In several texts in the Gospels (Lk 7:5; 23:2; Jn 11:48, 50; 18:35), as well as in Acts (Acts 10:22), the word ἔθνος is used to refer to the people of Israel. Only in one text in Acts 26:23 used the same time the word λαός for the people of Israel and the word ἔθνος for the Gentiles. In other texts the word ἔθνος refers to Gentiles (Mt 4:15; 20:25; Lk 21:24; FA 4:25; 7:7; 13:19; Rom 1:5; Gal 3:8; Rev 10:11; 14:8; 15:3).

This word can be found in about 100 places in opposition to either Jews or Christians (Mt 6:32; Lk 12:30). However, we have one exception where it is used, in the same verse, to designate both Christians and non-Christians Mt 24:7 ἐγερθήσεται γὰρ ἔθνος ἐπὶ ἔθνος / "for nation will rise up against nation".

In several texts, the word ἔθνος is used for gentiles and appears in antithesis with that of Jews (Rom 3:29; Rev 15:3; Gal 2:15; Eph 4:17), so that τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν θεόν / "the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thes 4:5) and therefore ὅτε ἔθνη ἦτε πρὸς τὰ εἰδῶλα τὰ ἄφωνα / "when you are Gentiles, you were always being led away to dumb idols" (1 Cor 12:2). The distinction

<sup>26</sup> Hagner comments on Gray's choices as follows: the fourth takes the word brethren too literally and therefore limits it only to those who are Jews by birth; the difference between the second and third is small, specifying that nothing in the text can argue that religious leaders are meant; it is almost certainly not meant to refer to human beings in general, but rather to brothers and sisters in the Christian community. For more details see Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 744.

<sup>27</sup> This word can be interpreted as "the largest unit into which the people of the world are divided based on their constituting a socio-political community – nation, people. FA 13, 19 *kai. καθελῶν ἔθνη ἐπὶ ἐν γῆ Χαναναίῳ* "he destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan. In several languages, the term meaning *tribe* has been extended in meaning to identify nations. In other instances, different nations are spoken of simply as different peoples. In certain cases, distinct nations are classified primarily in terms of their diverse languages." Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, word ἔθνος. In another dictionary we find the following meanings: 1. *a multitude* (whether of men or of beasts) *associated or living together; a company, troop, swarm*; 2. *a multitude of individuals of the same nature or genus, the human race*, Acts 17:26 *ἐποίησέν τε ἐξ ἐνός πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων*; 3. *race, nation*: Mt 21:43; Acts 10:35 *ἀλλ' ἐν παντί ἔθνη ἀπὸ καὶ δοθήσεται ἔθνεϊ* Mt 24:7 *ἐγερθήσεται γὰρ ἔθνος ἐπὶ ἔθνος* used (in the singular) of the Jewish people, Lk 7:5; 23:2; Jn 11:48, 50-53; 18:35; Acts 10:22; 24:2 (3), 10; 26:4; 28:19. 4. In the O.T., *foreign nations not worshipping the true God, pagans, Gentiles*: Mt. 4:15 (*Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν*), 6:32, and very often; in plain contradistinction to the Jews: Rom 3:29; 9:24; Gal 2:8, etc.; ὁ λαός τοῦ Θεοῦ Ἰωσ. καὶ τὰ ἔθνη, Lk 2:32; Acts 26:17,23; Rom 15:10; 5. Saint Paul uses τὰ ἔθνη even of Gentile Christians: Rom 11:13; 15:27; 16:4; Gal 2:12 (opposite Gal 2:13 to οἱ Ἰουδαί/οί, i.e. Jewish Christians), Gal 2:14; Eph 3:1, cf. Eph 4:17. Joseph Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers*, word ἔθνος

between the people of Israel and the other Gentiles is clear *ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔθνων ἀμαρτωλοί* / “we are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (Gal 2:15). Yet even though they do not know the law of God *ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν* / “when Gentiles, who have no law, do by nature the things of the law” (Rom 2:14). When speaking of the denial of the Cross we find both Jews and Gentiles together *ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἔθνεσιν δὲ μαρτίαν* “we preach Christ crucified, for Jews a stumbling block, for Gentile’s foolishness” (1 Cor 1:23).

By Saint Paul the Christians from among the Gentiles are called *ἔθνη* so that Cephas *τῶν ἐθνῶν συνήσθιεν* / continually ate with the Gentiles (Gal 2:12), and he is *ὁ δέσμιος τοῦ Χριστοῦ [Ἰησοῦ] ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν τῶν ἐθνῶν* “the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you, the Gentiles” (Eph. 3:1). At the same time, it is also used in contrast to those who are not Christians (1 Cor 5:1; 12:2). Even though Jews and Gentiles have a different salvation history one can see how God's mercy transcends these differences. The Holy Apostle Peter by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit observes *ἀλλ’ ἐν παντὶ ἔθνει ὁ φοβούμενος αὐτὸν καὶ ἐργαζόμενος δικαιοσύνην δεκτὸς αὐτῷ ἐστιν* “in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:35). In the same direction are the texts of Acts 10:45; 11:1,8. On the other hand, St. Paul is aware of his mission to *ἵνα εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν* / “announce Him as the gospel among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:16; 2:9 see also Rom 1:5; Eph 3:1-13) as *ἐθνῶν ἀπόστολος* / “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13). It should be noted that Saint Paul warns *ὑμῖν ἦν ἀναγκαῖον πρῶτον λαληθῆναι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ· ἐπειδὴ ἀπωθεῖσθε αὐτὸν καὶ οὐκ ἀξίους κρίνετε ἑαυτοὺς τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς, ἰδοὺ στρεφόμεθα εἰς τὰ ἔθνη* “it was necessary for the word of God to be spoken to you first. Since you thrust it away and do not judge yourselves worthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46 also 18:6; 19:9). Not least from the book of Revelation we learn that people were redeemed *ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους* “of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev 5:9), so there will be a lot *ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν* “of every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Apoc 7:9). In this broad context of Revelation, which considers all nations, the word *ἔθνος* appears in the context of He who shepherds with a rod of iron (Rev 12:5); He who conquers against the evil one (Rev 2:26); He who has a sharp sword in His mouth (Rev 19:15); of the two witnesses (Rev 11:2, 9); of the Beast that is warring (Rev 13:7); of the preaching of the Gospel to all nations (Rev 14:6); of the fall of Babylon (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 18:3, 23); of the binding and casting down of Satan (Rev 20:3), but also of his deliverance (Rev 20:8); of the new city (Rev 21:24)<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> In approaching this part, we have followed the structure and meanings identified by Hans Bittenhard in the article *ἔθνος* synthesising ideas where possible. See for more details Hans

Given this wide range of interpretations, the natural question arises as to which of the meanings the words πάντα τὰ ἔθνη<sup>29</sup> refers to in the Gospel according to Matthew 25:32. The word ἔθνος occurs 11 times in the plural, 4 times in the nominative form τὰ ἔθνη (Mt 6:32; 12:21; 25:32; 28:19), 4 times in the genitive τῶν ἐθνῶν (Mt 4:15; 10:5; 20:25; 24:9) and 4 times in the dative τῶν ἐθνῶν (Mt 10:18; 12:18; 20:19; 24:14). A contextual analysis of the verses makes it clear that in almost all cases the author is referring to Gentiles, those who are of a different race from the Jews. If we consider only the eschatological context, we see that the disciples<sup>30</sup>, being warned τότε παραδώσουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς θλίψιν καὶ ἀποκτενοῦσιν ὑμᾶς, καὶ ἔσθε μισούμενοι ὑπὸ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου<sup>31</sup> “then they will deliver you up to tribulation and will kill you, and you will be hated by all the nations because of My name” (Mt 24:9). In this context it is about the attitude of those who do not believe, towards those who believe. In the second text, we are told that καὶ κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν “and this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations” (Mt 24:14). This verse refers to those to whom the Gospel was preached, and they did not believe it<sup>31</sup>. In this case, it is the Gentiles who either resist the Gospel or those to whom the Gospel has been preached and have not believed in it.

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Bitenhard, “ἔθνος,” in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, Band III (Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag Rolf Brockhaus, 31972), 1318-20.

<sup>29</sup> The importance of interpreting this word in the parable is also stressed by Ulrich Luz „ the meaning of πάντα τὰ ἔθνη is the second fundamental question for the interpretation of our text”. See Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 130. Robert Gundry draws attention to two aspects: on the one hand “we can hardly restrict *all the nations* to professing disciples among all the nations. Such a restriction would violate Matthew’s use of the expression elsewhere”, on the other hand, “we can hardly suppose that he implies at least a formal conversion of all the nations – i.e., of everybody in the world – by the time the Son of man comes”. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 511. By this term “probably included, therefore, are the gentile nations, Israel, and the corpus mixtum of the Christian church – i.e., the reference is universal ... there are no clear markers in the text to indicate that any group is excluded (cf. 24:30), and, moreover, there are earlier indications in the Gospel that point to the future judgment of Christians (e.g. 7:21: 16:27).” Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 742.

<sup>30</sup> Saint John Chrysostom says that after the announcement of the woes that would befall the Jews “at the proper time he also spoke of the tribulations that would come upon the disciples”. See Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur, *Omilii la Matei*, 850-1.

<sup>31</sup> The words “to the witness of all nations” have been interpreted thus: “The gospel has been preached everywhere but has not been believed everywhere.... those who have believed will bear witness against those who have not believed and will condemn them”. Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Matei*, 852.

Given what has been said above about the meanings of the word *ἔθνος* in the New Testament, but also its plural meaning in Matthew's Gospel, in conjunction with the fact that "the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thes 4:16) and with the reality that "the saints will judge the world" (1 Cor 6:2), we would not force the interpretation if we were to maintain that the text of Mt 25:32 refers only to pagans and not to pagans and Christians together<sup>32</sup>.

The Greek word *ἀδελφός* with all the possibilities of interpretation from Holy Scripture<sup>33</sup> has been analysed in the footnote, so in what follows I will

<sup>32</sup> It has been said that "Matthew by no means ignores the eschatological fate of the Gentiles. He addresses this subject in his colourful description of the final judgement in 25:31-46. This tradition emphasises the completely universal nature of the judgement of the Son of Man by specifying that all the nations will stand before his throne of glory awaiting the final separation (v. 32). The Gentiles along with everyone else take part in this event." Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 231-2. Ulrich Luz assumes that the ambiguity of the text is due to the pre-existence of a text that the evangelist used, in which "the traditional text doubtless spoke of the universal judgement pronounced upon non-Christians while the Christian men and women took their places at the side of their great brother, the Judge of the world. Matthew's community was now destined to live among and minister to the Gentiles". Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel*, 131.

<sup>33</sup> 1) The word *ἀδελφός* has the meaning of brother (whether born of the same two parents, or only of the same father or mother): Mt 1:2; 4:18. The expression "brothers of Jesus" in Mt 12:46,47; 13:55ff; Mk 6:3 (in the last two passages and sisters); Luke 8:19 ff.; Jh 2:12; 7:3; Acts 1:14; Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 9:5, maybe Joseph's sons from a previous marriage as reported in the apocryphal Gospels, or cousins, children of Alphaeus or Cleopas and Mary, a sister of Jesus' mother as claimed by the Church Fathers. According to the Greek biblical language by *ἀδελφός* as by the Hebrew *ah* is meant any blood relative or kinsman (Gn 14:16; 1 Sam. 20:29; 2 Kgs 10:13; 1 Chr 23:2). Protestant theology, starting from texts such as Mt 1:25 and Lk 2:7 where the preposition *ἕως* / "until" and the word *πρωτότοκον* / "firstborn" are used, have affirmed that the Virgin Mary would have borne other children after Jesus. Regarding the text of Matthew 1:25 with the preposition *ἕως* / "until", until what, until when it should be noted that it also has the meaning of continuity, perpetuity (see Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testament* Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann Verlag, 1963, 662. Example: *καὶ αὐτὴ χήρα ἕως ἑτῶν ὀγδοήκοντα τεσσάρων* / "and a widow until eighty-four years old" – Lk 2:37). Metropolitan Bartholomew in the footnote points out that the verb preceding it "did not know her" rendered by the compound perfect in modern languages is in the original the imperfect durable (see Osty), i.e. it expresses an action that does not end, that has no end. See also texts 2 Sam 6:23; Ps 110:1; Mt 28:20. Regarding the term *πρωτότοκον* / "firstborn", Metropolitan Bartholomew says in his explanation that "in biblical language, the term firstborn does not necessarily imply the existence of younger siblings, but refers exclusively to the prescriptions of the Old Law, which gave the firstborn male a special dignity and special prerogatives, under the very incidence of scarcity (cf. Is 13:2; 13:14)". See also the argument based on the text of Col 1:15 and Rom 8:29.

2) the word *ἀδελφός* according to a Hebrew use of *ah* (Is 2:11; 4:18, etc.), hardly found in secular authors, the word brother refers to all those who have the same national ancestry, belonging to the same people, fellow-countrymen; thus Jews are brothers among themselves Acts 2:29; 3:22; 13; 26; Mt 5:47; Rom 9:3; Heb 7:5.

3) In Lev 19:17 we see how the word *xa* is used interchangeably with *ραα* (but, as Lev 19:16, 18, speaking of Israelites, shows), so also in Christ's sayings, Mt 5:22, 24; 7:3 ff. The word near



focus only on the meaning that interests us here. Certainly not considered are the blood relatives mentioned in several places (Mt 12:47; Mk 6:3; Jn 2:12; Jn 7:3; Acts 1:14, etc.). The Saviour, explicitly, says who his brothers and sisters are: “and stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in the heavens, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:49-50); speaking to the crowds and His disciples says: “but you, do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers” (Mt 23:8); after the Resurrection speaking to the pious women he says: “go and report to My brothers” (Mt 28:10); and to Maria Magdalena says “got o My brothers and say to them” (Jn 20:17). So given these texts, but also the analysis we have made of the word *ἀδελφός* it can be said that we have in mind His disciples in the broadest sense of the word<sup>34</sup>.

If we consider the expression *τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων* / “the least of My brothers”<sup>35</sup>, and the context of their utterance and associate it with texts

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is used for *ὁ πλησίον* to designate (as is evident from Lk 10:29 ff.) any seed – as having the same father with the others, that is, God (Heb 2:11), and as being descended from the same first ancestor (Acts 17:26);

4) the word *ἀδελφός* may designate a fellow believer, united with another by affectionate bond; thus, most frequently, of Christians, who are constituted as one family: Mt 23:8; Jn 21:23; Acts 6:3; 9:30; 11:1; Gal 1:2; 1 Cor 5:11; Phil 1:14, etc.; in courteous address, Rom 1:13; 7:1; 1 Cor 1:10; 1 Jn 2:7; however, in John’s phraseology, it refers to the new life to which people are born again through the efficacy of a common Father, even God: 1 Jn 2:9 and 4; 3:10.14.

5) The word *ἀδελφός* can designate an associate in work or office: 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 2:13; Eph 6:21; Col. 1:1.

6) the word *ἀδελφος* is used for a) all those mentioned in point 1 b) for all men: Mt 25:40; Heb 2:11-12 c) for apostles: Mt 28:10; Jn 20:17 d) for all Christians, as those who are destined to be exalted to the same heavenly greatness he enjoys: Rom 8:29. In presenting these meanings, I based my analysis on Joseph Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with Strong’s Concordance Numbers*, *ἀδελφός* and in places where I did not agree with his view (see item 1) I have also referred to other sources.

<sup>34</sup> “*These littlest brothers* can hardly denote an elite corps of Christian preachers in the church; for all those who do the will of the Father belong to the brotherhood (12:48-50) and *the little ones* refer especially to obscure people in the church, who are easily despised and prone to stray *but whose do the will of his Father* (12:48-50)”. Gundry, *Matthew*, 514.

<sup>35</sup> “It is brought to our attention that we are commonly tempted It is common to take this description in a universal sense, according to which the least of my brethren refers to the poor and needy of the whole world. On this view, the Matthean Jesus identifies with all the deprived persons of the world and will judge people, including those in the church, based on their treatment of them... This interpretation of the phrase, though widespread, must be deemed rather improbable in the light of Matthew’s sectarian outlook. It presumes that the Matthean community is ‘world-open’ when in fact it is closing itself off from the outside world... for Matthew the wider world is a place to be feared and avoided, and it is difficult to accept that he would have given much thought to the needy outside his community. Moreover, it is inherently unlikely that Matthew’s concept of dualism would have tolerated the explicit

in which the Saviour addresses the disciples with the words: “he who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who has sent Me ... and whoever gives to one of these little ones only a cup of cold water to drink in the name of a disciple, truly I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward” (Mt 10:40-2); or “for whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name that you are Christ’s, truly I say to you that he shall by no means lose his reward” (Mk 9:41), we are entitled to see in them all disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ<sup>36</sup>. Together these texts lead to the following idea “the response of the people to Jesus’ disciples and their witness becomes their response to Him”<sup>37</sup>, The Saviour identifies Himself with each of those who witness to Him<sup>38</sup>.

### **Exegetical difficulties in interpreting the parable of the Last Judgment**

The astonishment<sup>39</sup> of those on the right following the judgment of the Son of Man and the question they ask “Lord, when have we seen You hungry and have fed You? ...” (Mt 25:37-39) may be a starting point that the judgment is not addressed to Christians but to Gentiles. Those certainly being judged, at least

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identification of Jesus with anyone outside his group. A further and perhaps overwhelming problem for this view is that the use of ‘brother’ points to a community setting rather than a general or universal context (cf. 5:22-4, 47; 7:3-5; 12:49-50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10)”. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 232-3. If we take these clarifications into account, we would be rather tempted to believe that these words refer either to those who are part of the Matthean community or to those who preach the Gospel. In contradiction to this idea is Ulrich Luck who says “alle Menschen werden zu Brüdern, weil Jesus Christus, der jetzt als Weltenherrscher offenbar wird, sich für viele, d.h. für alle hingegeben hat (26:28)” Luck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 278. “Jesus thus identified himself fully with his disciples (1 Cor 8:12; 12:27; Acts 9:5)” Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 744.

<sup>36</sup> “He calls either his disciples or the poor too little brethren, for every poor man is a brother of Christ”. Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Matei* (București: Sophia, 2007), 381.

<sup>37</sup> Milne, “Judecată,” 721.

<sup>38</sup> “Aussagen dieser Art, in denen sich Christus mit bestimmten Menschen identifiziert, sind mehrfach belegt (10:40&2; Mk 9:37)”. Ulrich Luck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1992), 277. Other commentators go in the same direction “Jesus declares His identity with the suffering”. Albricht and Mann, *Matthew*, 306. Rev. Professor Stelian Tofană has the same interpretation of Christ’s encounter with Paul on the road to Damascus.

<sup>39</sup> “Ihr Erstaunen, das sich in ihrer Rückfrage äußert, erklärt sich aus der unerwarteten Begründung des Richters, für Christen wohl, weil sie den Menschensohn zu kennen glaubten, für Heiden eher, weil sie mit einer solchen Anrechnung ihrer Liebestaten nicht gerechnet haben”. Schnackenburg, *Matthäusevangelium* 16,21 – 28,20, 252.

apparently<sup>40</sup>, do not have the awareness and knowledge that during their earthly life, they met our Lord Jesus Christ. In this context, one may wonder whether this passage “is not about unconscious, latent Christians”<sup>41</sup> or “anonymous Christians”<sup>42</sup>. To approach the text in the sense of “unconscious, latent Christians” would contradict other texts which state that there are no such Christians, indeed the Saviour warns us about the commitment we should show “everyone therefore who will confess in Me before men, I also will confess in him before My Father who is in the heavens” (Mt 10:32); Saint Paul encourages Timothy to confess “do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord” (2 Tim 1:8); and to those in Rome he entrusts salvation only “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). The preaching of the Gospel and its acceptance (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15) entails a conscious keeping of the commandments (Mt 28:20), but also a faith that “without its works is useless” (Jas 2:20).

