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## **The Gospel of Matthew within the New Testament Canon\***

Very Rev. Dr. Paul Nadim Tarazi, Th.D.

### **The Enigma of the Jesus of the Gospels**

When dealing with the Gospel of Matthew one cannot bypass tackling the perennial dilemma inherent in the fact that Paul never appeals to the teachings of Jesus even at the height of his argumentation against his colleagues who were the Master's disciples. Moreover, in the Pauline corpus, those same disciples seem to display toward Paul the same recalcitrant misunderstanding they exhibited toward Jesus' teaching. This enigma is further complicated by two other considerations. If the so-called "other" apostles kept misunderstanding the Master even after his post-resurrection appearances to them and his exaltation at God's right hand, then in which sense can they still be considered apostles? Are they not rather, as Paul puts it, "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ... Satan's servants disguising themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor 11:13, 15)? The other more important consideration is that, according to Acts 9, 22, 26 as well as 1 Corinthians 15, the same exalted Jesus appeared to Paul, assigning him as his apostle to the Gentiles, *after* he had appeared to the others. Looking at the matter from the perspective of the chronology of Acts, one has the distinct impression that Jesus appeared to Paul *because* the earlier disciples were apprehensive concerning the open mission to the nations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in Acts, both the "pillars" of Galatians and Barnabas seem to "vanish" from the scene, one after the other, once Paul's apostolic activity becomes full-fledged and takes center stage. Paul alone remains on the Roman scene "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (Acts 28:31). In other words, he was carrying further the mission initiated by the Jesus of Luke and, by extension, of all the Gospels. And, if so, then the letters of Paul contain the correct teaching of the Master. Since, according to both Acts and Galatians, Paul's knowledge of that teaching was received directly through divine revelation and not "from or through human beings" (Gal 1:1, 12), then the entire assumption of an "oral

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<sup>1</sup> See my article "Paul, the One Apostle of the One Gospel," *The Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies (JOCABS)* Vol. 2, No 1 (2009).

tradition” going back to Jesus through the intermediacy of the “others” needs to be reassessed especially in view of the fact that the letters of Paul as literary products are universally acknowledged to antedate the Gospels. At any rate, they are definitely independent of those Gospels in that they neither quote the Master nor refer, even obliquely, to his teaching. So our understanding of the Gospels could be enhanced if we approach them as literary creations, as we do the Pauline letters.

## The Problem of Oral Tradition

As of late, so-called post-modern theologians are trying to find a way out of what they view as an impasse created by the “critico-historical” study of scripture. The approach they champion is basically a pseudo-scholarly disguise to revive patristic, if not outright Origenist and thus Alexandrian, philosophical theology. The same, and unfortunately so, applies to the efforts expounded by Orthodox as well as Oriental scholars who are trying to revive the Syriac patristic tradition by presenting it as more in line with the scriptural Semitic background. All are still held captive by the erroneous age-old premise that “oral tradition” preceded the scriptural text, and beyond that, they consider the scriptural text simply sedimentation that is never total or perfect. Even when such textual sedimentation is considered final and authoritative, the assumption of “oral tradition” always looms in the background and is appealed to in various ways to unlock the perceived textual *crucis interpretum*. The worst case scenario is actually the classic one where such “oral tradition” is viewed as shaping the scriptural text in both its emergence and final form, and then continues on its course as so-called “living tradition” even though scripture has become a closed canon. Whether oral or living, “tradition” is similar to the Platonic “soul”: a non-provable reality and yet a universal assumption. And these two suppositions have ruled and still rule all scriptural and theological discourses.