The observation that “these people considered righteous do not say that they have never given to eat, drink, etc. ... but only that I have never seen You (Jesus) hungry, etc.” leads us to believe that in this context it would not even be those Christians “who’s left-hand does not know what the right hand is doing”<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Saint Theophylact says that “out of humility I deny having done anything of what He says”. Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Matei*, 381. St John Chrysostom says, “does not speak of two or three persons, nor of five, but of the whole world” which is being judged, without going into details, and when he is to identify “the least of My brothers” he says “I speak not only of these monks and those who live in the mountains, but of every believer, even if he is living in the world”. Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Matei*, 895-7.

<sup>41</sup> Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, 874.

<sup>42</sup> This approach of “anonymous” or “implicit” Christians, by which non-Christians are meant, is in flagrant contradiction with the formulation of Saint Cyprian of Carthage “extra ecclesiam nulla salus” and has been problematized by the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner based on the text that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the full knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Those who followed him in this approach brought other arguments such as a greater tolerance and understanding of Christians towards non-Christians, the reality of the existence of a smaller number of believers in Christ than of non-believers, but also a cosmic Christology based on the text “because in Him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth ... all things have been created through Him and unto Him” (Col 1:16). Karl Rahner, *Die anonymen Christen*, in *Karl Rahner, Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VI, (Einsiedeln, 1965), 545-554). Ulrich Luz points out that even though in this parable “here the Church anonymous seems to make an appearance. It is my feeling, however, that this fascination rests on a misreading of the text. According to 23:8 and 28:10 the brothers of Jesus, the Judge of the world, can only be Christian missionaries (cf. 18: 4-6, 10), who are travelling without means of support and are thus dependent on the love and hospitality of others (cf. 10:9-14, 40-2)”. Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel*, 129-130.

<sup>43</sup> Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, 874.

One of the remaining possible explanations is that non-Christians would be considered and judged by their good deeds done with Christian missionaries<sup>44</sup>, but even this exegesis has its shortcomings, and "if we can interpret this parable in a way that does not imply any fundamental contradiction, but allows us to integrate it harmoniously with the other teachings of Jesus, it is clear that this is the course that should be followed"<sup>45</sup>.

The claim that this parable is aimed at non-Christians, at first glance, contradicts the words of Jesus: "no one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6)<sup>46</sup>, but also the apostles' confession that "and there is salvation in no other" (Acts 4:12)<sup>47</sup>. Ignoring this reality would lead to accepting the salvation of non-Christians based on good works, which would be tantamount to the erroneous conclusion that the Saviour died only for Christians, which is contradicted by the whole parable in which "everything is decided about the Person of Jesus: I was hungry – You gave Me food – when did we see You hungry?"<sup>48</sup>.

Given the context developed by the above verses and the identification of "the least of My brothers" with Jesus' disciples, but also those who were merciful to the disciples<sup>49</sup>, as being merciful to Christ Himself, we can hold the following statements "as Mt 10:40 ff. promises reward to those who do good to the persecuted disciples of Jesus, so this parable comforts the disciples in that it promises salvation at the last judgment to every man who has done good to them – for you have done good to Me. The disciples are the Body of Jesus (Rom 12:4 ff; 1 Cor 12:12 ff). So far does God's mercy go that for Jesus' sake he not only saves those who have become one of the members of the Body of Christ, but also those who have done good to one of the members of the Body of Christ"<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> "Matthew feels, quite self-serving, that the determining factor for the fate of the ethne (nations or Gentiles) in the Last Judgement will be their behaviour toward the Christian missionaries. Indeed, this was previously the case with the Israel mission (10:14-5; 23:34-6)". Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel*, 130.

<sup>45</sup> Milne, "Judecată," 721.

<sup>46</sup> "Jesus is the one mediator of salvation for all men ... That there are different ways of salvation is a misconception ... It brings into Christianity an element of intransigence ... through Jesus – and Jesus alone! – the disciples can go where Jesus is going now". For more details see Maier, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, 612; St. John Chrysostom says "I am the Way is the explanation of the phrase *no one comes to the Father except through Me* ... there is no other way that can lead you to Him". Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Comentar la Evanghelia de la Ioan* (Oradea: Ed. Pelerinul Român, 2005), 396-7.

<sup>47</sup> "The Greek text emphasizes particularly strongly that in no one else is their salvation". Heinz-Werner Neudrfer, *Faptele Apostolilor*, vol. 8-9 (Korntal: Ed. Lumina lumii, 2000), 96.

<sup>48</sup> Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, 874.

<sup>49</sup> "It is important to know that the Son of God is not only up in heaven, but also down here on earth, on our street, where we work, on the bus, in the hospital, in the person of every person in need and suffering." Tofană, *Evanghelia lui Iisus*, 353.

<sup>50</sup> Maier, *Evanghelia după Matei*, 875.

This exegetical approach does not for a moment challenge the judgment of Christians “according to the practice or non-practice of the love of man”<sup>51</sup>, but will only emphasize the reality that “God requires of us the works, according to the gifts he has given us and the circumstances he has bestowed upon us, that we should use them”<sup>52</sup>. So if non-Christians will be judged by the way they practiced love for Christ's disciples, Christians will be judged by the way they used the gifts they received<sup>53</sup> in the service of loving their neighbour.

## Conclusions

The universal judgment that will take place after the Savior's second coming is not only one of the highlights of Matthew's Gospel but of Christian teaching in general. While the text of Matthew 25:31-46 has been understood throughout the ages unequivocally as a criterion of judgment, even for non-Christians, few exegetes have seen in the text of Matthew 25:14-30 a judgment of Christians that takes place before the judgment of non-Christians. An analysis of some keywords in the parable of the Last Judgment that clarify who are those who stand in judgment and who are the recipients of acts of mercy can open a new interpretation of the text of the parable of the Talents. If in the first parable, we conclude that non-Christians are judged based on acts of love towards those who confess Christ in the world, we ask the question according to what criteria Christians will be judged and when the judgment took place. In this context, we can say that it took place a little earlier, in the parable of the Talents, based on the same acts of love, but they will give an account of how they put the gifts they received at the service of the love of their neighbour.

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<sup>51</sup> Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică*, 288. Commentators with this in mind said, “it seems, completely unexpectedly, to make the outcome of the Judgment dependent on love of those who suffer rather than on a commitment to Jesus (quite unlike 10:32-3)”. Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel*, 129.

<sup>52</sup> Papacostas, *Parabolele Domnului*, 449.

<sup>53</sup> Here we must point out that Saint Matthew in the words *ἐκάστω κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν δύναμιν* / to each according to his own ability Mt 25:15 “jeder der drei Empfänger den Betrag in Zalenten nach seinen Fähigkeiten erhalten hat” Luck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 271.

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## Resurrection and Resurrections. Some Insights into Matthew 27:51-54

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**ABSTRACT.** After Christ's death upon the cross, the gospel of Matthew is the only one that preserved a tradition about the opening of the graves and the resurrection of the saints (Mt 27:51-54). According to context, this resurrection of the Old Testament saints diverges from the concept of Christ as the beginner of the general resurrection. The article scrutinises the history of interpretation in patristic literature, modern commentaries, and the ideas of resurrection in early Judaism and Christianity. The author argues that here the gospel may preserve an ancient tradition about the victory of the Messiah which was further corrected to converge with the post-easter tradition about Jesus who was resurrected after three days.

**Keywords:** Resurrection, interpretation, Old Testament, Judaism, Pharisees, Sadducees

### Introduction

After Jesus died on the cross, Matthew narrates some extraordinary events: "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep (*πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων*) were raised (*ἠγέρθησαν*); and coming out of the tombs (*ἐξελθόντες ἐκ τῶν μνημείων*) after His resurrection (*μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ*) they entered the holy city and appeared to many (*ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς*)" (Mt 27:51-53 – NASB).

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This series of resurrections that happened before Jesus' resurrection raises some questions: How was the nature of this resurrection in connection with Christ's resurrection? Was it in line with other resurrections that already occurred during the period of the Old Testament, for example as the resurrected son of the widow from Sarepta (3 Kgs // 1 Kgs 17) or the resurrected son of the Shunammite woman (4 Kgs // 2 Kgs 4) or the resurrected dead man upon which the relics of prophet Elisha were thrown (4 Kgs // 2 Kgs 13)? If so, was it the same as the resurrections performed by Jesus himself: Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:41-56), the son of the widow from Nain (Lk 7:11-17) and his friend Lazarus of Bethany (Jn 11)? All these resurrections are relative because it seems that the resurrected people only gained life for a while, without acceding to the status of bodily immortality. After all, they were supposed to die in the end. Their resurrection means only bringing them again to ordinary mundane life.

Or was the resurrection of the saints from Matthew 27:51-53 the first instalment for "the resurrection on the last day (ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει ἐν τῇ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ)", as Martha knew to finally happen to all the people (cf. Jn 11:24)? But how then could Jesus be "the first fruits (ἀπαρχή) of those who are asleep" (1 Cor 15:20), if before him some other saints have already been resurrected? The text from Matthew 27:51-53 doesn't seem to fit the general Christian teaching about the importance of Jesus' resurrection as the first of its kind and the beginning of the resurrection of all humankind at the end of times.

### History of interpretation

Ulrich Luz<sup>1</sup> discerns five categories of interpretation: (1) one related to the history of salvation; (2) a Christological interpretation; (3) Christ's descent to hell; (4) allegorical interpretation; (5) eschatological interpretation.

Here the allegorical interpretation seems the most distant one to the text, because it goes beyond the literal meaning. Origen interprets allegorically the rocks that shattered as the prophets and the apostles who spread the gospel, the empty tombs as the bodies of sinful souls that were dead to God, but now have been raised, are made bodies of saints and are seen to go out of themselves in the holy city, whose citizenship is in heaven (*Commentary on Matthew* 139)<sup>2</sup>. For Jerome, the text alludes to a type of believers, "those who were formerly like tombs of the dead, when their former errors and vices are abandoned and

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary on Matthew 21-28*, in *Hermeneia*, trans. by James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 562.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald E. Heine (trans.), *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 755-757.

their hardness is softened, afterwards they recognize the Creator" (*Commentary on Matthew* 4.27.51)<sup>3</sup>. Hilary of Poitiers sees in the splitting of the rocks the Word who penetrates everything that is hard (*Commentary on Matthew* 33.7)<sup>4</sup>.

The allegorical interpretation eludes the literal meaning of the text and focuses on the spiritual analogy with the aspects of the Christian life. The historical sense might be acknowledged, as Origen who limits the extent of the resurrection of the saints to Jerusalem and Judaea: "For 'rocks were' not 'shattered' outside Judaea, nor 'were' other 'tombs opened' except those alone that were in Jerusalem or perhaps in the land of Judaea, not did 'the earth shake' at that time except in the region of Jerusalem" (*Commentary on Matthew* 134)<sup>5</sup>.

The third interpretation brings the episode of Matthew 27.51-54 in connection to Christ's descent to hell as the sequel of that event: first Christ went down to Hades to preach the gospel to the dead of the Old Testament, then he raised them along with his resurrection. Ulrich Luz considers 1 Peter 4:6 ("For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God") as the only New Testament text that supports this doctrine. But in the same epistle, the classical text about this doctrine is 1 Peter 3:18-20 – Christ "having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient...".

Echoes of this doctrine are found in St Ignatius' *Epistle to the Magnesians* 9.2: "If these things be so, how then shall we be able to live without him of whom even the prophets were disciples in the Spirit and to whom they looked forward as their teacher? And for this reason, he whom they waited for in righteousness, when he came raised them from the dead"<sup>6</sup>. Allusion to Christ's descent to hell to preach there the gospel is found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* 10: "When those soldiers saw this, they awakened the centurion and the elders, for they also were there to mount guard. And while they were narrating what they had seen, they saw three men come out from the sepulchre, two of them supporting the other and a cross following them and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was being led reached beyond the heavens. And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, 'Have you preached to those who

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas P. Scheck (trans.), *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 117 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 321.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Doignon, *Hilaire de Poitiers. Sur Matthieu*, vol. 2, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 258 (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1979), 256-257.

<sup>5</sup> Heine, *The Commentary of Origen*, 747.

<sup>6</sup> Kirsopp Lake (trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, in *Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 24 (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1965), 204-207.

sleep?', and from the cross was heard the answer, 'Yes'.<sup>7</sup> St Justin the Martyr records also a fragment from an apocryphal text of prophet Jeremiah (*Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew* 72.4): "And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out: 'The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation'<sup>8</sup>.

The most extended version of Christ's descent to hell is presented in the apocryphal literature of the Old Testament. In the *Odes of Solomon* 42.11-20 the sojourn in Hades (Sheol) is glorified: "11Sheol saw me and was shattered, / and Death ejected me and many with me. / 12I have been vinegar and bitterness to it, / and I went down with it as far as its depth. / 13Then the feet and the head it released, / because it was not able to endure my face. / 14And I made a congregation of living among his dead; / and I spoke with them by living lips; / in order that my word may not fail. / 15And those who had died ran toward me; / and they cried out and said, 'Son of God, have pity on us. / 16And deal with us according to your kindness, / and bring us out from the chains of darkness. / 17And open for us the door / by which we may go forth to you, / for we perceive that our death does not approach you. / 18May we also be saved with you, / because you are our Savior'. / 19Then I heard their voice, / and placed their faith in my heart. / 20And I place my name upon their head, / because they are free and they are mine"<sup>9</sup>. The same image appears in the *Ascension of Isaiah the Prophet* 9.12-18: "12And he said to me, 'They do not receive the crowns and thrones of glory – nevertheless, they do see and know whose (will be) the thrones and whose the crowns – until the Beloved descends in the form in which you will see him descend. 13The Lord will indeed descend into the world in the last days, (he) who is to be called Christ after he has descended and become like you in form, and they will think that he is flesh and a man. 14And the god of that world will stretch out [his hand against the Son], and they will lay their hands upon him and hang him upon a tree, not knowing who he is. 15And thus his descent, as you will see, will be concealed even from the heavens so that it will not be known who he is. 16And when he has plundered the angel of death, he will rise on the third day and will remain in that world for five hundred and forty-five days. 17And then many of the righteous will ascend with him, whose spirits do not receive (their) robes until the Lord Christ ascends and they ascend with him. 18Then indeed they will receive their robes and their

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<sup>7</sup> J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 156-157.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 235.

<sup>9</sup> James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, in *Anchor Yale Bible* (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1985), 771.

thrones and their crowns, when he has ascended into the seventh heaven"<sup>10</sup>. Finally, the *Sibylline Oracles* 8.310-314: "310He will come to Hades announcing hope for all / 311the holy ones, the end of ages and last day, / 312and he will complete the fate of death when he has slept the third day. / 313And then, returning from the dead, he will come to light, / 314first of the resurrection, showing a beginning to the elect".<sup>11</sup>

The connection of Matthew 27:51-53(54) with Christ's descent into hell became later well attested, as in St Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew* 23.7: "Graves were opened, for the gates of death had been unlocked. And a number of the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep arose. Dispelling the shadows of death and illuminating the darkness of hell, Christ destroyed the spoils of death itself at the resurrection of the saints, who saw him immediately"<sup>12</sup>. This became a standard explanation for the text of Matthew 27.51-53.

Some patristic exegetes wrote that the resurrected in Matthew 27.51-53 resembled Lazarus and other resurrected persons from the Old and New Testaments because they were supposed to die in the end. Apollinaris of Laodicea explained: "The raising up of the saints' bodies was announcing that the death of Christ was actually the cause of life. They certainly were not made visible prior to the Lord's resurrection, since it was necessary that the resurrection of the Savior first be made known. Then those raised through him were seen. It is plain that they have died again, having risen from the dead in order to be a sign. For it was not possible for only some of the firstborn from the dead to be raised to the life of the age to come, but the remainder [must be raised] in the same manner (fragment 144)".<sup>13</sup> St Jerome wrote: "Just as the dead Lazarus was resurrected, so also many bodies of the saints were resurrected. Thus they showed the Lord rising again" (*Commentary on Matthew* 4.27.52-53)<sup>14</sup>. Later on, St John Chrysostom seems to refer to the same thing in *Homilies on Matthew* 88.2: "For if for Lazarus to rise on the fourth day was a great thing, how much more for all those who had long ago fallen asleep, at once to appear alive, which was a sign of the future resurrection. For, 'many bodies of the saints which slept, arose', it is said, 'and went into the holy city, and appeared to many'."<sup>15</sup> In the

<sup>10</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, in *Anchor Yale Bible* (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1983), 425.

<sup>12</sup> M. Simonetti (ed.), *Matthew 14-28*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament 1b* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 297.

<sup>13</sup> Simonetti, *Matthew*, 297.

<sup>14</sup> Scheck, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew*, p. 321.

<sup>15</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, trans. by G. Prevost & M. B. Riddle, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 521.

post-patristic period, St Theophylact of Ochrid (Bulgaria) interprets that those saints were resurrected to become a sign of future resurrection and afterwards died again. He noted also the opposite interpretation that they have never died but added: "I do not know if it is worth accepting this teaching".<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the persons of the resurrected saints from Matthew 27.51-53, they tend to be identified with Adam, Abel, Enoch and other righteous according to the *Ascension of Isaiah the Prophet* 9.7-9: „<sup>7</sup>And there I saw all the righteous from the time of Adam onwards. <sup>8</sup>And there I saw the holy Abel and all the righteous. <sup>9</sup>And there I saw Enoch and all who (were) with him, stripped of (their) robes of the flesh; and I saw them in their robes of above, and they were like the angels who stand there in great glory”<sup>17</sup>.

The resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27.51-53(54) was also connected by some commentators to the first resurrection of Revelation 20:4-5: “<sup>4</sup>And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup>The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection”. St Jerome interprets the text in relation with a “special resurrection”, distinct from the general one: “But when it is said: ‘They appeared to many’, it is shown that this was not a general resurrection that appeared to all, but a special one to many. Thus those who deserved to behold it saw it” (*Commentary on Matthew* 4.27.52-53)<sup>18</sup>.

Nevertheless more supporters found in the discussed text the teaching of the general resurrection, as Ulrich Luz who concludes: „Of course, most interpreters assume that their resurrection was final and that they will ascend to heaven with Christ. This seemed to be more in keeping with the fundamental saving significance of Jesus’ resurrection that had preceded theirs (v. 53a) and also with the fact that, according to the general view, the persons who had already been raised were Israel’s patriarchs, Adam, Abel, Enoch, etc.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Matei*, in *Tâlcuiri la Sfânta Scriptură*, vol. 1 (București: Sophia, 2007), 416.

<sup>17</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, 170. J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha and the New Testament*, vol. 2: *Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works. Includes indexes* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1985), 170.

<sup>18</sup> Scheck, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew*, 321.

<sup>19</sup> Luz, *Matthew*, 564.

## Resurrection in the Old Testament and Judaism

Surprisingly, there are only a few texts, all of them late, in the Hebrew Bible about the resurrection. Besides the resurrection as a bringing to life for a while in Elijah and Elisha's narratives, general resurrection is reflected in the book of Daniel, at the very end. The text runs as following: "1Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise (Hebr. *ya'amod*, Gr. LXX *παρελύσεται* "will arrive", Theodotion *ἀναστήσεται*). And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2And many of those who sleep (Hebr. *rabbim miyyešene...*, Gr. LXX and Theodotion *πολλοὶ τῶν καθευδόντων*) in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life (Hebr. *leḥayye 'olam*, Gr. LXX and Theodotion *εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον*), but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3And those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars (Hebr. *kakkokhabim*, Gr. LXX *ὡσεὶ τὰ ἄστρα*, Theodotion *ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες*) forever and ever".

Nickelsburg supposes that beside angel Michael there was an angelic opponent as in Zechariah 3. The expression "will arise" seems to suggest a juridic context<sup>20</sup>. For some scholars, the book of Daniel refers to the general resurrection, as "many" mean here "all".<sup>21</sup> Other commentators saw in the expression "many" only a special category of loyal Jews who will receive the gift of eternal life.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Jewish expectations about the resurrection must be considered.<sup>23</sup>

In the period contemporary with Jesus, Jewish beliefs were diverse, and John Dominic Crossan is right that "Jesus not only lived and died as a Jew, he also rose as a Jew"<sup>24</sup>. Josephus Flavius, the historian who served also as a priest at the

<sup>20</sup> George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*, expanded edition, in *Harvard Theological Studies*, vol. 56 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, in *New American Commentary*, vol. 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 318-319.

<sup>22</sup> Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. di Lella, *The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, in *Anchor Bible*, vol. 23 (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1978), 309-310. John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 30 (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1989), 306-307. John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, in *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 391-392.

<sup>23</sup> Outi Lehtipuu, *Debates over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus in Its Jewish Context," *Neotestamentica* 37.1 (2003): 29-57 (here p. 29).

temple for Jerusalem shortly before its destruction in 70 BC, testified that Judaism was divided into three main religious groups: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. Regarding the Pharisees, Josephus wrote that for them “souls have power to survive death (ἀθάνατόν τε ἰσχὺν ταῖς ψυχαῖς)”; they believe that “there are rewards and punishments under the earth (ὑπὸ χθονός) for those who have led lives of virtue or vice; eternal imprisonment (εἰργμὸν αἰδίου) is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life (τοῦ ἀναβιοῦν)” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.14)<sup>25</sup>. In another place, he describes the doctrine of the Pharisees as following: “every soul... is imperishable (ψυχὴν τε πᾶσαν μὲν ἀφθαρτον), but the soul of the good alone passes into another body (μεταβαίνειν δὲ εἰς ἕτερον σῶμα), while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment (αἰδίῳ τιμωρίᾳ)” (*Jewish War* 2.163)<sup>26</sup>. In his own speech delivered to the fellow combatants during the war with the Romans, Josephus warns against suicide, saying that the righteous “are allotted the most holy place in heaven (χῶρον οὐράνιον... τὸν ἀγιώτατον), whence, in the revolution of the ages (ἐκ περιτροπῆς αἰώνων), they return to find in chaste bodies a new habitation (ἀγνοῖς πάλιν ἀντενοικίζονται σώμασιν)” (*Jewish War* 3.374)<sup>27</sup>.

Regarding the Sadducees, Josephus wrote that they affirm that “the soul perishes along with the body (τὰς ψυχὰς... συναφανίζει τοῖς σώμασι)” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.16).<sup>28</sup> But Josephus mentioned that only a few of them adhere to this teaching, while most of the Jews are adepts of the Phariseeism. The Sadducees were aristocrats, wealthy persons, who once acceded to official positions used to please the crowd promoting the doctrine of the Pharisees. The same description is repeated elsewhere: “as for the persistence of the soul after death (ψυχῆς τε τὴν διαμονήν), penalties in the underworld, and rewards, they will have none of them” (*Jewish War* 2.165)<sup>29</sup>. There is a confirmation of this overview in the New Testament: Luke 20:27 (“the Sadducees... say that there is no resurrection”) and Acts 23:8 (“the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them both”). In the second text, it is strange that although there are three elements (resurrection, angel and spirit), the Pharisees are said to agree with both. Some

<sup>25</sup> Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XVIII-XX, trans. by Louis H. Feldman, in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1965), 12-13. In Romanian: Josephus Flavius, *Antichitățile iudaice*, vol. 1: Cărțile I-X, trans. by Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1999); vol. 2: Cărțile XI-XX, trans. by Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, trans. by H.St.J. Tackeray, in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1956), 384-387. In Romanian: Josephus Flavius, *Războiul iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, trans. by Gheneli Wolf, Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, 680-681.

<sup>28</sup> Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XVIII-XX, 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, 386-387.

scholars<sup>30</sup> commented that it cannot be a question of denying the existence of angels or spirits, present throughout the Old Testament (there are not enough arguments to postulate that the Sadducees had a narrower biblical canon than the Pharisees, i.e. only the Pentateuch<sup>31</sup>). Rather “angel and spirit” regard the teaching of resurrection: they do not believe in resurrection, “neither as angel nor as spirit” (a relational explanatory accusative). That is, they do not have the idea that the soul, after subsisting like angels or like spirits, could finally be resurrected. This would be the best solution for understanding the text and would also agree with other texts regarding the vision of “spirit (πνεῦμα)” (Lk 24.37) and the vision of “angel” (Acts 12.15).

Finally, the Essenes held the third conception about the afterlife: “they regard the soul as immortal (ἀθανατίζουσιν δὲ τὰς ψυχὰς)” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.18)<sup>32</sup>; “the body is corruptible and its constituent matter impermanent, but [...] the soul is immortal and imperishable (τὰς δὲ ψυχὰς ἀθανάτους αἰεὶ διαμένειν)”. For them, souls are kept in bodies as in prison (ὡσπερ εἰρκταῖς), but “once they are released from the bonds of the flesh, [...] they rejoice and are borne aloft” to “an abode beyond the ocean, a place which is not oppressed by rain or snow or heat, but is refreshed by the ever gentle breath of the west wind coming in from ocean”, while the wicked souls are thrown into “a murky and tempestuous dungeon (ζοφώδη καὶ χειμέριον... μυχόν), big with never-ending punishments” (*Jewish War* 2.154-155)<sup>33</sup>.

## Resurrection in the New Testament

There were two directions to understanding the resurrection. Oscar Cullmann<sup>34</sup> considers that the idea of resurrection is not compatible with the

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<sup>30</sup> Floyd Parker, “The Terms «Angel» and «Spirit» in Acts 23,8,” *Biblica* 84.3 (2003): 344-365; David Daube, “On Acts 23: Sadducees and Angels,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109.3 (1990): 493-497; Benedict T. Viviano, Justin Taylor, “Sadducees, Angels, and Resurrection (Acts 23:8-9),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111.3 (1992): 496-498.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, in *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, vol. 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 266-268; Timothy H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon*, in *The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2013), 27-29. Lim criticizes the classical position of the restricted canon to the Pentateuch adopted by the Sadducees, represented for example by Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1985), 87-90.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XVIII-XX, 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, 380-383.

<sup>34</sup> Oscar Cullmann, “Unterblichkeit der Seele und Auferstehung der Toten. Das Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 12.2 (1956). In English: *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1958).



idea of the immortality of the soul. That is why, on the one hand, the resurrection in the original Semitic milieu was understood as a revitalization of the body, but on the other hand, the resurrection was accommodated to the Greek mindset and consisted in assuming a pneumatic form. The gospels preserved the Semitic idea: Jesus rose with the body and went outside the tomb. Even in the Gospel according to John, the warning *μὴ μου ἅπτου* (Jn 20:17) has not to be understood as “do not touch me”, as if the body is impossible to touch, but “do not hold on to me” (NRSV), “do not cling to me” (ESV), “stop holding on to me” (NAB), “stop clinging to Me” (NASB). In Paul the tradition of the empty tomb doesn’t occur because Paul insists upon the pneumatic or celestial body which is imperishable.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul envisioned a heavenly body for the resurrected: <sup>35</sup>But someone will say, ‘How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?’ <sup>36</sup>You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; <sup>37</sup>and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. <sup>38</sup>But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. <sup>39</sup>All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. <sup>40</sup>There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. <sup>41</sup>There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. <sup>42</sup>So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; <sup>43</sup>it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; <sup>44</sup>it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup>So also it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul’. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup>However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup>The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup>As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. <sup>49</sup>And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. <sup>50</sup>Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup>Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup>in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup>For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:35-53). This idea is further articulated in 2 Corinthians 5.1-4: <sup>1</sup>For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. <sup>2</sup>For indeed in this house we groan,

longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; <sup>3</sup>inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. <sup>4</sup>For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life". While in 1 Corinthians 15 the heavenly body is received at the Parousia, in 2 Corinthians 5 Paul underlines that already at the death the Christian will be clothed in the celestial form<sup>35</sup>.

### **Towards a Proposal**

Considering these observations, there is the possibility of interpreting the passage from Matthew 27.51-53 also in the sense of the initial message of the gospel. Jesus preaches the nearness of the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven in the Gospel according to Matthew. The kingdom will be established on earth, but by divine intervention, which meant Messiah's victory over all enemies of Israel. In the Kingdom of God, the Messiah will become the awaited king. The ascension of Messiah was to bring about national rebirth, seen as a resurrection (Ez 37) and eschatologically developed as a judgment with general resurrection.

But the Christian message must readjust this scheme to historical reality. Jesus the Messiah died on the cross, and his victory for the kingdom of God is still expected. It will come, with the Resurrection and the Parousia, but it is not yet realized. The Christian Messiah ascends therefore in two stages: first defeated on the cross, then resurrected in glory and revealed at the Parousia.

This two-stage coming also creates the adaptation of the general resurrection issue. Because the first ascension of Messiah is on the cross, the righteous from the Old Testament are resurrected at the crucifixion. But then they follow Christ in the resurrection, coming out of the graves after his resurrection. This resurrection would represent the inauguration of the general resurrection that will be at the Parousia, while for the Gospel of Matthew, as for the first Christians, the Parousia was expected in a very short time.

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<sup>35</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 40 (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1986), 98. Cf. Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: Translated with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, in *Anchor Bible 32A* (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1984), 265.

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## Matthew 28:16-20 - hermeneutical key to the Gospel of Matthew

Alexandru MOLDOVAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** This study analyses Matthew 28:16-20 as the hermeneutical key to the Gospel of Matthew. The text contains a narrative part about the eleven disciples meeting the risen Jesus in Galilee (vv. 16-17) and Jesus' final words commissioning them to evangelize all nations (vv. 18-20). The location of Galilee symbolizes openness to the Gentiles, fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. The mountain setting represents an encounter with God, as in other key moments of Jesus' ministry. The disciples' worship yet doubt (v. 17) shows imperfect faith, inviting readers to mature belief. Jesus claims absolute, cosmic authority from God (v. 18) as the basis for commissioning the disciples to "make disciples of all nations" through baptism and teaching (vv. 19-20). This universal mission corrects earlier limitations only to Israel. Teaching them to obey Christ's commands grounds the mission in Jesus' ethical demands. His perpetual presence (v. 20) assures guidance despite uncertainty. Thus, the text presents a mission paradigm for readers: Christ – centred proclamation for God's kingdom, not power; fidelity to Jesus' original disciples; invitation to internalize divine daughterhood; and responsibility to embody values commanded by Jesus. This call for active discipleship awaiting the Parousia proposes to resolve doubt into faith.

**Keywords:** hermeneutical key, Galilee, mission, disciples, nations, baptism, teaching, presence, discipleship

The text of Matthew 28:16-20 is considered by many exegetes to be a "key pericope" that helps us to understand the entire Matthean work, both through the theological reasons it contains and through the position it occupies

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at the end of the first canonical Gospel. This text is not only the end of this work, its last verses, but also the last words of the Saviour Christ, or the “testament of the Risen One” entrusted to the eleven to be handed down from generation to generation until the end of time (Mt 28:20)<sup>1</sup>. This pericope contains a theophany or Christophany: on the morning of the Resurrection the angel told the disciples that their Lord had risen “as he said” (Mt 28:6) and that “he is going before you to Galilee” where they will see him (Mt 28:7); therefore, “he eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain<sup>2</sup> to which Jesus had directed them. where Jesus had commanded them. And when they saw him they worshipped him” (Mt 28:16-17 – ESV). The Matthean text represents a retrospective view of the entire work that the evangelist offers to his recipients and readers; a synthesis that combines the themes found in the pages of the first Gospel, especially the Christological and ecclesiological themes<sup>3</sup>.

### Pericope shape

Formally, the text of Matthew 28:16-20 contains a narrative part with the “eleven disciples” as protagonists (vv. 16-17) and a speech or short discourse by Jesus (vv. 18-20). The pericope is thus made up of two scenes, with an unexpected change of subject, literary genre and style. The second scene, in which the Saviour Christ is the protagonist, is liturgical in character and very solemn.

Throughout the first scene, the eleven disciples are presented to us in narrative form through actions and attitudes and with the help of verbs in the aorist tense: “they went into Galilee” is the first action of the disciples, which corresponds to the command Jesus Himself gave to the miraculous women on the morning of the Resurrection: “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee” (Mt 28:10), a command expressed earlier in v. 7, through the angel’s voice: „Behold, he is going before you to Galilee”. The other two verbs are *προσεκύνησαν* (“they worshipped him”) and *ἐδίστασαν* (“they who [earlier] had doubted”), a binomial familiar to readers of St Matthew’s Gospel and elsewhere<sup>4</sup>.

Not a single word is spoken in the first scene, and the reader of the pericope is left with the impression of a simple style, typical of St Matthew,

<sup>1</sup> Massimo Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles* (Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniano, 2016), 179.

<sup>2</sup> The mountain is an important symbolic element in the first Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus reveals himself and his teaching on “a high mountain” (Mt 5:1; Mt 17:1). See details in Alexandru Moldovan, *Propedeutică la Sfintele Evanghelii* (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2022), 165-7.

<sup>3</sup> Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1998), 774.

<sup>4</sup> See Mt 14:31-33, a text in which unbelief and doubt are followed by an admission of authority and deity of the Saviour: “Truly you are the Son of Gog”.

which demands attention to the essential. Nothing is left to chance or to details that might distract the reader. The verb *καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν* (“and seeing Him” or “as soon as they saw Him”) in v. 17a is the connecting element.

In the second scene the reader's attention is directed to Jesus: v.18a “nd Jesus came and said to them” has the role of an introduction with a very solemn unfolding (participle + infinitive verb + participle)<sup>5</sup>. In this way, the reader's attention is directed to the words that follow. We have the conjunction: “therefore” (*οὖν*) and “and behold” (*καὶ ἰδοὺ*). A solemn declaration of authority: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”, is followed by a precise command to the Lord's disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt 28:19-20 – ESV)

Unlike the first scene, in which not a single word is spoken, in the second scene, the words of the Saviour are the central element, and the reader's attention is focused on them, and rightly considers them decisive words because they are spoken at a solemn moment and the end of the Gospel.

### **“The eleven disciples went to Galilee” (v. 16a)**

As can be seen, the scenario of the pericope is provided by Galilee, the region or place where the Saviour Christ began His preaching activity: “When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee” (Mt 4:12 – ESV). In this region the Saviour Christ preached the coming of the kingdom of heaven and performed miracles; it was also here that the Saviour experienced acceptance and rejection (or rejection) from the Jews<sup>6</sup>. However, the theological significance of this place is indicated by the expression “Galilee of the Gentiles” (*Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν*) in Mt 4:15, mentioned at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, makes precise reference to a prophecy in Is 8:23-9:1. The land of Israel, which was the geographical and historical setting in which the Messiah carried out His public activity, is presented by the words of the prophet Isaiah, and then confirmed at the beginning of the Lord's activity, as the land of openness to the Gentiles: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” (Is 9:1; Mt 4:16 – ESV). We have, then, a prophecy which finds a new fulfilment now, on the last page of the Gospel, the place from which the disciples are sent by the Lord “to all nations”.

<sup>5</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 180.

<sup>6</sup> See Mt 11:20-24; 13:53-58, the latter of which seems to have a parallel text to the episode presented by St. Luke in chapter 4:16-30.



The topographical detail is already a message in itself, “Galilee of the Gentiles” (*Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν*) is not only the land inhabited by a cosmopolitan population, but it is the place where the Saviour began His preaching, the place where His hearers heard Him speak with authority and great power (Mt 7:29)<sup>7</sup>. The Saviour Christ returns to the place where He began His preaching work to “validate” this work and His entire mission but also to entrust the “field” in which He worked to other workers, His disciples. Therefore, they too will begin their missionary work from where He began.

Beyond the space in which the action takes place, the evangelist Matthew offers his reader another interesting detail, a theological motif that is dear to him: that of the mountain. The mountain is the place where Jesus teaches the crowds (Mt 5:1), it is the place visible to all (Mt 5:14), the mountain is the place of temptation (Mt 4:8), but above all, it is the place where man meets God<sup>8</sup>, the place closest to heaven. This aspect of topographical detail, which can be found in all cultural and religious areas, was also brought out as clearly as possible in the pages of the Old Testament, in the story of the great Moses who, on the mountain, received the call to the mission (Ex 3:1 ff.) and the Law of God (Ex 19-20)<sup>9</sup>.

In the text of Matthew 28:16, the mountain in Galilee refers to the “high mountain” on which Jesus changed His face (Mt 17:1), the place where the Lord revealed His profound identity as the Son of God. The Saviour's change of face is linked to the event of His Resurrection, because that episode is a foretaste of the revelation of his glory, the Lord revealing his identity in advance, which, however, must remain hidden “until the Son of Man is raised from the dead” (Mt 17:9). On the last page of the Gospel, in its very last lines, the revelation of Jesus' identity becomes evident, as does the role of his disciples, just as clearly and obviously.

The mountain, like the region indicated – Galilee – is a precise choice of St. Matthew. The “high mountain” on which the tempter takes Jesus during the temptation (Mt 4:8) to offer Him absolute “dominion” over the world is climbed again, but by a different path (or by a different path): it is not a gift easily obtained, but is the “fruit” of the Passion and death on the Cross<sup>10</sup>, because “Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Lk 24:26 – ESV)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 774.

<sup>8</sup> The great Moses once heard the Lord's call, “Come up to me in the mountain and be there” (Ex 24:12). The mountain is the place of the theophany or revelation of the Lord. And the prophet Elijah, walking “forty days and forty nights”, came to the foot of this mountain (3 Kg 19:8) and it was there that the Lord appeared to him. Raniero Cantalamessa, *Urcuşul pe Muntele Sinai* (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2022), 13-7.

<sup>9</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> The Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Philippians, writes: “For this reason God has raised him up” (Phil 2:9).

<sup>11</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 775.

Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' disciples is important because they disappeared from the scene of the Gospel story at the time of Jesus' arrest: "Then all the disciples left him and fled" (Mt 26:56b). Their presence now on the mountain in Galilee plays an important role: readers of the Gospel will always have recourse to the disciples of the Lord – who were his direct witnesses – when they question the soundness of the teaching they have received.

**"And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted"  
(v. 17)**

The verbs used by St. Matthew in his account in v. 17 are typical of the evangelist's description of the Lord's disciples elsewhere in his work: *προσεκύνησαν* ("they worshipped him") is one of the favourite terms of the first Gospel, and in combination with *διστάζω* („to doubt") appears only in the text of Mt 14:31-33, a text in which the reproach for "little faith" is addressed only to Peter, although the other disciples are not excluded, a fact confirmed by the statement in Mt 28:17 "they worshiped him, but some doubted". Therefore, the meaning of the word *διστάζω* ("to doubt") in both Mt 14:31 and Mt 28:17 is clarified by its close relationship to the term *ὀλιγόπιστος* ("little believer"). Using this word, St Matthew characterizes the disciples of the Lord on several occasions<sup>12</sup>, the *ὀλιγόπιστια* of the disciples indicating the faith that is lagging, the immature faith, the incomplete faith, the faith that, at the moment of trial, does not know, or is unable, to recognize the Lord<sup>13</sup>. So, it is not "unbelief", indicated in Mt 17:20 by the word *ἀπιστίαν*, but incomplete faith.

It is very difficult to say whether the phrase *οἱ δὲ ἐδίστασαν* refers to the whole group of disciples or only to some of them<sup>14</sup>. The grammatical wording in the original Greek text gives room for both interpretations. However, the substance of the discourse is not affected.

Doubt is a natural and usual thing in the case of the Resurrected Jesus' revelations, and the evangelist Matthew wants to draw an ideal framework for his community, but historically his community is still showing its limits: it is on its knees before Christ, but with its perplexity and contradictions, with amazement mixed with perplexity, but this will in no way hinder its future mission<sup>15</sup>. However, the future mission of the disciples will not depend solely and exclusively on them, but on the presence of the risen Christ.

<sup>12</sup> See Mt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20.

<sup>13</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 184.

<sup>14</sup> The bilingual edition of the New Testament from the Vatoped Monastery on Mount Athos has the version "And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted" (p. 86).

<sup>15</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 775.

The reader of the Gospel is called on the one hand, to discover in the “eleven” (the first group of disciples), the foundation of his Christian existence, and on the other hand, is called to overcome their doubt, fear, wavering faith and to reach the mature faith required by the Lord<sup>16</sup>.