But what if there never was an “oral tradition”? To reply that such a proposition is impossible is dodging the issue. At a time when there was no tape recording, oral tradition would have been impossible to prove. Without exception, what was supposedly rendered orally was already recorded material, that is, any access to a supposed oral tradition was through the written record thereof, and consequently, although strange to our modern ears, any presumed oral tradition could not have been relayed (traded) except *in writing*. The *logos* was by definition *scripture* (written) as is evident from Paul’s phraseology: not only does he say (*legō*) what he is writing (Gal 1:9; 3:15, 17; 4:1; 5:2, 16; also Rom 3:5; 6:19; 9:1; 10:18, 19; 11:1, 11, 13; 12:3; 15:18), but even scripture itself says, *hē graphē legei* or, literally, what is written says (Gal 4:30; also Rom 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2). Whenever Paul intends to render official what he is saying in writing, he unequivocally consigns it to a sealed written document: “See with what letters I am writing (*grammasin egrapsa*) to you with my own hand (*tē emē kheiri*).” (Gal 6:11) This attitude, in turn, is nothing other than what is found in scripture itself. Indeed the Mosaic Law was given to Israel in a written form—as scripture—at Moses’ hand (*en kheiri mesitou*, Gal 3:19).

I can understand that this basic reality slipped the mind of the philosophically, and thus unrealistically, minded Greco-Roman and Western Latin worlds that equate reading with mumbling, but we who live in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and *‘al’Iraq* amid Muslims have no excuse whatsoever. Early Islam captured the meaning as well the essence of scripture by calling its Holy Book *Qur’an*, something *written* to be *read*, that is to say, read with vocalic sounds for others to

hear. Hence the official nomenclature for the reading of the *Qur'an* is not “reading” but rather *'adhan*, that is to say, pouring vocalized words into the ears, which is how Isaiah describes the rendition of the words coming out of God’s mouth: “Hear (*šim'û*), O heavens, and give ear (*ha'azini*), O earth; for the Lord has spoken (*dibber*).” (1:2a)

Consequently, even when Galatians refers to a presumably oral Pauline teaching that may have been circulating before the letter was written (1:8, 9; 5:21), our sole access to the actual content of that teaching is exclusively through the letter itself since we do not have any tape recording of what the Apostle had preached before writing the letter. Still, what is even more important is that in this letter we have a corrective to the misinterpretation by Paul’s opponents of the presumably oral gospel that he was spreading throughout Galatia (1:6-7) and the other Roman provinces. Put otherwise, since oral tradition presumes a channeling of the original message by the hearers and since, according to Galatians, those hearers are being duped by those who are perverting the gospel, then what Paul is actually attacking in this letter is precisely the oral tradition that was circulating in Galatia.

If the gospel consigned to writing is a corrective to the presumed oral gospel behind it, then it follows that the so-called oral or living tradition can never be a reference and, to plagiarize Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:21, it is always under the corrective rod of scripture. The unavoidable conclusion is that the so-called “oral gospel” is not equivalent to scripturalized apostolic *paradosis* (tradition).

Jeremiah 36 pushes this matter to its extreme when it shows us that the canonized scripture supersedes not only the oral “words of God,” but even any of its preceding written copies. We hear of Baruch writing down on a scroll at Jeremiah’s personal dictation all the words which the Lord spoke to Jeremiah from the days of Josiah until “today,” the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah. Furthermore, such activity was done at God’s express request: “Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today.” (v.2). So the scroll, read to the king, contained the entire message of Jeremiah and, after it was burned, it was rewritten with additions that were obviously not part of the earlier scroll:

Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words which Baruch wrote at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: “Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah has burned. And concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah you shall say, ‘Thus says the Lord, You have burned this scroll, saying, “Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?” Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity; I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear.’” Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them. (vv.27-32)

Thus the new scroll which became the canonical Book of Jeremiah was different from the original scroll in that it contained the story of the burning of that original. This being the case, it is hard to

imagine that the addressees would have kept copies of that prophetic message which was intended to castigate them. It is Jeremiah's disciple, Baruch, who kept a copy of the original scroll that became scripture. Following the same logic, it is as hard to imagine that the Galatian addressees would have cherished and kept a letter that castigated them as *anoētoi* (mindless, brainless) twice in a row (3:1, 3) because they refused Paul's gospel and endorsed the perversion thereof preached by his opponents whom he squarely branded as deacons of Satan in another letter (2 Cor 11:15). Neither the opponents nor the addressees would possibly have kept the Pauline correspondence; rather they would have burned it as King Jehoiakim did.

The post-modern solutions to the impasse in which contemporary scriptural study finds itself are already doomed, as are any future scholarly fads of Biblicists and theologians alike, unless they relinquish the age old premise of "oral tradition." The mere consideration of an "oral gospel" preceding the New Testament texts will not only throw the one and only gospel of which Paul speaks in Galatians 1:6-7 at the mercy of the highest bidder, but also—and more dangerously so—will introduce, together with "a different gospel," "another Jesus" (2 Cor 11:4). This is precisely what happened: the quest after an ever elusive pre-scriptural "oral tradition" left us at the mercy of Gnosticism that threw us the "bait" of the "Gospel of Thomas" claiming to provide supposedly lost information about the "historical Jesus." It is our obsession with a non-scriptural Jesus that allowed the use of the non-canonical and thus false Gospel of Thomas to elucidate the New Testament canon via the Q hypothesis.

## The Solution

Unless we take seriously the chronological precedence of Paul's letters over the Gospels, we shall always be bound to turn in a vicious circle. In those letters, where he often takes a stand against the other "apostles," Paul not once appeals to the arbitration of Jesus. The absence of this becomes even more stunning after the fortnight he spent in a tête-à-tête with Cephas (Gal 1:18), from whose lips he presumably would have heard something about the Master's teachings. And, if that were true, then one would have expected Paul to use some of that teaching against his opponents. If he did not do so, then Paul should have been accused to be what he declares his opponents to be, that is, a "false apostle, deceitful workman, disguising himself as apostle of Christ" (2 Cor 4:13). Further, it would have been indeed odd to have his letters read aloud to the communities alongside the Gospels where we hear the Master's voice. The conclusion is unmistakable: Jesus and Paul teach in unison without having encountered each other except in Paul's vision of the Lord commissioning him to become the apostle to the Gentiles. The disciples who were privy to the Master's teachings in the Gospels not only kept misunderstanding them but also, according to the Pauline letters, did not seem to have undergone any change of mind. In other words, Paul's opponents are the same leaders who either refused or misunderstood Jesus' teachings.

When one subscribes to the universally endorsed thesis that Mark is the first book of the four Gospels to be in circulation, then it becomes understandable why Jesus' teaching in that Gospel is practically reduced to the two parables—that of the sower and that of the vineyard's tenants. These parables do not carry any teaching of the Master; rather they concentrate on the

behavior of the recipients of his message.<sup>2</sup> Besides that, most of the controversies in Mark revolve around table fellowship with sinners and unclean people, which is the main point of controversy in Galatians between Paul and Jesus' disciples. The link to Galatians in this regard is clearly betrayed in Mark's pervasive use of *kat' idian* (privately)<sup>3</sup> to describe Jesus' meetings with his disciples, especially Peter, James, and John, during which he tried to lead them to the correct understanding of his behavior. It cannot be mere coincidence that in the entire Pauline corpus the phrase *kat' idian* occurs only in Galatians 2:2 where it is used in reference to Paul's "private" meeting with the pillars.