**“And Jesus came and said to them: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (v. 18)**

In contrast to the previous scene described in verses 16 and 17, the Savior's last words (recounted in vv. 18-20) are contained in a solemn literary scheme. Jesus enters the scene, speaking to them and saying the words, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”, that is, supreme authority<sup>17</sup>. His entrance on the scene is as solemn as can be, and the reader of the Gospel is left with the expectation of important statements. Nevertheless, the Saviour is referred to in both v. 16 and v. 17 simply as *ὁ Ἰησοῦς*. One would expect a more imposing Christological title, such as *Χριστός* or *Κύριος*, titles which are frequently used throughout the first Gospel. It seems a minor detail, but it is not at all so. The reader of the Gospel is invited to see in the risen Christ, who was given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18b), the historical Jesus, who experienced the Cross and the Passion and who was accompanied by the same disciples, whose faith had wavered for a time, and who now stand before him<sup>18</sup>.

Jesus' last words in St Matthew's Gospel can be divided into three statements:

First, we have a solemn declaration of authority (18b): Jesus presents Himself as “Pantocrator”, called by God to participate fully – and as true Man – in His divine and universal omnipotence (the use of the passive diathesis in this text should be emphasized); He did not take His power alone, but “it was given to Him”. The use of the term *ἐξουσία* in Mt 28:18 has been linked by exegetes and commentators to the text in Daniel 7:13-14. There are obvious literary coincidences between the two texts that cannot be denied or ignored, but the theological orientation of the two texts is different. In the Book of Daniel *ἐξουσία* (“absolute authority, dominion or power”) does not lie at the origin of a missionary mandate, and “the Gentiles” are not summoned to be evangelized.

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<sup>16</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 184.

<sup>17</sup> During His public activity, the Saviour Christ made a statement like the one He is making now: in Mt 11:27, Jesus expresses Himself thus: *Πάντα μοι παρεδόθη ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου*.

<sup>18</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 185.

*Ἐξουσία* (“authority or power”) has always accompanied Jesus throughout His public activity<sup>19</sup>, but the combination of the three elements in our text, “all power in heaven and on earth”, is a unique phrase. A similar, but less solemn formulation is found in Matthew 11:27: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father”. In both Mt 28:18b and Mt 11:27a, the initial statement about the authority Jesus received from his Father and as a true Man is laid as the foundation for the statements that follow. If in Mt 11:27 the declaration of authority is a basis for the Son's power to reveal the Father to the world, in Mt 28:18b the same declaration of authority becomes a basis or foundation for the missionary mandate Jesus gives to his disciples. However, the historical Jesus now presents Himself as Lord and absolute Master of history, Who – through His resurrection from the dead – was called to participate also as true Man in the divine kingship; He is the Son of God to whom is due worship, honour and praise.

Such a view of the risen and glorified Lord might seem very different from the aloof and sober style in which His public activity had been presented up to that point, but the reader of the Gospel will not be surprised, for he knows that Jesus' *ἔξουσία*<sup>20</sup> refers not simply to His power, but to His power to save the world to which He was sent<sup>21</sup>.

The fact that the Son of God has attained – through the Passion and Resurrection – absolute sovereign power is not at all sensational. On the contrary, it seems superfluous information, but the fact that he reached such a status and as a true Man (i.e., with the human nature he assumed through the Incarnation) is a much more important proclamation to be made to people. “All things have been handed over to me by my Father” (Mt 11:27) now returns, in different words, to the end of his earthly mission (Mt 28:18b)<sup>22</sup>.

Then follows the missionary mandate given to the eleven (vv. 19-20). From the absolute authority of the Risen One flows the missionary mandate that the Lord gives to his disciples<sup>23</sup>. We have the conjunction *οὖν* (“therefore” or “therefore”), which is articulated by a main phrase in the imperative: “Going, teach all nations” and by two others in the participle: “baptizing them” and “teaching them” (vv. 19b and 20a), obviously connected to the main phrase. Surprisingly, instead of the classic verb *κηρύσσω* (which translates as “to announce”, “to proclaim”, “to preach”), we have the verb *μαθητεύω*<sup>24</sup> (which translates as “to make disciples”).

<sup>19</sup> See Mt 7:29; 9:6.8; 10:1; 21:23-24.27.

<sup>20</sup> See details in Werner Foerster, “*ἔξουσία*,” in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, vol. 3, coll. 630-665. Richard Karpinski, *Exousia at the basis of Jesus' teaching and apostolic mission according to St Matthew* (Rome, 1968).

<sup>21</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 186.

<sup>22</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 776-7.

<sup>23</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 186.

<sup>24</sup> A word that appears four times in the New Testament, including three times in Matthew (Mt 13:52; 27:57; 28:19) and Acts 14:21.

The phrase “all the Gentiles” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) raises the question of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles<sup>25</sup>. The juxtaposition of this statement, which supports the universalism of salvation, with other (equally important) texts that consider the priority of Israel before the Lord in the same Gospel, has caused serious difficulties not only on the question of the mission of the Saviour and His Church but also on the general plan of the Gospel. In texts such as Mt 10:5b-6 and Mt 15:24, Jesus states that his mission is “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”; so must be that of his disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. This problem becomes even more acute in more radical texts, such as the text in Mt 21:43 in which Jesus expresses himself so radically: “Therefore I say to you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to the generation that bears its fruit”<sup>26</sup>.

Exegetes and biblical commentators have sought solutions and explanations for these seemingly antithetical texts, and these have resulted in three answers: first, both the command to the disciples to “make disciples among the Gentiles” and the command to do the same, but only within the borders of Israel, come from Jesus Himself and reflect two stages of His activity. There were two different periods in the evolution of the Gospel proclamation process.

Secondly, Jesus' command preserved in Mt 10:5b-6 comes from Jesus and refers strictly to sending on a “trial mission”; in Mt 28:19, on the other hand, we have the intention of the Matthean community, an intention based on Jesus' intention or simply due to the extension of the missionary area. Finally, both commandments represent the creation of the early Christian community and reflect two phases of the Church's preaching<sup>27</sup>.

The Gospel of Matthew contains both perspectives in its pages, and the text of Mt 28:19a seems to express, perhaps, the decisive point of view.

To solve this problem, the reader of the Gospel has at his disposal a central element of St. Matthew's theology: Jesus is the “fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets”; he is the “ultimate and definitive fulfilment” of God's plan to save the world. St Matthew saw in Jesus the eternal Covenant of God with his people, a Covenant to which “all nations” were called to adhere. Unlike St. Luke, Matthew's writing betrays a much more intense emotional involvement or participation and a more vivid concern for Israel's destiny (much closer to St. Paul's concern

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<sup>25</sup> Alexandru Moldovan, “Israel and the Gentiles in the Vision of the Biblical Prophets,” *Studia Theologica* 1-2 (2002): 265-84.

<sup>26</sup> The Judeo-Christian community of St. Matthew is open to the Gentiles, for they have received Messiah (Mt 2:1-12), and the Jewish political and religious authorities rejected him. Da Spinetoli, *Matteo, Il Vangelo della Chiesa*, 778.

<sup>27</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 187.

in the Epistle to the Romans, even if the nuances are slightly different), but the overall vision leaves no room for ambiguity: on the one hand, St. Matthew shares, along with the whole Old Testament tradition, the idea that God's plan is for the "setting in place of the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6), an idea that emerges from the texts of Mt 10:5b-6; 15:24 and 19:28. On the other hand, the same vision is outdated and inappropriate to the eschatological time (which has already begun with the death and resurrection of Christ). There was, therefore, a limited vision that excluded the Gentiles from God's original plan, a vision that has in the meantime been overcome, and this "overcoming" is clearly expressed by the reference of the eleven to "all the Gentiles"<sup>28</sup>.

But this new perspective does not appear in the Gospel story at random, as a *deus ex machina*, but it existed in God's eternal plan: already in chapter 1 of his Gospel, St. Matthew presents us with the universalistic character of the salvation brought by Christ to the world by presenting his genealogy (Mt 1:1-17).

Saint Matthew did not hesitate to extol in his work the special faith of those of other nations: the faith of the centurion (Mt 8:10), and of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:28). At the foot of the cross, he presented the faith of the centurion and of those who, together with him, guarded Jesus: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Mt 27:54). The pagans confess Him as the Son of God, while "His own" curse Him. The sending now to the Gentiles only confirms a tradition or something that happened during the Messiah's activity in the world.

It was hard for the Jews to give up, or rather, to see themselves stripped of the privileges of divine calling and to see the Gentiles on the same level with them in God's plan: "These last [Gentiles] worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt 20:12 – ESV) or, an even harder word, after the healing of the servant of the centurion: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt 8:11-12 – ESV) or Jesus' word in Mt 21:43: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits". However, for St. Matthew, this does not mean an arbitrary choice of the community he represents, or the opinion of some apostle of the Lord (for example, St. Paul), but represents the firm and unequivocal will of Christ<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 188.

<sup>29</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 778-9.

There are two connotations of “fulfilment”: baptism and the fulfilment of the commandments. Readers of the Gospel will recognize in the Mystery of Holy Baptism “the new sign of the Covenant” and in participation in the life of the Holy Trinity one of the most important theological aspects of the entire New Testament<sup>30</sup>. In contrast to St. Luke and St. Paul, the former of whom emphasizes baptism “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5) and the latter of whom emphasizes participation – through Baptism – in the death and resurrection of Christ, St. Matthew is concerned with “grafting” and the full engagement of the baptized in the Trinitarian dynamism of the divine life.

The mission of the Church is not only the command to baptize but also the work of preaching. The preaching motive is not new: the verb *διδάσκω* (“to teach”) and the noun *διδάσκαλος* (“teacher”) have in St. Matthew’s work about as many occurrences as in the other two Synoptic Evangelists. The special character of the text of Mt 28:20 is that the work of preaching, the mission of teaching people, is “qualified” by the observance of Christ’s commandments: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (20a). St. Matthew emphasises, more than St. Mark, the link between teaching and morality (Mt 5:2; 7:29) and stresses, more than the other New Testament authors, the importance of morality in the Christian life. This is also confirmed by the fact that using the verb *ἐν-τέλλομαι* (“to command/command”), the whole preaching activity of the Saviour Christ is presented in Mt. 28:20a as a “command”. St. Matthew’s formulations refer the reader of his Gospel to a whole range of Old Testament pericopes (especially from the Book of Deuteronomy) that refer to the authoritative will of Yahweh<sup>31</sup>.

Thus, it will not be difficult for the reader of the first Gospel to see that the preaching and work of the Saviour fully interpret and fulfil the will of God<sup>32</sup>, fulfilling it in the two commandments which sum up all: love of God and love of neighbour, for “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:40 – ESV; Lev 19:18.34). It is clear, then, that the practice or fulfilment of the commandments – which qualify the Church’s missionary activity – is the most appropriate response to God’s will.

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<sup>30</sup> The Trinitarian formulation in Mt 28:19b is unique in the pages of the New Testament. For St. Matthew, The Holy Trinity is the author of our salvation. Invoking the names of the Persons of the Holy Trinity – the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit – at a decisive moment in the Gospel story cannot be accidental, because through Baptism the Christian participates concretely in the life of the Holy Trinity. Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 780.

<sup>31</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 188-9.

<sup>32</sup> It is along the lines of what St. John says repeatedly in his Gospel: “I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of the Father who sent me” (Jn 6:38; 4:34; 5:30; 8:28-29).

### “And behold, I am with you” (20b)

The assurance of His presence in our midst is the last word of the risen Lord in the first Gospel: *Εγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἶμι* (“I am with you”). This is a *leitmotif* in biblical literature: it is found throughout the pages of the Old Testament, addressed both to individuals and the whole community. These words indicate the presence of the Lord and his protection. In the text of Mt 28:20b it is an active presence, the presence of Christ in history and not just a static presence in a particular place of worship<sup>33</sup>.

In the text of 1:23, St. Matthew gives the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and the prophetic name of the Saviour: *Emmanuel*, which translates as “God is with us”. Except for the text in Mt 27:46, which gives the cry of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, the text in Mt 1:23 is the only one in which the Evangelist Matthew gives us an express translation. The informed reader of the Gospel, but I also believe the ordinary reader, will easily recognise the explicit intention of the hagiographer: the first prophecy in his work (Mt 1:23) corresponds to the last statement (Mt 28:20b)<sup>34</sup>. The text of Mt 28:20 suggests that not only the Child born at Bethlehem represents the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (7:14), but also the Lord risen from the dead, the Son of God who holds in his hands the destiny of the history of the world and man; the Risen Christ is the definitive fulfilment of the Scriptures. The One who was dead and is now alive is called “God is with us”; the One who, with His presence, assists the disciples in their mission among the nations<sup>35</sup>.

Jesus is not a prophet who retires from the scene at the end of His mandate, He is the Son of God who remains eternally bound to His saving work and to all those who – of their own free will – will adhere to His destiny. The Evangelist Matthew does not simply say that Jesus will not abandon his disciples but says that “he will be with them (*μεθ' ὑμῶν*) always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20b). This presence of Christ in our midst, mentioned only by St Matthew (Mt 18:20), refers to the presence of Yahweh during his people, a presence which ensures the success of the missions entrusted to him<sup>36</sup>. The Saviour Christ will not take the place of his disciples, he will not act in their place, assuming their responsibilities, but he will not delay in supporting them throughout their mission.

<sup>33</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 189.

<sup>34</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 781.

<sup>35</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 190.

<sup>36</sup> William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 694.



By conquering death, the Lord has left the kingdom of death and entered the kingdom of the living forever, and his disciples will be able to call on him for help at any time. The Lord's disciples will not have to deal with a past, closed and long-vanished experience, but with One who is alive forever and ever and who will assist, through the Spirit, the march of His work towards the Eschaton. The link which establishes this living relationship of Christ with His Church, between the pilgrim Church towards the Eschaton and Christ, even if this is not explicitly stated, will be assured by the faith of the disciples. Christ and his Church are united forever, because the liturgical assembly is called in his name with the precise intention of advancing in spiritual understanding and of actualizing, in time, his experience and sacrifice: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26 – ESV). When the Church loses this dimension and orientation, it ceases to be the community of Christ's disciples and becomes an ordinary assembly<sup>37</sup>.

With this openness to the living and glorified Christ, to whom he was given all power in heaven and on earth, present among His own until the end of time, Saint Matthew ends his Gospel convinced that he has given his community a "point of reference", of cohesion or connection and of perfect security.

The Church is not a human organization – even though it has an administrative apparatus – but a living organism; it is born of a personal and living relationship with Christ and is sustained by an intimate and vital relationship with Him<sup>38</sup>: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:4-5 – ESV).

"I" and "you" – or more correctly – "I in you" is the binomial and the reality that gives comfort to the Church in her earthly pilgrimage. The Church is Christ's and will remain so even in His apparent absence from her midst<sup>39</sup>. It is interesting and suggestive that Saint Matthew, unlike the other two Synoptic Evangelists, says nothing about the episode of the Lord's ascension into heaven, precisely so as not to alienate Jesus from the community of his disciples<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 781-2.

<sup>38</sup> Alberto Mello, *Gospel according to Matthew. Midrashic and narrative commentary* (Magnano: Edizioni Quiaqajon, 1995), 499.

<sup>39</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 782-3.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Sand, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1992), 916.

### “Until the end of the age” (20c)

This expression refers to the time between the historical Jesus and the Parousia; it is the time of the Church, a time characterized by the sowing and growing of good wheat, but also of tares. The words of the Saviour “I am with you” are, in this case, an invitation to readers of all times to seek and discover the presence of the Lord in their own experience, often contradictory, marked by the mixture of faith and doubt, light and darkness, tribulation (Mt 8:23-27), opposition and persecution (Mt 10:17-23). *Εγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι*, should not be understood as an expression indicating a specific place, but as a commitment and a promise of the Saviour to his disciples, which responds to the uncertainties, insecurities, doubts of the disciples clearly expressed in Mt 28, 16-17<sup>41</sup>.

Finally, in response to the initial doubts of the eleven (Mt 28:17), the Saviour offers them – through St Matthew – the promise of his presence in their midst. Unlike the other evangelists, who are concerned with removing the hesitations of the disciples with new signs and signs (Mk 16:14; Lk 24:41-43; Jn 20:27), the originality of St Matthew consists in showing his readers the full authority of Christ's words (Mt 28:18-20)<sup>42</sup> and the promise of an active presence amid his disciples, which they will have to discover amid trials and suffering (Mt 8:23-27). For St. Matthew, the word of Christ – and by extension the word of God<sup>43</sup> – and not new revelations or new proofs, is enough for the readers of his Gospel to sustain their faith. Sight is not decisive! The Saviour Christ Himself expresses this admirably in the parable of the unmerciful rich man and poor Lazarus: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Lk 16:31 – ESV).

The message that the first evangelist writes at the end of his work is a call to faith in Jesus Christ, alive and at work – through His word and His mysterious presence – amid the community gathered in His name<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 190.

<sup>42</sup> *New Testament Study. General Introduction. The Gospels according to Matthew and Mark*, ed. Stelian Tofană (Bucharest: Basilica, 2022), 529.

<sup>43</sup> Lk 16:29: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them” is the invitation that the evangelist Luke addresses his Gospel readers.

<sup>44</sup> Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 783.

## The programme of the pericope

On a programmatic level, the model of mission that the Matthean text proposes stimulates the reader of the Gospel to a challenging confrontation. First, St Matthew tells us that the Church does not refer to herself in her preaching; her only *raison d'être* is the mandate of the Risen One for a service to the Kingdom of Heaven and to the man who is to be part of it. To focus on the internal problems of its administrative (worldly) structure is to disregard the primacy of God and His Kingdom. Let us not forget that even after His resurrection from the dead the Saviour's teaching to the disciples focused on the theme of the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), while the Lord's disciples, who still had an unfulfilled faith, were concerned with the establishment of "the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6).

"The first word of the Church – Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said in a speech on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, delivered in the Diocese of Caserta – is Christ and not herself; the Church is pure and holy to the extent that her entire attention is directed to Him [...] Indeed, a Church that exists only for herself would prove superfluous.... The crisis of the Church, as reflected in the concept of the people of God, is *the crisis of God Himself*; this crisis is due to the abandonment of or estrangement from Christ. What remains is only a power struggle, and the power struggle is enough in the world, there is no need for it in the Church."<sup>45</sup>

The importance that the text of Mt 28:16-20 gives to the disciples<sup>46</sup> or "the eleven" reflects St. Matthew's intention to entrust to a historical group of disciples who followed Christ the function of *trait-d'union* and, therefore, the guarantor of the faithful transmission of the Christian message to successive generations. Reading this work, readers have the impression or the feeling that within it we have St Matthew's constant concern to safeguard, at all costs, the sound teaching of the Saviour Christ<sup>47</sup>.

The reasons for this concern could be internal or external. The Jews who received Christian teaching (Judeo-Christians), who are also the first recipients of the Gospel of Matthew, had to confront the Jews who rejected it, and the correct understanding of Jesus' teaching was the "test bed" for their own identity and the correct interpretation of the Torah<sup>48</sup>. Then, within the community of St. Matthew the preaching of the Gospel of Christ could lead to a subjective hermeneutic of the teaching (Mt 7:15). Therefore, safeguarding the sound teaching of Christ was a matter of survival.

<sup>45</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano* 17-18 (2001): 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Gianfranco Ravasi, *The Gospels* (Bologna: Centro editoriale dehoniano, 2016), 187.

<sup>47</sup> Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 192.

<sup>48</sup> See the severe indictment of the spiritual leaders of the Jews, the scribes and Pharisees, by the Saviour Christ in Mt 23.

For Saint Matthew, discipleship is the model and content of evangelization. The eleven, called to continue Christ's work or work in the world, are defined primarily by their status as disciples. At all times, to be a Christian means "to be linked to Jesus Christ", to be in Christ totally and unconditionally: "they left everything and followed him" (Mt 4:20; 8:22), recognizing his presence in the Church and the world.

This bond is the foundation of the Church as the "family of God", which the recipients of Matthew's Gospel feel and know that they make up (Mt 18:17; 23:8). St Matthew best portrayed among the holy evangelists the image of the Church as the family of God: those who hear and do the word of Christ and do the will of the Father in heaven are to Christ "brothers and sisters and mother" (Mt 12:49-50). After the Resurrection, Jesus calls his disciples "my brothers and sisters" (Mt 28:10); equal in dignity (Mt 18:1-14), the Lord's disciples are "sons of the Father in heaven" (Mt 5:45), to whom they all address him as "Father" (Mt 6:9).