Taking a closer look at the two parables bracketing as an *inclusio* Jesus' teaching in Mark, one will immediately notice that their source is again Galatians. In the parable of the sower, the two parties under criticism for betraying the word of preaching after having accepted it are those who are on "rocky" ground, on the one hand, and the rich, on the other hand (Mk 4:5-7, 16-19). One cannot possibly miss, in the first case, the intended reference to Peter/Cephas, the "rock," who faltered in his commitment to the gospel in Antioch. As for the rich, I have shown repeatedly in my work on the Gospels that this refers to the Jews, who are rich in the Law with which they were entrusted (Rom 3:2); the oblique reference then is to James and his men (Gal 2:12) and to Barnabas as well (v.13). The main point in the parable of the vineyard is the tenants' mistake in assuming that the inheritance, *klēronomia*, can be secured independently of the sole heir, *klēronomos* (Mk 12:7), which is again the central point of Galatians (chs. 3-4). Furthermore, richness and inheritance are linked together in a pericope that is found between the two parables, which pericope (10:17-30) is delineated by the *inclusio* "life eternal" (vv.17 and 30) and centers around three instances of "entering the kingdom of God" (vv.23, 24, 25). Jesus' unequivocal refusal to answer the man, who was rich in both his knowledge and observance of the Law, as to what to do in order to "inherit life eternal"—which is tantamount to "entering the kingdom of God"—except to suggest to him to "fulfill" what is required by that Law through love for the needy neighbor, points to what Paul wrote in Galatians 5:13-21 about "inheriting the kingdom of God." This is corroborated by the strange Markan addition of "with persecutions" (*meta diōgmōn*) to the benefits one shall receive by following Christ (Mk 10:30)—strange indeed since it is omitted by both Luke (18:29-30) and Matthew (19:29). This addition cannot be explained except against the background of Galatians where Paul asks, "why am I still persecuted (*diōkomai*)?" (Gal 5:11) just two verses before the passage referred to earlier as the source behind the Markan pericope.

Last, and in no way least, in the "beginning of the gospel" (Mk 1:1) John the Baptist is calling the Judeans and the Jerusalemites out of their country and cities into the "wilderness" (vv.4-5) "of the peoples" (Ezek 20:35). This is a prelude to Jesus "coming into Galilee (of the nations; Is 9:1; see also Mt 4:15), preaching the gospel of God" (Mk 1:14) in which all are to "put their trust" since it heralds "the kingdom of God" (v.15). It is there in Galilee that Jesus' disciples are first called (vv.16-20) and where Peter and his colleagues are to meet the Lord again, should they be willing to leave Jerusalem and its tombs where Jesus is not to be encountered (16:6-7). Indeed, it is Capernaum (the village of grace) of Galilee that will prove to be Jesus' city (Mt 4:13). Mark is

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion demonstrating the lack of any teaching specific to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, see Tom Dykstra, *From Volkmar to Tarazi and Beyond: Mark as an Allegorical Presentation of the Pauline Gospel in Festschrift in Honor of Professor Paul Nadim Tarazi*; Volume 2, *Studies in the New Testament* (Peter Lang, 2015), 99-120.

<sup>3</sup> Mk 4:34; 6:31, 32; 7:33; 9:2, 28; 13:3.

preserving in his roundabout story line the perennial message of Galatians: not only did the one and only gospel start in Damascus, Arabia (1:17), Syria and Cilicia (v.21), but the agreement reached at Jerusalem had to be tested in Antioch. The gospel, God's message of good news, originates in the "wilderness of the nations" and remains there always as an invitation addressed to Jerusalem, but it never proceeds out of that city. The earthly Jerusalem is always the harlot city of David, Solomon, and Herod, and is never the Jerusalem of God, which is in heaven (Gal 4:25-27).

## Luke-Acts and John

It is interesting to note that after Jesus' corrective teaching of Peter's misunderstanding, during which they harshly rebuke one another and Jesus calls Peter "Satan (tempter)" (Mk 8:32-33), the disciples are offered the classic three scriptural chances to realign themselves with that correct teaching, immediately following the three predictions of Jesus' demise. One shall notice that the description of the first chance is short (Mk 8:31-9:1), and is followed by the pericope of the transfiguration and that of the healing of the boy with an unclean spirit (9:2-29; 28 verses). The second chance is the lengthiest since it precedes the third and final test. The passages between the second and third predictions extend over 49 verses (9:33-10:31).