Divine sonship has an actual or real connotation in St. Matthew's work, as understood by Clement the Alexandrian, who writes that "Christ shows sons, brothers and heirs [of the Kingdom] to those who do the will of His Father in heaven."

The missionary work of the Church must be understood as "education for the ethics of responsibility", which St Matthew indicates on the last page of his Gospel, in the words: "Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20a). At the origin of St. Matthew's vision lies a fundamental category within the theology of this evangelist: the sense of a righteousness superior to that of the spiritual leaders of the Jews of Jesus' time: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). There is a "higher righteousness" which essentially consists in a right understanding, a will and a doing that is following God's will. The deep meaning of this righteousness is the unity and harmony between *ὁμολογέω* ("to confess") or *ὁμολογία* ("confession") and *ποιέω* ("to do") or *ποίησις* ("work").

The reference of the disciples to "all nations" corrects the previous reference limited only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:5-6) and expresses clearly and unequivocally the universal dimension of the Christian mission.

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## Matthean Allusions and Echoes in the Catholic Epistle of James

Mihai CIUREA\*

**ABSTRACT.** The present article aims to examine the theology of the Epistle of James through the lens of the Gospel according to Matthew. James is a unique text in the New Testament deeply rooted in the tradition of Hellenistic Judaism. The writing presents theological ideas in the form of sayings or sentences, closely resembling the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the Synoptic Gospels. The practical nature, rare doctrinal fragments, and the presence of recurring themes make it challenging to establish a clear division of the five chapters. They can be best grouped around eight homiletic-didactic discourses, mostly built around a macarism or aphorism, adapted by the author to a specific theme. Most allusions and echoes can be linked to the Sermon on the Mount, but not exclusively. Even though some texts resonate strongly with the Matthean text, especially thematically, and the phenomenon of intertextuality is impressive, it would still be quite bold to assert that James had a copy of Matthew in front of him when writing his Epistle. This is confirmed by the lack of exact quotations. It is very likely a catechetical or didactic tradition already present in the first-century Christian teaching at the confluence of the Jewish and Hellenistic environment, strongly influenced by Matthew, whose popularity is beyond doubt. The hypothesis is supported by the presence of similar themes in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, literature highly esteemed in early Christian communities. It is therefore very possible that James was familiar with the Matthean Gospel through his cultic reading, justifying the theological depth evident in the treatment of common themes.

**Keywords:** *macarism*, aphorism, wisdom, wealth, poverty, good deeds

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## Introduction

The Catholic Epistle of St James represents, from many perspectives, a unique text in the New Testament canon, especially due to its practical and moralizing character, as well as at the stylistic and lexicological levels. Specifically, it is one of the most interesting and suggestive New Testament ethical texts, with a very rich and cultivated vocabulary<sup>1</sup> – a sort of pastoral encouragement addressed by the author to the Churches in the Jewish diaspora. Deeply rooted in the tradition of Hellenistic Judaism, the writing presents theological ideas in the form of sayings or sentences, closely resembling the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (*e.g.*, Proverbs, Sirach, Ecclesiastes, etc.) as well as the Synoptic Gospels. James' aphorisms are rendered in an expressive and concise form that moves easily between orality and textuality. From this perspective, the Epistle is usually viewed as a diatribe or a moral parenesis. The author of the Epistle is, therefore, a cultured member of the church, familiar with both Judeo-Christian teaching methods and Hellenistic ones. He offers sincere exhortations, avoiding boasting of his knowledge through frequent quotations resulting from his readings. However, his text contains many allusions or echoes of expressions and ideas that suggest various associations and relationships. Formal quotations from the Holy Scripture are few (*cf.* Jas 2:8, 11, 23; 4:5-6), and one of them (*cf.* Jas 4:5) is apocryphal, sparking debates among commentators, both regarding its source and its meaning.

Even though it is highly likely that the author is familiar with Jewish sapiential writings, we cannot accept the opinion of some modern exegetes who argue that the Epistle was originally a Jewish composition to which certain Christian elements were later added. Firstly, the two references to Jesus Christ, through the theonym *κύριος* (*cf.* Jas 1:1; 2:1), are found in all manuscripts and biblical lectionaries. We are dealing with two of the most important Christological confessions in the New Testament (*cf.* Jn 20:29; Lk 24:26). Secondly, as mentioned earlier, we can identify numerous similarities between our text and the evangelical tradition, even though there is no direct quotation of Jesus' sayings. In other words, James is saturated with Christ's teachings and breathes a Christian spirit. Most likely, St James employs an already existing oral tradition within Judeo-Christian circles, especially in Jerusalem<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The text contains 63 hapax legomena, including 12 absolute hapax legomena, 6 biblical hapax legomena, and 45 neotestamentary hapax legomena.

<sup>2</sup> Simion Todoran, *Epistola Sfântului Iacov. Introducere, Traducere și Comentariu* (București, 1997), 24.

From the literary genre perspective, the writing presents itself as an encyclical (*cf.* Ecumenius: “*catolicae vocantur, id est encyclicae*”), meaning a circular letter addressed to the universal Church, sent by St James, “a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, o the twelve tribes who are dispersed” (Jas 1:1). It is a letter of comfort, written not sentimentally but with a focus on sound teaching. The designation of the recipients is undoubtedly metaphorical, encompassing all Christians, following the model of the twelve tribes of Israel, dispersed in the ideological, economic, and social universe of the Roman Empire. Throughout the writing, the same recipients will also be called “brothers” or “beloved brothers” (*cf.* Jas 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19).

St Theophylact of Bulgaria, at the same time, speaks of the practical nature of the Epistle: “James himself, writing this epistle to those scattered among the twelve tribes who have believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, writes it as a teaching, instructing them about the distinction of temptations, which come from God Himself and which come from the hearts of men. He teaches that not only words but also deeds should demonstrate faith, and that it is not the hearers of the Law but the doers of the Law who are justified. As for the rich, he commands that they should not be honoured in the churches more than the poor, but rather they should be rebuked and confronted for their pride. Toward the end, he comforts the unjust, urging them to endure patiently until the coming of the Judge. Teaching them about patience and showing them the benefit of endurance from the example of Job, he commands that the priests of the Church be called to the sick and that they be diligent in turning the erring and deceived back to the truth. For the one who does this will receive from the Lord the forgiveness of sins. Thus ends the epistle”<sup>3</sup>.

Considering the practical nature of the writing, the relatively rare doctrinal passages, and the presence of recurring themes (*e.g.*, perfection, wisdom, faith and good works, wealth and poverty, etc.), it is quite challenging to establish a clear division of the 108 verses. However, the five chapters of the Epistle of James can be best grouped around eight homiletic-didactic discourses, a true “moral code” corresponding to authentic Christian living. Thus, each discourse can be attributed to a main theme, although it is later developed either through a series of secondary topics or through a list of relevant examples. This reading key of the Epistle highlights, in a positive way, the inspired use of word connections (*i.e.*, concatenation)<sup>4</sup>, as well as thematic recapitulations that

<sup>3</sup> Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, *Tâlcuire cu de-amănuntul la Epistolele sobornicești*, ed. Ștefan Voronca, trans. by the monks Gherontie and Grigorie (Dascălul) (Iași: Doxologia, 2015), 15.

<sup>4</sup> The Rhetorical form by which one idea leads to another through the correspondence of words in adjacent verses, constructed on the same root, is known as ‘concatenation’.



link multiple sections, forming a cohesive whole. In this way, the various sources the author resorts to (whether oral or written) are consciously adapted to fit his style and purpose.

The main discourses or sections of the writing can be summarized as follows<sup>5</sup>:

1. Enduring trials with patience (Jas 1:2-18);
2. Reverence and action (Jas 1:19-27);
3. Love of neighbor (Jas 2:1-13);
4. Faith and good works (Jas 2:14-26);
5. Controlled speech and slander (Jas 3:1-12);
6. Wisdom and division (Jas 3:13-4:12);
7. Two curses: Woe to you, the rich! (Jas 4:13-5:6);
8. Long-suffering (Jas 5:7-20).

Most of these sections are built around a certain macarism or aphorism, adapted by the author to a specific theme. However, even though each of the eight identified discourses contains evident parallels with the Gospel according to Matthew, there are no precise quotations. Most allusions and echoes can be connected to the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), but not only. While the author's use of the Synoptic Gospels is considered problematic, and direct dependence cannot be asserted, most commentators identify numerous thematic parallels, especially with Matthew, and to a lesser extent, with the Gospel according to Luke. E. J. Goodspeed goes even further than most scholars, stating that "it may be that James knew the Gospel of Matthew"<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, we will attempt an analysis of these Matthean allusions and echoes in the Catholic Epistle of James, as well as how the text itself reflects such influence from well-known Gospel motifs. We will analyze them one by one.

### **Enduring trials with patience (Jas 1:2-18)**

Following the epistolary prescription (cf. Jas 1:1), St James immediately sets forth a series of brief exhortations (cf. Jas 1:2-4), which will constitute the first part of his message, connected through verbal connections (*i.e.*, concatenation) rather than through specific themes, but introducing certain arguments that will be developed later in the text. Then, the author transitions to another essential aspect of Christian living: how prayer should be made to receive God's wisdom (cf. Jas 1:5-8). He does not speak of wisdom (*σοφία*) in

<sup>5</sup> Massey H. Shepherd, Jr, "The Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew," *JBL* 1 (1956): 42-44.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 291.

the abstract, in philosophical terms. Still, he contemplates the “gift of wisdom from above” within the context of fidelity to God, from which arises a new way of understanding ourselves and others. If this new *modus vivendi* that transforms the believer weakens, it must be sought again as a gift from God, without any doubt and with a pure soul<sup>7</sup>.

As the first bishop of the Christian community in Jerusalem, which was not very wealthy (cf. Rom 15:26, 31; Acts 6:1), St James is concerned with the theme of social justice, the ongoing balance between the rich and the poor, as an essential dimension of authentic religious commitment (cf. 1 Cor 11:18; 1 Tm 6:17; 1 Jn 3:17). This is the moment when the author expresses the “option of God for the poor.”<sup>8</sup> The main theological issue is not wealth itself, but the relationship to it, both wealthy and those who mediate for them. It is, in fact, a concern that includes the condemnation of oppression and indifference towards the poor and ensures the eschatological overturning of their situation.

Therefore, in this first section of the Epistle, the author combines several of his favourite topics, connecting them with a macarism whose core is likely built around the formula: “Blessed are those who endure evil, for they will receive good things” (*μακάριοι οἱ ὑπομένουσι κακίας/πονηρίας ὅτι αὐτοὶ λήμψονται ἀγαθά*). This is evident, especially in the beatitude in Jas 1:12<sup>9</sup>, which resonates with the one concerning the reward that “those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness” will receive in Mt 5:10-12 (cf. Lk 6:22-23).

Viewed from another perspective, this section could be considered a commentary on the last request of the Lord’s Prayer: “And do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil.” (Mt 6:13; cf. Lk 11:4), or even on the Savior’s general statement about prayer: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Mt 7:7; cf. Lk 11:9). However, the emphasis on prayer with faith and without doubting in Jas 1:6<sup>10</sup> has a close parallel only in the Gospel according to Matthew: “Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will happen.” (Mt 21:21; cf. Mk 11:23). Similarly, the teaching that all good gifts come from God in Jas 1:17 is closer to the version in Mt 7:11, “So if you, despite

<sup>7</sup> Louis Simon, *Une Ethique de La Sagesse. Commentaire l’Epître de Jacques* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1966), 34–38.

<sup>8</sup> David Hutchinson Edgar, *Has God Not Chosen the Poor?: The Social Setting of the Epistle of James* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 31.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed (*μακάριος*) is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (Jas 1:12).

<sup>10</sup> “But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.” (Jas 1:6).

being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”, rather than to the parallel form in Lk 11:13, where “good gifts” are replaced with the “Holy Spirit.” This significantly indicates that where there is a common material in the Gospel traditions, St James is generally closer to Matthew’s theology<sup>11</sup>.

### Reverence and action (Jas 1:19-27)

After conveying a series of teachings, presenting some fundamental aspects of the Christian faith, St James returns to exhortations, relying on various motifs from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (*e.g.*, Prv 10:19; 13:3; Sir 5:11-13; 4:29; 1QH 1:34-37). Biblical texts explicitly use the language of beneficence to describe God. The common Greek term for “benefactor” is *εὐεργέτης* (from *εὖ* = “good” and *ἔργον* = “work”). In the Septuagint, out of the 22 occurrences of the word family based on the root *εὐεργ-*, in connection with goodwill, 14 refer to God and are found in the Old Testament wisdom literature. In the New Testament, St Luke presents God the Father as the ultimate Benefactor, who persists in actions contrary to human inclinations, such as caring for those in distress<sup>12</sup>.

The first topic addressed by St James in this section concerns “anger” (*ὀργή*; cf. Jas 1:19-20). St Matthew speaks on several occasions about the “anger of God” (*ira Dei*), not only in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt 5:22 ff.), but also addressing the issue of anger in human relationships and emphasizing that an angry person falls under God’s judgment. What is stated in Jas 1:20, “for a man’s anger does not bring about the righteousness of God,” fully resonates with the Matthean perspective. Moreover, the beatitude in the second section is undoubtedly the one in Jas 1:25: “But one who has looked intently at the perfect law, the law of freedom, and has continued in it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an active doer, this person will be blessed (*μακάριος*) in what he does.”

However, one could assert that behind this entire second section of the Epistle lies the evangelical principle articulated by Jesus Christ in Mt 7:21, 26: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter [...] And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.” (cf. Lk 6:46, 49). St James also places a similar emphasis on the necessity, not only of hearing but also of

<sup>11</sup> Mihai Ciurea, “Dumnezeu Tatăl (*ὁ Πατήρ*) în Epistola Sobornicească a Sfântului Iacob,” *ST* 2 (2019): 18–19.

<sup>12</sup> Alicia Batten, “God in the Letter of James: Patron or Benefactor?,” *NTS* 2 (2004): 257–72.

putting into practice the teachings of Jesus: “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror.” (Jas 1:23). Additionally, it can be observed that the author's definition in the Epistle of true piety in terms of acts of mercy (cf. Jas 1:27<sup>13</sup>) recalls the judgment scenario in Mt 25:31-46<sup>14</sup>.

### Love of neighbor (Jas 2:1-13)

Returning to the issue of wealth and poverty, St James argues that a new reality should become essential in the minds and hearts of his readers and, consequently, all Christians. This reality opposes arrogant wealth, the biased system of patronage (*clientela*)<sup>15</sup>, and generally all inappropriate behaviours that encourage the commission of such wicked deeds or sins. However, our author is not the only ancient writer who opposes distinctions of status based on wealth versus poverty. We encounter the same principles in the prophetic and wisdom writings of the Old Testament and partially in the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, some Greek moralists, at least theoretically, have disapproved of this constant, even obsessive, concern for a privileged socio-economic position in the community to which one belongs<sup>16</sup>. Although the aphoristic basis of the third section may be problematic, it can be captured either in Jas 2:5<sup>17</sup> or Jas 2:10<sup>18</sup>. In essence, we could argue that the Beatitudes regarding “the poor” and “the merciful” from the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt 5:3, 7) are reflected throughout this entire section.

Certainly, these virtues are important for the New Testament author, but he goes further, stating a fundamental Christian principle: all the evils created by artificial distinctions imposed by society cannot be healed through human efforts but through a radical reordering of human reality by God. In this entirely new perspective, honesty, faithfulness, and submission are always maintained

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<sup>13</sup> “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (Jas 1:27).

<sup>14</sup> F. Charles Fensham, “Faith, Works, and the Christian Religion in James 2:14-26,” *JNES* 2 (1962): 129-39.

<sup>15</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation and Commentary Garden* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 277.

<sup>16</sup> M. O'Rourke Boyle, “The Stoic Paradox in James 2:10,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 611-17.

<sup>17</sup> “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters: did God not choose the poor [fn]of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (Jas 2:5 – similar ending to Jas 1:12).

<sup>18</sup> “For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all.” (Jas 2:10).

about God. Only by resisting this sinful and unjust world, by denouncing it and its manipulative institutions, can one embrace the new reality to which the holy author calls us, that of friendship with God. Therefore, the author does not limit himself to emphasizing the importance of charity but goes further, boldly challenging the schema of influence-based relationships based on status differences. This system was omnipresent in the ancient world, supported by the patronage institution and defined as an exchange of goods and services between unequal individuals. Unfortunately, due to this obvious disproportion, it could lead to abuses, the most common being the exploitation of the weak. It is precisely against this unjust and oppressive system that his direct attack is directed. The rich are not condemned for their wealth and influence, but because they oppress the poor and blaspheme the name of Christ God.

A particular significance in this section is the interpretation of the Law in Jas 2:8-12, which closely resembles the well-known statement of Christ in Mt 5:17-19<sup>19</sup>. Both in the Epistle of St James and the Gospel of Matthew, the same illustration of the principle is used by referring to the commandments against adultery and murder.

There is also another parallel with Matthew in this section, often overlooked by commentators. In the account of the Rich Young Man presented in all three Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mt 19:16-22; Mk 10:17-22; Lk 18:19-23), it is crucial to observe once again Matthew's specific additions. For example, only Mt 19:17b contains the injunction: "But if you want to enter life, keep the commandments," which fully corresponds to the words of St James in this section. Similarly, in Jesus' words about the commandments to the Rich Young Man, Matthew provides a longer list, including the great commandment of love (cf. Jas 2:8<sup>20</sup>). But also, James, like Matthew, closely ties the same golden commandment to the disapproval of adultery and murder (cf. Jas 2:11<sup>21</sup>).

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<sup>19</sup> "Do not presume that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter shall pass from the Law, until all is accomplished! Therefore, whoever nullifies one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 5:17-19).

<sup>20</sup> "If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,' you are doing well." (Jas 2:8).

<sup>21</sup> "For He who said, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,' also said, 'DO NOT MURDER.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but do murder, you have become a violator of the Law." (Jas 2:11).

### Faith and good works (Jas 2:14-26)

The term “faith” (πίστις) is one of the most natural words in the New Testament, an essential expression of the “fruit of the Holy Spirit,” the last among them (cf. Gal 5:22), upon which the entire Christian devotion is built. The necessity of living out an authentic faith, fulfilling the Scripture’s word, having a pure devotion that bears fruit in good deeds, overcoming sin, anger, and indifference, and working out love and mercy – all these form the background of the teaching in our Epistle and have been addressed, even if not systematically, from the beginning. The section from Jas 2:14-26, on the other hand, is unique precisely because of its unified and relatively extensive development that directly addresses a single theme: faith without good works cannot save. We are right at the central point of the writing, where we find the theoretical foundation of practical exhortations.

Unlike the Pauline Epistles, which primarily deal with matters of faith, the Catholic Epistles specifically address issues of social morality. This aspect is generally explained by the fact that issues related to religious practice, especially the observance of the Law and Jewish customs (*i.e.*, the works of the Law) by Gentile Christians, were resolved at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (49-50 AD). Therefore, it is crucial to understand that St James speaks about “faith” and “works” (*erga*), so the works of the Law are not the subject of his Epistle<sup>22</sup>. Instead, he addresses the nature of faith itself and its concrete manifestation in good deeds, as a synergistic work continually present in the Christian’s life. In this sense, the two key statements are found in Jas 2:2<sup>23</sup>, and in Jas 2:26<sup>24</sup>.

However, most often, the attention given to this well-known section of the Epistle of St James and its almost natural association with Pauline theology is so pronounced that the somewhat close connection with the Sermon on the Mount is often overlooked. Not only are the words from Mt 7:21, 26, already mentioned above (cf. “Reverence and action”), applicable here, but there is also a significant echo in St James’ teaching of the “Parable of the Two Sons” (cf. Mt 21:28-32), not to mention once again the “works of mercy” suggested by the judgment scene in Mt 25:31-46.

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<sup>22</sup> Mihai Ciurea, “Credința și faptele bune după Epistola Sobornicească a Sfântului Iacob,” *MO* 9-12 (2020): 125–34.

<sup>23</sup> “But are you willing to acknowledge, you foolish person, that faith without works is useless?” (Jas 2:20).

<sup>24</sup> “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” (Jas 2:26).