Luke, who wrote after Mark, leaves untouched the Markan content as well as sequence between the first two predictions, but feels at liberty to extend the material between the last two predictions into what came to be known as the ascent toward Jerusalem (Lk 9:46-18:30). A clear sign that Luke is only expanding on Mark is that he brackets his very lengthy and virtually new material with the same pericopes found in Mark: the question as to who is the greatest, at the beginning (Mk 9:33-37//Lk 9:46-48) and Jesus' blessing of the children followed by his encounter with the rich man, at the end (Mk 10:13-31//Lk 18:15-30). In other words, Luke expanded Mark's presentation of Jesus as a teacher in parables and a healer of sickness and infirmity by adding appropriate parables and healing stories, all within the "second day" in preparation for the "third day," which is judgment day. When one assumes that Mark was written during the Jewish War of 66-70 and Luke written soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 70, then the Lukan tour de force of expanding the "gospel" of Mark into two "gospel words" begins to make sense. Mark, as Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him, invited the leaders of God's *ekklēsia* in Jerusalem to leave the city unfaithful to God's message in the hands of the besiegers, who are viewed as God's instrument of punishment. Luke covers the same in his "first word" which ends where the second "word" begins, with the vanquished Jesus being seated at God's right hand as the Lord of both Judea and the Roman empire that conspired together to put him to death. Thus, Luke's Gospel functions as a preamble to "the Acts of the Apostles" and, more specifically the Acts of the Apostle Paul, who ends his odyssey at Rome "having lived there *two whole years* at his own expense, and welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ *quite openly and unhindered*" (Acts 28:30-31), preparing the citizens of Rome and its empire for the third year, the "day of the Lord," in the same way Jesus had prepared Jerusalem and Judea for that same "third day." Rome is no better than Babylon; and as Paul taught its citizens, Rome had better hearken to God's call and submit to his gospel (Rom 1:1-7) since that city too is subject to judgment "on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (2:16). Luke's intention was to incorporate the Pauline literature into a scriptural canon around the "Gospels" dealing with Jesus, just as the Old Testament scripture had joined the Law

and the Prophets. One can gather Luke's aim from the fact that the detailed accounts of Paul's activity are essentially linked to the cities to which Paul wrote letters: Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome.<sup>4</sup> So, whenever the reader of Acts is "curious" as to what Paul more specifically taught in those cities, he would turn to the Apostle's epistles. The Lukan project can be seen at its clearest in the ending of Acts: Paul is teaching unhindered in Rome and thus to the Romans. In the New Testament canon, the letter to the Romans immediately follows the Book of Acts and, from that perspective, it forms a trilogy with Luke-Acts. The interconnection intended between Acts and the Pauline corpus is manifest in New Testament manuscript evidence: Codices Vaticanus (4<sup>th</sup> century) and Alexandrinus (5<sup>th</sup> century) have the sequence Gospels, Acts, Letters of Paul, Revelation, which is more usual, however Codex Sinaiticus (4<sup>th</sup> century) has the sequence Gospels, Letters of Paul, Acts, Revelation.<sup>5</sup> It is as though the Pauline corpus and Acts formed an integral diptych.

As reflected in Acts, after the break with Antioch of Syria, the Pauline group established itself in Ephesus of Asia, with a view toward spreading the gospel message to Macedonia—the land of Alexander, Achaia—the land of the Hellenes, and Italy—the heart of the Roman empire, and even to Spain—Rome's westernmost province. Although Jerusalem moved the battleground from Judea to Antioch (Gal 2:11-14), it did not leave the Pauline contingent in peace at their new quarters in Ephesus (Acts 20:18-19). Paul was forced to "go up" again to Jerusalem (Acts 15; Rom 15:22-32) after having been there while he was active in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:1-4; Gal 1:20) and there in Jerusalem, it was "the Jews from Asia, who... stirred up all the crowd, and laid hands on him, crying out, 'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; moreover he also brought Greeks into the temple, and he has defiled this holy place'" (21:27-28). It is this tension between pro-Paul Jews and anti-Paul Jews that is the background for the Jesus story in the Gospel of John, as has been recognized by scholars. However, it is the line of development from Mark to John via Luke-Acts, which has been overlooked.