### **Controlled speech and slander (Jas 3:1-12)**

The third chapter of the Epistle represents a more elaborate critique of speech but also praises wisdom. The author begins by stating that not many in the community should become teachers because they will be judged more severely. The danger comes from the fact that the one instructing others in virtue may fall into the sin of vainglory, giving in to the cunning use of speech for manipulation, a concern also evident in the Pastoral Epistles. By directly addressing this admonition, St James suggests that there was a certain problem in this regard in the early Church. Jewish sages also warned about false teachings, admitting that teachers would be harshly judged for leading others astray. It seems that some aspiring to become teachers of wisdom were instructing others in the kind of “wisdom” adopted by Jewish revolutionaries that inevitably led to violence<sup>25</sup>.

The entire diatribe of St James regarding “speech” can be considered a homiletic illustration of Jesus’ words in Mt 12:36<sup>26</sup>: “But I tell you that for every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on the day of judgment.” Another parallel, with less weight, is the saying in Mt 15:11: “It is not what enters the mouth that defiles the person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles the person.” (cf. Mk 7:15), which can be related to Jas 3:10: “From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way.”

Also in this fifth section, we can identify a macarism in Jas 3:2 (like the beginning of the blessing in Jas 1:12), where the author replaced the term “blessed” with “perfect”: “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect (*τέλειος*) man, able to rein in the whole body as well.”

### **Wisdom and division (Jas 3:13-4:12)**

The structure of this narrative unit is quite clearly defined and reintroduces, first (cf. Jas 3:13-18), the theme of authentic wisdom through a challenge addressed to all members of the community, consisting of the “wise and understanding.” Gentleness and humility are attributes of wisdom and good conduct. Wisdom knows what is good and how to accomplish it, so Christians are advised to manifest their true wisdom practically. Then, in the second part of the discourse (cf. Jas 4:1-12), the author revisits the theme of inner rupture,

<sup>25</sup> Dale C. Allison Jr, “Blessing God and Cursing People: James 3:9-10,” *JBL* 2 (2011): 397–405.

<sup>26</sup> With the additions about the “tree” and “its fruit” from Mt 12:33 and Mt 7:16-20 (cf. Lk 6:43-45).

the division within the depths of humanity where desire is born and nourished. St James thus directly accuses hedonism as the source of violence and, ultimately, spiritual and physical death. This philosophical doctrine (from the Greek ἡδονή), quite prevalent in the author's time, argued that the primary purpose of human existence is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of suffering. Thus, the hedonist hoped to possess what can never be possessed, that which always eludes us, namely the "object" capable of satisfying that fundamental spiritual lack of man or, in other words, filling that inner void manifested in frustration and instinctual needs. In vain, he exhausts himself trying to chase after an entirely illusory goal<sup>27</sup>.

The aphorism in the sixth section is found in Jas 4:4 and is introduced by the stereotypical formula *οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι*: "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." The second part of the statement, about friendship with the world and enmity with God, may have a counterpart in the text from Mt 6:24 (cf. Lk 16:13), which speaks of the impossibility of serving two masters: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." In the Gospels, the two masters are "God and money," or "wealth", while in James, they are "God and the devil" (cf. Jas 4:7-8).

Similarly, the saying about prayer from Mt 7:7 ("Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you;" cf. Lk 11:9) is brought to the forefront again in Jas 4:3a: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures."

The recapitulation of themes in the conclusion of this section of the Epistle (cf. Jas 4:11-12<sup>28</sup>) certainly reminds us of the admonition not to judge anyone, regardless of the circumstances, from Mt 7:1-5<sup>29</sup> (cf. Lk 6:37-42).

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<sup>27</sup> Ehud M. Garcia, *The Wisdom of James: Word and Deed for the Diaspora* (Xulon Press, 2018), 117-19.

<sup>28</sup> "Do not speak against one another, brothers and sisters. The one who speaks against a brother or sister, or judges his brother or sister, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you, judging your neighbor?" (Jas 4:11-12).

<sup>29</sup> "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and look, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye!" (Mt 7:1-5).



### **Two curses: Woe to you, the rich! (Jas 4:13-5:6)**

The second part of the fourth chapter transitions to another subject and generally addresses rich merchants, traders, or perhaps even affluent individuals in the community who had decided to follow the path of Christ. The author abandons the more logical and methodical mode of address from the previous section and now speaks directly and categorically, reminiscent of the style of the Old Testament prophets (cf. Jas 2:1-13). Therefore, he no longer confines himself to emphasise the importance of cultivating Christian virtues and fulfilling the commandments of the Law but goes further, boldly challenging the schema of influence based on differences in status. Unfortunately, due to this evident disparity, there could be a slide into some abuses, with exploitation of the weaker being the most frequent. It is precisely against this unjust and oppressive system that his direct attack is aimed. Such shortcomings, being “double-minded,” with a divided soul, and being “friends with the world,” can lead the rich and influential to believe that there is no conflict between accumulating treasures for the future and hoping for eternal life.

All the evils created by artificial distinctions imposed by society cannot be healed through human effort but require a radical reordering of human reality by God. In this entirely new perspective, sincerity, fidelity, and submission are always maintained about God. Only through resistance to this sinful and unjust world, by denouncing it and its manipulative institutions, can one embrace the new reality to which the holy author calls us, that of “friendship with God.” The prophetic tone reappears, but this time it is of extreme virulence. Faced with the imminent threat of a potentially tragic end, the only hope for the rich remains sincere repentance and a desire for correction. None of the New Testament authors condemned the sin of those who stole the labour of others, in other words, the exploitation of man by man, so vehemently. Earlier, James emphasized the “ephemerality of the proud and rich” and accused them of oppressing the poor and blaspheming the name of the good Christian. Now, with more vigour, he condemns those who put their hope in wealth and urges them to gather treasures in heaven, following the Savior’s admonition (cf. Mt 6:19-20; Lk 12:33; 19:22; Acts 20:31-33, etc.). In other words, their earthly “comfort” does not last long (cf. Lk 6:24), for true comfort is eternal (cf. Lk 16:25). From the selfish use of goods naturally follows social injustice, concretely manifested in withholding payment from workers<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Arhiep. Dmitri Royster, *Comentariu La Epistola Sfântului Apostol Iacov*, trans. by Camil Marius Dădărlat (București: Basilica, 2021), 170–82.

These condemnations are clearly distinctive in their style and form in the Epistle of James, yet they are entirely in harmony with the author's attitudes and sympathies regarding tensions between the rich and the poor. Although it has been suggested that they can be related to two Lucan parables – the Parable of the Rich Fool (cf. Lk 12:16-21) and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (cf. Lk 16:19-31) – the parallels are nonetheless superficial. The teaching, however, aligns more closely with Matthew. Initially, the author's attention turns to those who are preoccupied with gaining wealth and making plans for their business tomorrow. This contrasts with the careless rich man in Luke, who had no intention of increasing his profit but rather retiring to comfort and pleasure. The first condemnation in the Epistle (cf. Jas 4:14<sup>31</sup>) is more of an exposition of the Gospel teaching about casting off concern for tomorrow (cf. Mt 6:34).

Similarly, the second condemnation in this section of the Epistle (cf. Jas 5:2-3) reminds us of the teaching in Mt 6:19: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal." Moreover, the concluding sentence in Jas 5:6a ("You have condemned and put to death the righteous person!") finds a remarkable parallel in the judgment that the Savior pronounces on the Pharisees: "But if you had known what this means: 'I desire compassion, rather than sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent." (Mt 12:7).

### **Long-suffering (Jas 5:7-20)**

The exhortation of St James to long-suffering (*makrothymia*) in this pericope is addressed, first and foremost, to the Christians in the community who had become victims of injustice due to their faith. The keyword (verb or noun) is used four times in this passage: patience itself (v. 7a) is first illustrated by a parable (vv. 7b-8a), before being motivated (v. 8b); then, through a digression on judgment, the special way of enduring is made known (v. 9); finally, to strengthen the readers in the virtue of patience, examples from Holy Scripture are given (vv. 10-12). In the pericope from Jas 5:13-18, the author's discourse becomes dense and exhortative. St James returns to the themes of prayer, healing, and repentance. The section begins with three paratactic units, each consisting of two clauses, formulated in an asyndetic rhetoric. The end of the Epistle is somewhat surprising, simply because it ends abruptly, without any conclusive remarks. In other words, instead of "closing" his text, the author leaves it open, linking salvation to reflection on the personal responsibility of

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<sup>31</sup> "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. For you are just a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away." (Jas 4:14).

his readers. The keywords of this epilogue are encouragement and exhortation. This does not only mean practising “good deeds,” but also the ability to let the “Word of truth” (Jas 1:18) work in their lives and the Church. The form of this concluding exhortation is somewhat peculiar: in its first part, contained in v. 19, St James continues the style of direct address to his readers, a style predominant in the Epistle; in the second part (v. 20), the formulation is in a more general form. Some authors have intuited traces of a specific liturgical form of the early Church behind these two verses<sup>32</sup>. The thematic continuity is, however, evident and resonates with the note of joy at the beginning of the Epistle, even if it addresses the ominous threat of apostasy.

In the final section of the Epistle, the author symmetrically returns to the theme addressed in the first discourse, suggested by the blessedness of those who patiently endure persecution: “We count those blessed (*μακαρίζομεν*) who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.” (Jas 5:11). In both sections, there is the subsidiary theme of prayer and the gifts that prayer brings. However, while the first treatment focused on enduring trials, the last discussion developed the theme of patience in suffering. It is noteworthy that the fourth and eighth sections, though different, are similar in structure using so-called examples taken from the Old Testament tradition but accompanied by illustrations from the life of the contemporary church, that is, situations or events relevant to the church community at that time.

But the final section also introduces a new subsidiary theme, that of oaths. This is because trials and suffering sometimes lead to the loss of patience, which, in turn, manifests itself in oaths. All exegetes note the very close parallel between the words of St James about oaths and those taught by the Savior on this specific topic in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5:33-37. Usually, this parallel is considered the strongest argument for James’ dependence on the Gospel, even though James does not quote the Gospel and seems to convey an older tradition than the Gospel. However, one swallow does not make a summer. Therefore, our analysis should not be reduced to a single example, but the entire context of the Epistle should be considered, as seen in all the details described above.

### **Lukan Allusions and Echoes in the Catholic Epistle of James**

The two “woes” in the seventh section (cf. Jas 4:13-5:6) have a form that distinguishes them from the other discourses, being written in the vein of

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<sup>32</sup> Dale C. Allison Jr, “A Liturgical Tradition behind the Ending of James,” *JSNT* 1 (2011): 3–18.

prophetic warnings. However, they contain a saying that we can indirectly connect to the context of our analysis, namely Jas 5:17: "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months." Yet, we cannot say with certainty whether Jas 5:17 is dependent on Lk 4:25 regarding the three and a half years of drought. This is because, in Luke's account, the author intends to reinforce the idea that no prophet is accepted in his hometown, while St James is interested in the drought itself as proof of the power of the fervent prayer of the righteous. The exact chronology could have reached James independently of the Lucan text, through the oral tradition of Judaism or some apocryphal source. More significantly, the reflection of the Beatitudes from the Gospel in the Epistle of St James shows, upon closer analysis, closer affinities with their Lucan form. Of the eight Matthean blessings, Luke retains only four, which are directly addressed to the disciples and, through them, to Christian followers, not necessarily to devout Israelites in general. Therefore, they must be understood as practical and theological qualifications of the disciples, those who followed Jesus and became his family, directly related to everyday reality. Moreover, Luke's blessings are balanced by four "woes," which are essentially just the four blessings expressed in the opposite sense (cf. Lk 6:20-26).

Not all the Beatitudes from the Gospels are reflected in the Epistle of James with the same clarity and certainty. Of the four common to both Matthew and Luke, the blessing of those "hungry and thirsty for righteousness" is not indicated anywhere. Similarly, the blessing of those "persecuted and reviled" does not have an exact equivalent in James, although it is similar in some respects to the already mentioned macarism in Jas 1:12 and Jas 5:11, as central texts in the author's discourse on enduring trials and especially on patience. For St James, the emphasis is not on the sufferings endured because of the Christian status, but rather on the ordinary trials and sufferings of life, particularly those caused by the oppression of the poor by the rich. On the other hand, the blessing of the "poor" is reflected in Jas 2:5 and following, along with other related passages that mention the tension between the rich and the poor (cf. Jas 1:9-11; 5:1 and following). Like in Lk 6:20, here οἱ πτωχοί refers to the literal poor and the woes are pronounced against their opposites, the "rich." St James does not emphasize the theological distinction found in Mt 5:3, which speaks of those who are "poor in spirit."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the blessing of those who mourn appears in Jas 4:9, not in the form of a macarism but as a woe in Lk 6:25b pronounced against "those who laugh" now.

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<sup>33</sup> Ion Sorin Bora, "Ceî săraci cu duhul din perspectiva lui Wirkungsgeschichte," *MO* 5-8 (2006): 115-20.

Indeed, considering these two significant similarities between James and Luke regarding the Beatitudes, we should not overlook the reflection in James of the Beatitudes from Matthew that are not found in Luke. The clearest case is the blessing of the “merciful,” which has a parallel in Jas 2:13: “For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” It is also noteworthy to observe that in James’ discourse on hypocrisy, there are references to gentleness (cf. Jas 3:13), peacemakers (cf. Jas 3:18), or purity of heart (cf. Jas 4:8). These connections highlight the complex intertextuality and theological nuances present in the New Testament writings. James, in incorporating elements from both Matthew and Luke, engages with and interprets the teachings of Jesus in a way that addresses the specific concerns and themes of his audience. This underscores the richness and diversity of perspectives within the early Christian community as they sought to understand and apply the teachings of Jesus in various contexts.

If we did not have the Gospel according to Matthew, we could not, of course, reconstruct from the Epistle of James the list of Matthean or Lucan beatitudes. However, with the two gospel versions available, it makes sense to assume that the author of the Epistle was familiar with them, especially with a list of Beatitudes more extensive than those preserved in Luke. In two instances, St James has given them an interpretation closer to the Lucan perspective, and the reason is not hard to intuit. The Lucan Beatitudes were shaped to fit the actual conditions of church life, and St James writes from the perspective of a Christian community living in similar circumstances. Thus, the parallels in James with the Beatitudes from the Gospels do not, in themselves, prove that the author knew Matthew and/or Luke. Rather, they suggest that the author was acquainted with a series of blessings concerning the poor, the mournful, the merciful, and the persecuted, and possibly also blessings concerning the meek, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. This context indicates, at the very least, a familiarity with the Matthean formulation. However, it can be highlighted even further by examining other Matthean influences on the Catholic Epistle.

## Conclusions

Even though, as we have seen from the detailed analysis above, some texts in the Epistle of James resonate quite strongly with the Matthean text, especially thematically, and the phenomenon of intertextuality is impressive in this regard, it would still be quite bold to assert that St James had a copy of the Gospel of Matthew in front of him when writing his Epistle. This is confirmed by the absence of exact quotations. Most likely, we are dealing with another

phenomenon, equally interesting and important, that occurred in early Christianity. It is about a catechetical or didactic tradition that is already present at the end of the first century in Christian teaching, situated at the confluence of the Jewish and Hellenistic environments, strongly influenced by Matthew, whose popularity is beyond doubt. This reality is confirmed by the presence of similar themes in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, literature that, in turn, enjoyed great appreciation among early Christian communities (*e.g.*, the Epistles of Clement, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistles of St Ignatius of Antioch, etc.).

In other words, it is highly possible that the author of the Catholic Epistle was familiar with the Gospel of Matthew through its liturgical and catechetical usage. This justifies the theological depth demonstrated by St James in his treatment of common themes. It seems that we are dealing with the same phenomenon as in the case of the Old Testament citations in the Epistle. The few references the author makes to the Septuagint text are likely rendered from memory, reflecting general Old Testament themes that a Christian teacher, especially a bishop, undoubtedly mastered. We even observe a greater emphasis that St James places on citing the Old Testament when he goes beyond allusions or scriptural echoes (such as the unmistakable use of Is 40:6-7 in Jas 1:10-11 or Gn 22:9 in Jas 2:21), considering that Christian writings were in the process of canonical crystallization. Therefore, while the term "Scripture" exclusively referred to the Old Testament during that period, the Gospel of Matthew held overwhelming importance as part of the living tradition preserved in the Church regarding the life and teachings of the Lord: a Catechism of the early Church.

This reality is also justified by other aspects that, although not contradicting the theology of the Gospel, are not derived from it. Instead, they belong to the general Judeo-Christian character and the Palestinian-Syrian context of the text. For instance, the gathering place for Christians is not referred to as *ἐκκλησία* but rather as *συναγωγή* (a term rarely used in Christian writings but present in St Ignatius Theophorus and the Shepherd of Hermas; cf. Jas 2:2<sup>34</sup>). Additionally, liturgical formulas resembling the *Shema Israel* (*i.e.*, Adonay Ehad; cf. Jas 2:19) or the structure of Jewish blessings (cf. Jas 3:9) are present. Prayer and psalms are also mentioned (cf. Jas 5:13). Furthermore, in Jas 2:7, there is a possible allusion to Christian baptism in the "name of the Lord," as in Acts (2:38; 8:16; 19:5), or to the early practice of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, through the anointing of the sick with oil (cf. Jas 5:14), as in Mk 16:13. This likely indicates a common practice in this regard within the Church in Jerusalem.

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<sup>34</sup> See also the compound term *ἐπισυναγωγή* in Heb 10,25 and 2 Thes 2,1 (here, it rather refers to the Parousia of the Lord).

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## Saint Nicodemus of Tismana's Tetraevangelion and its Relation with Slavic-Byzantine Manuscripts

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**ABSTRACT.** This study aims to bring a series of clarifications regarding the objectives pursued by Saint Nicodemus in creating a Tetraevangelion for the Tismana Monastery in 1405. We believe that these objectives could be better understood based on the investigation of the relationship that Saint Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion has with similar Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts, especially with Bulgarian and Serbian manuscripts, of his time. This relation helps identify both the characteristics of the manuscript made by Saint Nicodemus at the beginning of the fifteenth century, as well as its originality among other Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts.

**Keywords:** Tetraevangelion, Saint Nicodemus, Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts, liturgy

### Introduction

The Tetraevangelion of Saint Nicodemus from Tismana, dated 1405, is the oldest biblical manuscript made on the territory of our country that has been fully preserved. Its value has been appreciated historically, philologically and especially artistically, but very little from a theological point of view.

Much of the existent scientific debate about the Tetraevangelion has unfortunately revolved only around rather marginal issues such as the question of where this manuscript was produced. As a book of worship, the Tetraevangelion gives us the reading of the Gospel text in a liturgical key, its fundamental quality being that of proclaiming and permanently updating the word of the Lord in the life of the Church and, implicitly, of its faithful followers.

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Therefore, in this study we consider the role that a Tetraevangelion has as a cult book, aiming to better understand both its characteristics and how it responded to the liturgical needs specific to its time. To this end, we rely on the investigation of the relationship that St. Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion has with other similar Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts from the second part of the fourteenth century and the first part of the fifteenth century. Based on this comparison, we want to get closer to understanding the motivation and objectives that St. Nicodemus had for the realization of this valuable manuscript.

### Objectives of Saint Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion

*The first objective* pursued by St. Nicodemus in the realization of his Tetraevangelion seems to have been generated by the need to leave to the Monastery of Tismana a new and updated Tetraevangelion that would meet the current liturgical needs of the monastic community. In the final note of his Tetraevangelion, it is written that: *Această Sfântă Evanghelie a scris-o popa Nicodim în Țară Ungurească în anul al șaselea al prigonirii lui, iar de la începutul firii socotim (anii) 6000 și nouă sute și 13 [This Holy Gospel was written by Father Nicodemus on Hungarian Land in the sixth year of his persecution, and from the beginning of the world we count 6000 and nine hundred and 13 (years)].*

About the place and implicitly about the so-called persecution of Saint Nicodemus, several hypotheses have been issued which, lately, could be summarized in two.

The first hypothesis pointing to Prislop Monastery as the place where the Tetraevangelion was written is rather based on the local tradition that was preserved around this monastic settlement, believed to have been built by disciples of Saint Nicodemus. This hypothesis is grounded on an alleged conflict between Saint Nicodemus and Prince Mircea cel Bătrân [Mircea the Elder] (1386-1418) which led to the retreat of St. Nicodemus in Ardeal<sup>1</sup>.

The second hypothesis indicated Vodița Monastery as the place where the Tetraevangelion was written, being supported by Metropolitan Tit Simeadrea<sup>2</sup>, but also by historians such as E. Lăzărescu<sup>3</sup>, I.-R. Mircea<sup>4</sup> or M. Păcurariu<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> Petre P. Panaitescu, *Mircea cel Bătrân* (București, 1944), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Mitropolit Tit Simeadrea, "Glosă pe marginea unei însemnări," *MO* 1-4 (1961): 15-24.

<sup>3</sup> E. Lăzărescu, "Nicodim de la Tismana și rolul său în cultura veche românească I (până în 1385)," *Romanoslavica* 11 (1965): 237-85.

<sup>4</sup> Ion-Radu Mircea, "Cel mai vechi manuscris miniat din Țara Românească: Tetraevangelul popii Nicodim (1404-1405)," *Romanoslavica* 13 (1966): 203-21.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, vol. 1 (București: IBMO, 1980), 293.

demonstrated great scientific thoroughness in researching the role that Saint Nicodemus had in our ancient culture. That place of “persecution” was interpreted by Metropolitan Tit Simedrea as a place of spiritual “retreat”<sup>6</sup>. This is also consistent with the *Life of Saint Nicodemus* written by Stephen the Hieromonk<sup>7</sup>, who also speaks of a “retreat” of Saint Nicodemus to his cave at Tismana in the latter part of his life. We also share this opinion, considering that Vodița monastery was part of the Banat of Severin, which, in the consciousness of that era, was considered a feud of the Hungarian Kingdom attributed to Wallachia, which is why Saint Nicodemus considered the place to be in the Hungarian Country. Of course, this is also done to amplify the idea of his retirement. The Vodița Monastery offered Saint Nicodemus a secluded environment, conducive to the completion of his undertaking regarding the copying of the Tetraevangelion.

Unlike Vodița, the Tismana Monastery had truly become a monastic “great lavra” at the beginning of the fifteenth century thanks to the great princely gifts, but especially to the efforts of Saint Nicodemus and, implicitly, to his prestige as a spiritual man of that time. This certainly attracted a considerable number of monks to the Tismana monastery and gave scope to monastic life. This may also be the reason why Saint Nicodemus, in the last part of his life, entrusted the monastic community of Tismana to his trusted disciple, Agathon, and retired to Vodița. Thus, he wishes to be able to detach himself from managing the current problems of the growing community of Tismana and to dedicate himself to this last great cultural-ecclesiastical project of his, which seems to be represented by the realization of a new Tetraevangelion. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that Saint Nicodemus considers this “persecution in the Hungarian Land” as a gesture of true repentance, the work of copying the Tetraevangelion being added, in this last part of his life, to his struggles.

The Tismana Monastery, together with Vodița, constituted a “true autonomous space” within the Church of Wallachia, being administered directly by the community led by Saint Nicodemus. This fact is confirmed by Dan I's charter in 1385, which strengthened the donations made in the past by the ruling families, as well as the “autonomous” status of the two monasteries<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the choice of Vodița as a place of refuge by Saint Nicodemus, to create a new Tetraevangelion, seems entirely natural to us, if we also take into account that the Banat of Severin had ceased to represent at that time, including from a political-state point of view, a reason for dispute between the Hungarian Kingdom and Wallachia, interested first and foremost in strengthening their

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<sup>6</sup> Simedrea, “Glosă pe marginea unei însemnări,” 20-1.

<sup>7</sup> Ștefan Ieromonahul, *Viața preacuviosului Nicodim sfințitul* (Craiova, 1935), 81-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Documente privind istoria României, B. Țara Românească*, vol. 1 (București, 1953), 32-3.

common defences against the Turkish threat that had already reached the Danube<sup>9</sup>. However, the most important aspect to be considered regarding the realization of Saint Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion at Vodița is that Saint Nicodemus could have used to copy his manuscript the Tetraevangelion given by Vladislav Vlaicu (1364-1376), by royal charter, most probably in 1372 to the Vodița Monastery at the time of its foundation. In this charter, it is mentioned that the Vodița Monastery, built through the efforts of Saint Nicodemus and his disciples immediately after their passage north of the Danube, was endowed by the ruler of the country with religious gifts, as well as with beautiful Tetraevangelion encased with gold and silver<sup>10</sup>. This Tetraevangelion will be used by the community from Vodița until the moment when the community will have to look for another monastery place following the conquest by the Hungarians of the fortress of Severin in 1376<sup>11</sup>. Certainly, then, the Tetraevangelion came into liturgical use of the Tismana Monastery, which will use it at least until the moment when monastic life could be resumed in Vodița. This may also be the moment when Saint Nicodemus decides to return the Tetraevangelion to Vodița Monastery, his first foundation, to which he had been gifted, not before using it to create a new and updated Tetraevangelion.

*The second objective* pursued by St. Nicodemus seems to be represented by his interest in updating the biblical text to the current language standard, which also implied a slight "Greekization" of it, noticeable at the level of proper names.

Thus, Ioan-Radu Mircea believes that Saint Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion has as a specific characteristic "the use of the Greek diphthong *-av, -ev* even where it was not required"<sup>12</sup>, as well as "the spelling of biblical names in a pretentious Greek form"<sup>13</sup>. This so-called Greekization would be due to St. Nicodemus' dual culture, Slavonic and Greek, and especially to his Greek origin after his father. For example, Serbian sources call St. Nicodemus, Nicodemus the Greek. However, this so-called attempt to "Greekize" Slavonic manuscripts must be seen rather as a kind of "fashion of the time", as the colophon of Ivan Alexander's Tetraevangelion written by monk Simion attests, which explicitly reveals that its editors also confronted their calligraphy text in Slavonic with the text in Greek.

Therefore, it is to be assumed that this "Greekization" could not have been done practically without the support of a Greek text. This text could have been that of the Greek Tetraevangelion from the Museum of Oltenia from the

<sup>9</sup> Constantin C. Giurescu, Dinu C. Giurescu, *Istoria românilor, 2, De la mijlocul secolului al XIV-lea până la începutul secolului al XVII-lea* (București: Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1979), 75-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Documente privind istoria României*, 27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Iusztin Zoltan, "Stăpânitorii Cetății Severin în veacul al XIV-lea," *Analele Banatului, S.N. Arheologie-Istorie* 24 (2016): 379-91.

<sup>12</sup> Mircea, "Cel mai vechi manuscris miniat," 210.

<sup>13</sup> Mircea, "Cel mai vechi manuscris miniat," 218.

11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries (*Codex Craiovensis*) which, after 1389, would have been donated by Metropolitan Antim Kritopol to the Tismana Monastery<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, Saint Nicodemus updates the ancient Tetraevangelion of Vodița, of Serbian editorship, according to the Greek standard of the language, which certainly did not show any Athonite influences.

The third objective that St. Nicodemus pursues when creating a new Tetraevangelion for the monastery of Tismana is given by the need to update the liturgical apparatus which, first, had to correspond to the liturgical needs specific to the monastic environment. Unlike the Gospel text, which by script and language attests to a much older Serbian editorial source, the liturgical apparatus of the Tetraevangelion is an updated form for a Slavic-Byzantine manuscript from the latter part of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the next century. However, the updating of the liturgical apparatus was made according to the Romanian ecclesial context and the liturgical needs of the Tismana Monastery at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

Saint Nicodemus places the liturgical apparatus at the beginning of the Tetraevangelion, and not at the end, as is found in most Tetraevangelions of the time. St. Theophylact of Bulgaria's *predoslovia* [introduction] about St. Matthew the Evangelist is missing. Moreover, he doesn't seem interested in the theological aspect.

The liturgical apparatus of the Tetraevangelion has the following structure:

“Arătare cuprinzând tot anul cifra evangheliilor și ordinea evangheliștilor, de unde încep și unde se sfârșesc” [Indication for the entire year with the number of the gospels and the order of the evangelists, where they begin and end] (Folio 1 r)

“Arătare de evanghelia ce trebuie să se spună în fiecare zi în săptămânile pe tot anul” [Indication of the gospel to be read every day of the weeks throughout the year] (Folio 1 v)

“Sbornicul dumnezeiesc al celor 12 luni, arătând capetele fiecărei evanghelii pentru sfinții aleși și sărbătorile împărătești” [The divine zbornik of the 12 months, showing the beginning of each gospel for the chosen saints and royal feasts] (Folio 6)

Different gospels for every need (Folio 12-13v)

Resurrection Prochemons at Matins, on Sundays, before the Gospel (Folio 13 v)

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<sup>14</sup> Ion Reșceanu, Mihai Ciurea, Carmen Bălțeanu, Ion Sorin Bora, *Studii despre Tetraevangheliarul grecesc de la Muzeul Olteniei din Craiova (sec. al XII-lea) / Studies on the Greek Tetraevangelion from the Museum of Oltenia in Craiova (12th century): “650 de ani de la înființarea Mitropoliei Olteniei (1370-2020)”*, trans. by Alina Reșceanu – bilingual edition (Craiova: Mitropolia Olteniei, 2020), 58.

“Arătare cum se cade să afli fiecare evangheliie a zilei și evangheliile Învierii și Apostolul, dar și Glasurile” [Indication how it is proper to find out the gospel of the day and the gospels of the Resurrection and the Apostle, but also the Voices] (Folio 14)<sup>15</sup>.

### **Its relation with Bulgarian manuscripts**

Regarding the relationship between the manuscript of Saint Nicodemus and the Bulgarian manuscripts, we will focus first on those made in Vidin in the last part of the fourteenth century and the first part of the fifteenth century. The motivation for this approach is given by the fact that Saint Nicodemus, before crossing north of the Danube, is present with his disciples in the Vidin area, where, according to tradition, he founded two monasteries, in Vratna and Manastirica<sup>16</sup>. What is known for certain is that Saint Nicodemus was a direct witness of the events that took place in the area after the occupation of Vidin in 1365 by the Hungarian Kingdom, under whose rule it remained until 1369 when it was liberated by Prince Vladislav Vlaicu. After this moment, due to the political and military instability of the area, Saint Nicodemus will find refuge and support north of the Danube, at the ruler of Wallachia<sup>17</sup>.

The period Saint Nicodemus spent in Vidin is certainly much longer than the time between 1365 and 1370, the year around which he passed in Wallachia. The persecution to which he was subjected by Franciscan monks, including the test of fire, during the Hungarian occupation of Vidin, implies a pre-1365 stay of at least several years.

During this time, he organized his monastic hearth and gained a certain notoriety in the area, which also attracted his persecution from the new rulers of Vidin, who were eager to catholicize the entire region that became part of the Hungarian Catholic Kingdom. Therefore, Saint Nicodemus spent an important period in Vidin and certainly kept in touch with the Danube fortress after he arrived in Wallachia. Therefore, Vidin could naturally exert a considerable cultural-ecclesiastical influence on Saint Nicodemus for a period when he actively participated in the ecclesiastical life of the area. Therefore, there is a need for an evaluation of the relationship between the manuscript of Saint Nicodemus and the Vidinian manuscripts made in the latter part of the fourteenth century and the first part of the fifteenth century.

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<sup>15</sup> Based on the translation of Ion-Radu Mircea, “Cel mai vechi manuscris miniat,” 206-7.

<sup>16</sup> Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, vol. 1, 288.

<sup>17</sup> Lăzărescu, “Nicodim de la Tismana,” 259-61.

After the division of the Bulgarian Empire by Ivan Alexander (1331-1371) between his two sons, Ivan Shishman and Ivan Sratsimir in 1356, the rivalry that arose between them, although it led to a departure from Tarnovo, also had beneficial consequences in terms of ecclesiastical and cultural affirmation of Vidin, henceforth ruled by Ivan Sratsimir. With the settlement of Ivan Sratsimir in Vidin, the city began to develop culturally. During this period, the existence of a scriptorium is attested based on manuscripts that have been preserved until today.

An advantageous aspect of our research is the fact that a series of manuscripts and a chancery document have been preserved since the period of the Vidin Empire (1356 -1396), based on which we can make a thorough comparative analysis.

These are:

- Tetraevangelion of Metropolitan Daniil of Vidin;
- The Zbornik of Vidin (*Bdinski Zbornik*) (1360)
- The Apostle of Vidin, made during the Hungarian occupation (1365-1369) by brothers Dragan and Rajko;
- Letter to the people of Brasov of Ivan Sratsimir (1369).

An Apostle is added to the above-mentioned documents, which was copied by Draško in 1428 and is currently stored at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb under inventory no. MS.III.b.16.<sup>18</sup>

The Tetraevangelion of Metropolitan Daniel of Vidin draws our special attention. It is of Tarnovean Bulgarian editorial origin in terms of script, but in terms of language, it has obvious Serbian influences. However, there are no elements to confirm the exercise of a direct influence on the later work of Saint Nicodemus, even if the Tetraevangelion in question would have passed north of the Danube together with Metropolitan Daniel, who is forced to take refuge in Wallachia after the occupation of Vidin by the Hungarians (1365). Metropolitan Daniel had received the approval of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to exercise his episcopal ministry, with the consent of the local hierarch, most probably in parts of Oltenia<sup>19</sup>, a fact confirmed by the synodal decisions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1370 issued at the same time when Metropolitan Antim Kritopol was installed in Severin<sup>20</sup>.

This manuscript could have represented a model, both for Vidin and for Wallachia, where, after 1365, it was certainly in liturgical use. The other manuscripts produced during the Hungarian rule of Vidin are also of Bulgarian

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<sup>18</sup> Maya Petrova-Taneva, "The Ghent Manuscript of the *Bdinski Zbornik*: The Original or a Copy?," *Slavica Gandensia* 28 (2001): 121-2.

<sup>19</sup> Răzvan Theodorescu, *Bizanț, Balcani, Occident la începuturile culturii medievale românești* (secolele X-XIV) (București: Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1974), 209.

<sup>20</sup> *Documente privind istoria României*, 20-1, 25-6.

editorship with a strong Serbian influence on the language, which is evidenced by the increasingly rare use of nasal vowels and their replacement with *-ou* and *-e*, as well as that pronounced iotization specific to Serbian spelling<sup>21</sup>. The same phenomenon is to be found in the letter to the people of Brasov<sup>22</sup> written by Ivan Sratsimir's chancellery after 1369, which attests that the influence of Serbian spelling was exerted to the same extent at the level of the chancellery language for official documents.

The Vidin Zbornik, even if it is not a biblical work, has characteristics that are of great use to us. It is a hagiographic work, including the lives of holy women from the Church of the East and was made in Vidin, in 1360, at the request of Tsarina Ana, wife of Ivan Sratsimir. She was the daughter of the Romanian ruler Nicolae Alexandru (1352-1364) from his marriage to Clara Dobokay (Lady Clara). According to recent research, the Zbornik, currently preserved at the University of Ghent, is not an autographed document, but a copy made in the first decade of the fifteenth century, as attested by the evaluation of the watermark of the paper used<sup>23</sup>. However, the transcription of this manuscript does not diminish its historical and cultural value, but on the contrary, as far as we are concerned, it is meant to reconfirm the use of the same type of spelling at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

Therefore, the type of spelling used in Vidin is a hybrid between Bulgarian (Tarnovean) and Serbian norms. All manuscripts known from Vidin, as well as the letter to Brasov, use both nasal vowels, specific to the Bulgarian editorial workshop, and semivowels specific to the Serbian editorial workshop, which indicates that a strict orthographic system was not used here. Therefore, specialists believe that a mixed spelling typical for Vidin was in use at the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century<sup>24</sup>.

The explanations offered by the specialists considered both Ivan Sratsimir's efforts to give a new cultural identity to Vidin about Tarnovo, and the fact that the spelling of the Bulgarian editorial workshop without nasals better reflected the spoken language of Western Bulgaria, which had been formed before the fifteenth century<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, we can understand that the breaking of political ties between Vidin and Tarnovo had immediate cultural consequences, which required attracting cultural people from neighbouring Serbia, including professional scribes, to work for the ruling family in Vidin. These, not only through their formation but also through the sources used, were

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<sup>21</sup> Petrova-Taneva, "The Ghent Manuscript," 120-1.

<sup>22</sup> Mariola Walczak-Mikolajezakowa, "Braszowska Gramota Iwana Sracimira. Nieduzy Dokument o wielkim Znaczenin," *Balcanica posnaniensia* 29 (2022): 71-80.

<sup>23</sup> Petrova-Taneva, "The Ghent Manuscript," 122-3.

<sup>24</sup> Petrova-Taneva, "The Ghent Manuscript," 125.

<sup>25</sup> Petrova-Taneva, "The Ghent Manuscript," 121.

introduced in an area with Bulgarian cultural specificity norms of Serbian orthography in the scriptoria and chancellery of the Tsardom of Vidin.

In this context, it can also be understood that Saint Nicodemus is rather a man of influence in the area, being part of the outstanding representatives of the Serbian current, which has a major contribution to improving the cultural-religious environment in Vidin during the reign of Tsar Ivan Sratsimir. The fact that Saint Nicodemus does not resort to the orthographic system specific to Vidin, where he was resident for a long time and with which he kept a direct relationship, proves that Saint Nicodemus was already formed in the spirit of the Serbian school, whose outstanding representative he is both in Vidin and, later, in Wallachia. If we consider what P.P. Panaitescu remarked about the fact that Wallachia did not have a direct border with the Serbian Empire at the end of the fourteenth century<sup>26</sup>, we notice that Vidin had the role of intermediating, at that time, the relationship with Serbian culture and its important representatives, such as St. Nicodemus.

As for the relation of St. Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion with the Tarnovian manuscripts, a possible influence exerted by them is very difficult to prove. Tarnovian manuscripts made during Ivan Alexander's reign are distinguished by graphic elegance and beautiful illuminations, the most famous being the Tetraevangelion made by monk Simeon in 1355-1356. This manuscript, considered to be one of the most beautiful biblical church manuscripts, ended in the possession of Alexandru cel Bun, ruler of Moldavia, after the fall of Tarnovo fortress in 1393, as indicated in a note on one of its pages.

Ivan Alexander's Tetraevangelion is a deluxe edition par excellence, and any possible influences exerted on that of Saint Nicodemus might be considered as "forced". At most, one can speak of that tendency to Greekize the text, which we mentioned above, which is found in both manuscripts. We can also observe a possible influence at the level of illuminations, exerted by another Tarnovean reference work, such as the Tomic Psalter, to which the Tetraevangelion of Saint Nicodemus can be related only as an artistic work of synthesis of the Slavic-Byzantine world in the middle of the fourteenth century.

### **Its relation with Serbian manuscripts**

The Serbian editorial influence in Church Slavonic on Saint Nicodemus' Tetraevangelion is indisputable, being supported by most researchers. The exception is, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Alexandru

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<sup>26</sup> Panaitescu, *Mircea cel Bătrân*, 31.



Ștefulescu, who speaks of a mixed Bulgarian-Serbian editorial influence<sup>27</sup> and then Emil Turdeanu, who claims that it was written in Middle Bulgarian<sup>28</sup>. The language and spelling elements are Serbian, presenting specific characteristics of the Rașca School. However, the manuscripts made at the beginning of the fifteenth century posed a whole series of difficulties when researchers tried cataloguing it the manuscripts of its time. Its spelling denotes characteristics that can only be categorized as archaic about the period in which it is made. However, the language appears updated with Greekizing tendencies, while the illuminations do not follow a specific style for Slavic-Byzantine manuscripts and can be considered rather “eclectic”. To all this, we add the fact that, unlike most contemporary Serbian manuscripts, the liturgical apparatus is placed at the beginning and not at the end, and that the introduction to Matthew of Saint Theophylact of Bulgaria is missing, or that the menologhion does not record the Serbian saints Simion and Sava. We can thus truly understand the difficulty of cataloguing it based on generally recognized characteristics for each family of manuscripts and for the respective time.