The Gospel of Mark entitles itself as "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and has the highest incidence of the term "gospel" of all four Gospels. Luke omits that word entirely from his Gospel, relegating it to the Book of Acts where it is exclusively found in conjunction with the mission to the Gentiles (15:7; 20:24). Such cannot be happenstance. Luke must have had a reason, and the reason, I believe, is that he wanted to use "word," the Pauline term for the Apostle's preaching, instead of "gospel," to refer to the activity of Jesus and Paul. The purpose of this decision was to scripturalize his work. The noun *evangelion* in the singular is not found at all in the Old Testament,<sup>6</sup> whereas *logos/dabar*, on the other hand, is ubiquitous. Moreover, it is God's *debarim* that are committed into writing as a *graphē*, which in turn materializes as a "book" (*sepher*; *biblion* or *biblos*).<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what Luke intended to do as he masterfully and succinctly put it in his preamble:

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 16:12-40 (Philippi); 17:1-14 (Thessalonica); 18:1-18 (Corinth); 18:19-19:41 and 20:16-38 (Ephesus); 28:14-31 (Rome).

<sup>5</sup> David Trobisch, *The First edition of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000; p.26.

<sup>6</sup> The plural *evangelia* occurs only once, in 2 Sam 4:10.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Deut *passim*.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the *word* (*logou*), it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to *write* (*grapsai*) an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Lk 1:1-4)

The intended link Luke is trying to establish with the Old Testament as scripture is evident in the first and early two (out of seven in Luke-Acts) instances where the noun “book” occurs: “As it is written in *the book of the words* (*biblō logōn*) of Isaiah the prophet” (Lk 3:4); and “and there was given to him *the book* (*biblion*) of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where *it was written* (*ēn gegrammenon*).” (4:17)

John takes the matter one step further. Besides compressing Luke’s work into one Gospel book<sup>8</sup> where Jesus’ “I” alternates with the apostolic “we” in the debates with opponents, John begins by referring to his work as a *logos* comprised of the many *logoi* and *rhēmata* of Jesus, and ends by committing this “word” to a “book”: “Now Jesus *did many other signs* in the presence of the disciples, which are not *written* in *this book*; but these are *written* that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (20:30-31). This choice of wording fits perfectly with the concluding remark concerning Jesus’ signs:

Though he *had done so many signs* before them, yet they did not *believe* in him; it was that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (12:38-39)

Put otherwise, it is the same message of Jesus, rejected by the Jews, which is now offered through the apostles *in the form of a written book* for the entire world to believe. The New Testament hearer cannot miss the correspondence with the passage from Romans (10:14-21) where reference is made to the same Isaianic quotation (Rom 10:16) and where Paul is leaving *in writing in the form of a letter*, to both the Romans and all the inhabitants of the empire, the same message that was rejected by the Jews. The self-canonization of the Gospel of John as a “book” can be heard in the last two verses of that Gospel:

This is the disciple who is *bearing witness* to these things, and who has *written* these things; and we know that his *testimony* is true. But there are also many other things which Jesus *did*; were every one of them to be *written*, I suppose that the world itself could not contain *the books* that would be *written*. (21:24-25)

Thus, if any extra-scriptural book is dismissed as irrelevant, the same verdict is all the more valid against any *unwritten* “oral tradition” purporting to have kept, through extra-scriptural channels, the one and only scriptural Jesus whose “oral” teaching settled *aurally* in a written text enclosed in a book.

## The Book of Matthew

The trajectory of the gospel word to a book finds its end in the Gospel of Matthew which, at the beginning, entitles itself not only a “book,” but actually the “book of the genesis of Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> The closeness between, at least, the passion narratives of Luke and John have been repeatedly pointed out.