Starting from the graphic analysis of the text of Saint Nicodemus' manuscript, Ion-Radu Mircea observes that the one who copied the Tetraevangelion between 1404 and 1405 preserved the Serbian orthographic tradition of the previous century<sup>29</sup>. In contrast, Ion Iufu claimed that, through his manuscript, Saint Nicodemus would make himself the exponent of manuscript writing in the Romanian Principalities in the new spelling of the Serbian editorial style, which was known to have been promoted in the first part of the fifteenth century by Constantine of Kostenets<sup>30</sup>. Clearly, the writing used by Saint Nicodemus is much older. He uses a bold, ample, almost uncial letter, specific to the Rașca School that was perpetuated in time until the second half of the fourteenth century. Unlike this type of writing, the Athonite manuscripts of Serbian editorial tradition of the mid-fourteenth century no longer used such scripting, adopting an elegant semiuncial script, smaller in proportion, which benefited from a much more generous space for word delimitation and punctuation use.

This can be observed both in the Tetraevangelion copied by the monk Dionysius from Hilandar Monastery in 1356, and in a Tetraevangelion from the same period made at Hilandar Monastery by the monk Teoctist. Therefore, at the level of script, the Tetraevangelion of Saint Nicodemus differs from the Athonite manuscripts, with which, however, it resembles at the level of language, just like the other Serbian manuscripts of the second half of the fourteenth century.

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<sup>27</sup> Alexandru Ștefulescu, *Mănăstirea Tismana* (București, 1909), 57.

<sup>28</sup> Emil Turdeanu, *La litterature bulgare du XIV e au siecle et sa diffusion dans les pays roumains* (Paris, 1947), 125.

<sup>29</sup> Mircea, “Cel mai vechi manuscris miniat”, 210.

<sup>30</sup> Ion Iufu, “Despre prototipurile literaturii slavo-române din secolul al XV-lea,” *MO* 7-8 (1963): 533.

However, regarding the writing style which uses a broad and bold letter, it seems that the tradition of the Raška School continued among Serbian manuscripts after the middle of the fourteenth century, being found in several manuscripts whose spelling is like that used by Saint Nicodemus. The most conclusive example of this is provided by a Tetraevangelion of the third quarter of the fourteenth century, currently at the National Library of Russia in Moscow, under inventory number F. p. I. 114. The writing is strikingly similar, as is the layout of the biblical text on the page, the use of punctuation or marginal notation to indicate chapters (pericopes), and the wording of the *kephalaia*. Even the illuminations found at the beginning of each Gospel indicate that both manuscripts are under a strong Byzantine influence. The Serbian Tetraevangelion surprises with very beautiful representations of the four evangelists.

A writing style with a Serbian editorial influence, less ample, slightly flattened, less bold but not much different can also be found in another Tetraevangelion dated to the third quarter of the fourteenth century, which was later completed in the sixteenth century with a liturgical apparatus that is included at the beginning of the manuscript. This is also kept in the National Library of Russia, with inventory number F.P.I, 109, as well as two other Serbian Tetraevangelions from the fourteenth century that are kept in the same location, under inventory numbers F.P. I, 79 and F.P. I.111. Gradually, however, in the last part of the fourteenth century, a less ample and cumbersome letter is mainly used, so that, in the first part of the fifteenth century, this tendency becomes generalized, as in Serbian Tetraevangelion of this period, such as those under inventory numbers OP F. I. 579 and OP F. I. 579 from the National Library of Russia or the much better known Radoslado Tetraevangelion, kept in the same location under inventory number F.I. 591. It is distinguished by an exceptional representation of the four evangelists at the beginning of each Gospel, but also by an elegant semi-uncial writing, close to the style that Gavril Uric<sup>31</sup> would use in his manuscripts and those of his school in Moldova of the fifteenth century.

After this overview of the Serbian editorial manuscripts, which aimed at briefly presenting the evolution of writing in the second half of the fourteenth century and the first part of the fifteenth century, the resemblance of St. Nicodemus' manuscript with the Serbian Tetraevangelion of the third quarter of the fourteenth century should seem at least surprising. Despite all the similarities in spelling and language, a whole series of features specific to the first part of the fifteenth century relate, first, to the format, content and arrangement of the liturgical apparatus, together with the considerable time

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<sup>31</sup> Sorin Ulea, "Gavril Uric. Studiu paleografic," *SCIA* 28 (1981), 35-62.

distance between their issuances, practically prevent us from considering that the two manuscripts under discussion could belong to the same family of manuscripts. However, this paradoxical situation leads us to understand that, at the editorial-orthographic level, the manuscript of Saint Nicodemus uses a similar manuscript from the third quarter of the fourteenth century, while at the level of the liturgical apparatus, it follows the current trends from the beginning of the fifteenth century. Therefore, it is not difficult to assume that it is not the Tetraevangelion of Saint Nicodemus that belongs to the same family of manuscripts as the Serbian manuscript of the third quarter of the fourteenth century, but the Tetraevangelion given around 1372 by Prince Vladislav Vlaicu to Vodița Monastery. This manuscript was produced in the same time frame as the third quarter manuscript, most likely in a Serbian scriptory which had largely preserved the tradition of the Rașca School in terms of script/writing. It is this manuscript that St. Nicodemus used to copy the Gospel text with its specific fourteenth-century writing style in his new Tetraevangelion for the monastery of Tismana, to which he added an updated liturgical apparatus, which he adorned with beautiful illuminations to strengthen its originality.

### **Conclusions**

Saint Nicodemus of Tismana makes from the writing of his Tetraevangelion an end in the last part of his life. The reasons are mainly determined by the need to have a complete Tetraevangelion that would replace the one at Vodița Monastery, to update it to the standard of language and to promote a good liturgical order. For copying the text, Saint Nicodemus most likely used the Tetraevangelion from Vodița. Moreover, he revised the Slavonic biblical text using the Greek text, which had already become a trend in that era. This Tetraevangelion of Saint Nicodemus ends an entire tradition, specific to the second half of the fourteenth century and opens a new one, specific to the fifteenth century.

Through the realization of the Tetraevangelion, Saint Nicodemus proves to be a defender and promoter of the Slavonic ecclesial culture. In other words, his work could be seen as a response to the campaign of “Greekization” carried out by the Greek hierarchs in the Romanian territories of that time.

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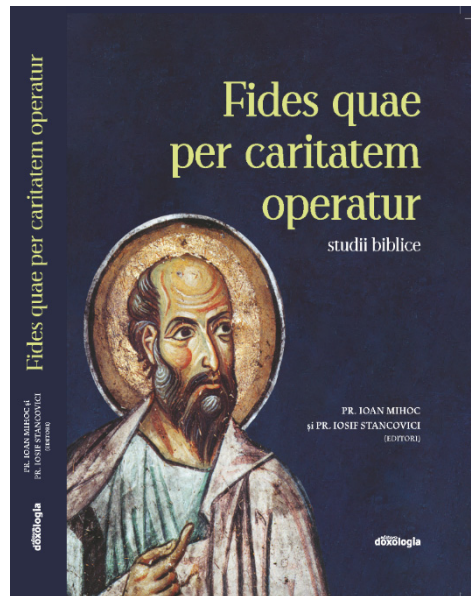


## Book Review:

**Ioan Mihoc, Iosif Stancovici (eds.),**  
***Fides qua per caritatem operatur: studii biblice***  
**[*Fides qua per caritatem operatur: biblical studies*]**  
**(Iași: Doxologia, 2023), 495 p.**

This volume brings together studies which have been presented at the International Symposium of Biblical Exegesis at the West University of Timișoara in 2020 and 2021. The symposium took place with the blessings of His Beatitude Ioan Metropolitan of Banat. The publication by Doxologia in Jassy has received the blessings of His Beatitude Teofan, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bucovina. A short preface introduces the volume and each article. Every chapter has its bibliography, instead of an overall bibliography at the end of the volume.

Regarding the contents, despite a few philological, historical and art-historical examples, most of the articles can be categorised as belonging to biblical theology. The theological and spiritual focus is clear from the opening words of the preface: “Exegesis, the queen of biblical studies, is always fundamental, not only in academic disciplines but also in the life of believers” (p. 9). After this, the aim of exegesis is defined with a citation from 1 Tim 4:6 as “words of faith and of good teaching”. An interesting aspect of the volume is that this theological and practical (relevance for Christian life) approach is embodied in an open-minded and generous spirit.



There are several contributions of scholars from different Christian traditions. Regarding linguistic diversity, fifteen of the twenty-four chapters are in Romanian, eight in English and one in French. And the title in Latin... The choice for a Latin rendering of the expression based on Gal 5:6 for the title might also be part of this openness and/or might express a desire for alignment with scholarly traditions of the past.

The editors have arranged the unnumbered chapters thematically into six parts of four papers each. The first part is entitled “Credința lucrătoare prin iubire” (*Faith Working through Love*). All of its chapters address aspects of the New Testament. Vasile Mihoc, has prepared a verse-by-verse commentary on Galatians 5:1-12 as he explores “The Freedom of Faith working through Love” (“Libertatea ‘credinței lucrătoare prin iubire’”). He identifies faith, hope and love as “those three theological virtues” (p. 25). A key verse is verse 6, where St Paul expresses the close relation between faith and love in the life of Christian believers. In his conclusion, he draws attention to the depth of the concept of Christian freedom in the thought of St Paul. The next article is firmly embedded within Roman Catholic thought, as it cites both Pope Francis and Pope Benedict within its first three pages. Giuseppe G. Scollo, offers a summary of his PhD dissertation: “The Strength Needed to Enter the Kingdom of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Luke 16:16 in Context” (published as a monograph under the same title by Mohr Siebeck in 2019 in the series WUNT). It focuses on a verse which has proved difficult due to the presence of the term “violence”. This is illustrated in a list of different translations of this verse in English Bibles which is added as an appendix to the article. Chapter 3, by Dragoș Andrei Giulea, focuses on another verse with a rich history of interpretation, in this case with implications for debates between different Christian traditions: the concept of universal priesthood from 1 Peter 2:5 and 9. The last chapter from part I is by Traian Gheorghe Mocan, and deals with repentance as an essential marker of Christian life. He recognises five nuances of to repent (*μετανοέω*) in five of the seven letters from Revelation 2-3 where this verb features (“*Μετανοέω* în mesajele epistolare ale Apocalipsei 2-3: semnul existențial al creștinismului”).

The chapters of the second part are dedicated to both OT and NT topics and have been brought together under the heading “Theophany and Eschatology”. In the first of these, Cătălin Vatamanu, explores instances, where humans encounter God, face to face throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and draws attention to the implications of this for the way God relates to human beings (“Descoperirea lui Dumnezeu ‘față către față’ (פנים אל-פנים): Rolul dezvăluirii chipului în pedagogia divină”). The next chapter, by Nichifor Tănase, combines the concept of the face with that of the breath of life and the spirit of God in order to explore the Spiritual-Chistological dimension of biblical anthropology (“*Panim* (‘fața strălucitoare’), *nephesh hayya* (‘suflarea de viață’) și *Ruach Elohim* (‘Duhul lui Dumnezeu’): Dimensiunea pnevmatologic-hristologică a antropologiei biblice”).

In the next chapter Ioan Mihoc, offers an exegetical commentary on Luke 17:20-37, an eschatological text within the third Gospel. The last chapter in this section stands out as a valuable contribution to reception history. Linda-Saskia Menczel offers some highlights from her PhD thesis as she explores Hebrew (often pseudo-Hebrew as the artists did not know the language) inscriptions which feature on works of European Christian art. Her research has resulted in an enormous catalogue of works of art containing Hebrew letters, words and phrases, which deserve to be widely known and used.

The third part has received the title “Sfânta Scriptură și istoria traducerilor” (The Holy Scripture and Translation). Ștefan Munteanu contributes to canon criticism, as he compares the names, order, and number of the books in the MT and the LXX (“La structure rédactionnelle des livres de l’Ancien Testament”). The next article addresses textual issues, as Alexandru Mihăilă, explores “Aquila and the Greek Text of Ecclesiastes: Consequences for Eastern Orthodox Understanding of the Old Testament Ecclesiastical Text”. It starts with some interesting reflections on the importance of the Septuagint in the Eastern Orthodox Church. This is followed by a detailed analysis of how the text of Qohelet stands out from the other translations gathered in the collection known as the Septuagint and some insight into the figure of Aquila. The author understands that “the history of the Old Greek translation known as the Septuagint is far more complex than the legend based on the *Letter of Aristeas*”. The inclusion of the translation of Qohelet by “proto-Aquila” is such a complicating factor. In the third article of this section, Constantin Jinga, tells the interesting story of the first translation of the Septuagint into Romanian. It was made by Chancellor Nicolae Milescu during his stay in Constantinople as representative of Prince Grigorie I Ghica of Wallachia from 1661 to 1664. In the last article of part three, the art historian Emilija Vuković examines the miniatures in the Kumanica Tetraevangelion (manuscript no. 69 at the library of the Serbian Academy of Science).

Part four deals with “Historical Aspects and Religious Identity” (Istoricitate și identitate religioasă). In the first chapter Eusebiu Borca offers biblical and scientific perspectives on the chronology of the flood (“Perspective biblico-științifice cu privire la cronologia Potopului”). Next Marcin Chrostowski, “The Book of Tobit in the Context of the First Israelite Diaspora in Assyria”, approaches Tobit not as a folk tale, but as an account based on historical facts which shed light on the circumstances of Israelites during the first exile. Lawrence Iwumadi, provides a careful analysis of “The Genealogy of Jesus According to Matthew: Purpose of the Text and its Reception in Early Christianity.” The closing chapter in this section is by Marian Vild, who explores the issue of marriage and virginity in 1 Corinthians 6-7 in the Greco-Roman cultural context in which the literature of the NT was created (“Căsătorie și feciorie după I Corinteni 6-7 în contextul lumii greco-romane.”)



The chapters in the penultimate section have been gathered under the concepts of Divine Pedagogy and the Study of Value (“Pedagogie divină și axiologie”). Maria-Cristina Trușcă provides an examination of concept and meaning of Ἀρετή in classical, biblical and patristic contexts (“Ἀρετή – conceptualizare și lexicalizare în context biblico-patristic”). Iosif Stancovici contributes to the interpretation of the OT and the NT, as he analyses the Christological interpretation of the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37:2-11) in early Christianity, examining Matthew 21, Mark 12, Luke 20, Acts 7 and I Clement 4 (“Nu puteau să-I vorbească în pace’: Facere 37:2-11 în literatura creștină primară”). The remaining chapters in this section are: George Cosmin Piț, “‘Toate faptele lor le fac ca să fie văzuți de oameni’ (Mt 23:5): Riscuri pentru ortopraxia creștină” (“‘Everything they do is done to be seen by people’ (Matthew 23:5): Pitfalls for Christian Orthopraxis” and Gabriela Radu, “Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia a II-a la Epistola Sf. Apostle Pavel către Filipeni*” (Sf) John Chrysostom’s Second Homily on Philippians).

The closing part is called “Kerygma și paradigme misionare” (Proclamation and Mission). Its chapters address themes from the NT Gospels and the OT prophetic and narrative books. In the first article Ilie Melniciuc-Puică, examines Luke 4:18-30, Acts 2:14-38 and Acts 7:2-50 to offer a Lukan perspective on the citation of scripture in missionary contexts (“Citarea Scripturii în argumentarea misionară: paradigmă lucanice”). Next, Danilo Mihajlović draws attention to the multi-faceted role of prophets in the Old Testament world, in his article “Old Testament Prophets in the Service of Community: Holistic Perspective on Prophetic Service”. The next chapter is dedicated to one prophetic event, as Stelian Pașca-Tușa, explores the issue of interpreting the narrative of Jonah’s prophecy to Nineveh (“Mila lui Dumnezeu sau mania lui Iona? O abordare ortodoxă a evenimentului Nineve” – God’s Mercy or Jonah’s Madness? An Orthodox Perspective on the Events at Nineveh). The last article returns to the Gospels, with Daniel Enea, “Parabolele despre Împărăția cerurilor în Comentariul lui Origin la Evanghelia după Matei” (The Parables of the Heavenly Kingdom in Origin’s Commentary on Matthew.)

The wide range of topics ensures that the volume offers something for everybody. The spiritual openness embodied in this collection of conference papers is commendable as an example to be followed.

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## Book Review:

**Stelian Pașca-Tușa, Bogdan Șoptorean (eds.),  
*Studii biblice in honorem Pr. prof. univ. dr. Ioan Chirilă*  
[*Biblical Studies in honorem Rev. Prof. Ioan Chirilă, PhD*]  
(Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023), 455 p.**

Homage volumes, following the model of the long-established Western ones, are no longer a novelty. It has long been accepted that almost every university professor will have at least one memorial volume dedicated to him or her on reaching the 'round' age of 60, 65, 70 or more. These volumes comprise a series of studies conducted by other academics, sometimes with a central theme and sometimes leaving the authors free to tackle any subject they wish. At the end of these studies, a personal message of congratulations and admiration for the academic personality to whom the volume is dedicated appears. The volumes are also prefaced by a substantial introduction which outlines the portrait of the person being honoured and their work and contribution to scientific research. So, this kind of academic literature has a precise 'recipe'.



The case of the present volume follows entirely the pattern already presented. It is dedicated to Rev. Prof. Ioan Chirilă, PhD, on his 60th birthday, is made up of a series of studies by professors who teach Old and New Testament Studies at theological faculties from Romania and beyond, contains commendatory messages and is prefaced by one of the two coordinators of the volume, a disciple of Rev. Professor.

Given that this type of volume has an exact format, there is not much room for novelty. Therefore, their value does not lay in this. In what follows we will try to highlight elements that make each tribute volume a unique academic endeavour, and not just a practical tradition out of inertia. We believe that two fundamental features that truly give value to such a publication are the quality of the studies contained in the volume and the love with which they are written.

As for the articles collected in this publication, they are as varied as they are complex. The authors of the thirty-one studies deal with a multitude of topics, covering both fragments of the text of Holy Scripture and issues of textual history, biblical canon, translation, the relationship with various Apocrypha, related philosophical notions, patristic exegesis, updating the message and much more. The methodology of the studies harmoniously blends fundamental Orthodox principles of biblical reception and assumption with the tools offered by the Western research environment. At the same time, a closer look at the bibliographies used by each author reveals that they are very consistent, highly topical and diverse. It must also be said that the studies in question are not 'arid' and 'heavy' scientific literature, aimed only at edifying readers, but rather more or less theological thoughts that highlight various elements of the Church's faith: the nature of light, the importance of hermeneutical principles, the value of the name, Scripture as the source and basis of iconographic representations, the use of the Psalms in the spiritual ascent, etc. All these points make the volume dedicated to Rev. Ioan Chirilă to have an extremely valuable, accessible and relevant content for Romanian theology.

As we saw at the beginning, the 'recipe' for designing a tribute volume is not only about academic research but also about the relationship that each author has with the celebrated personality. Looking through the messages that conclude each article, we discover not only the esteem that Romanian Orthodox biblical scholars have for Rev. Ioan Chirilă but also the love with which they relate to him. In general, among the authors, some are proud of the fact that they were able to collaborate with the distinguished reverend, while others 'boast' that they had the chance to be his students. Regardless of their position, those who have produced the studies contained in this volume choose, for a few lines, to detach themselves from the subject matter and open their hearts. This is why, in homage literature, scientific research aims to advance human

knowledge, but also provides a framework for strengthening inter-human relationships. In the present volume, this is seen not only in the messages at the end of the studies but sometimes even in the themes the authors address. An example could be the article by Rev. Al. Moldovan – “‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John’ (Jn 1:6). The portrait of St. John the Baptist in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel”, which we believe focuses on a biblical John who has something in common with the John we are honouring. Another situation could also be that in our opinion, some studies deal with themes or notions that Rev. Ioan Chirilă himself has given importance to in his work. As examples, we can give the study of Deacon S. Pașca-Tușa, which deals with the relationship between Scripture and Philokalia, and that of Rev. I. Melniciuc-Puică, which deals with the personality of the Prophet Hosea. All these issues show that the love of the disciples and colleagues of Ref. Ioan Chirilă was the driving force behind the publication of this volume.

Knowing all this, we can say with certainty that although this volume is perfectly in line with the academic homage literature, it is not the result of unwritten laws and contextual obligations, but is the fruit of research approaches influenced, among other things, by the personality and work of Rev. Prof. Ioan Chirilă. Therefore, the present work illustrates how scientific knowledge and the sensitivity of the human soul can be combined.

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