Christ” (Mt 1:1). The intentional use of “genesis” is corroborated in its repetition in v.18a: “Now the genesis of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” It is clearly an overbidding on John’s “In the beginning” which looks ahead to the end of the Gospel where Jesus declares that the testimony of “the disciple whom he loved,” which testimony is consigned in a “book” (Jn 20:30-31), would remain until Jesus would come (21:20-25). In turn, Matthew brackets his Gospel between “genesis” (1:1) and the “close of the age” (28:20b). And since Paul asserted that “on that day, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:16), Matthew casts his Gospel as the eschatological *torah* that will be preached, beyond Israel, to all nations (Mt 28:19). Indeed, what is to be preached to all nations is the words of Jesus consigned in this Gospel: “...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (v.20a) The terminology of “teaching,” “observing,” and “commanding” is quintessentially *torah* terminology. The closeness between Matthew and Paul is betrayed in the parable, special to Matthew, where the Son of man who teaches in that Gospel will appear as the King who will judge all the nations according to Paul’s gospel, and such judgment will revolve around the love for the needy neighbor as the summation of the divine Law (Mt 25:31-36). The centrality of the Son of man and his teaching as the medium of judgment is pointed out in chapter 24 (vv.27-37) where we have “nations” mentioned twice in conjunction with the preaching of the gospel (vv.9 and 14): “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake” (v.9); “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” (v.14)

The casting of Matthew as a *torah* has become virtually a given among scholars in that the teaching of Jesus is parsed as five speeches ending in Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1, with the object of the fifth *etelesen* (finished) being encompassing through the addition of *pantas* (all) before *tous logous* (these words) One should add here that those five verses account for all the instances of *etelesen* in the Gospel. In turn, the specific use of *etelesen* is much more versatile and encompassing than meets the eye. Consider the following:

1. The verb *teleō* (finish; end; bring to fulfillment) functions similarly to *plēroō* (fill; fulfill) which occurs more profusely in Matthew than in the other Gospels and in all cases is used to indicate the fulfillment of scripture in the actions and teachings of Jesus. This, in turn, recalls Paul’s statement in Romans that “Christ is the *telos* of the law” (10:4).
2. More important is Matthew’s exclusive use of the phrase *synteleia tou aiōnos* to speak of the end of time.<sup>9</sup> The verb *teleō* and the noun *synteleia* are from the same root. And just as *etelesen* occurs five times, so does the phrase *synteleia tou aiōnos*. This cannot be haphazard since the Messiah’s Law expounded in five speeches will apply at the judgment of all nations (25:31-46). It stands to reason then that the “commandments” of that law be shared with all nations until the close of the age: “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 lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (28:19-20)

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<sup>9</sup> The only apparent exception occurs in Hebrews 9:26 where we have *synteleia tou aiōnōn* referring to the end of the Old Testament scriptural story when Jesus appears; in other words, the reference here is to the beginning of the gospel story, not its end as in Matthew.

Looking more intently into Matthew, the hearer will notice not only that the structure of the five speeches mimics the five books of the Law, but also that the storyline itself follows that of the Pentateuch. Having entitled itself as the “book of genesis,” Matthew refers immediately not only to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Perez, but also to Judah’s brothers and Zerah who are unnecessary for the genealogical tree, unless Matthew’s intent is to point out the content of the first book of the Pentateuch to some extent. His intention is further betrayed in that he is the only Evangelist who uses the theme of going down to Egypt in conjunction with Joseph (Mt 2:13-14), which is the theme of the latter part of Genesis. Further, he is the only Evangelist who expressly mentions the exodus from Egypt (vv.15 and 20). Moreover, upon his return from Egypt, instead of settling in Judea, Joseph “withdraws (*anekhōrēsen*) into Galilee” (v. 22), which is precisely what Jesus himself will do at the start of his mission (4:12), where Galilee is further qualified as “Galilee of the Gentiles (the nations; *tōn ethnōn*)” (v.15) after Isaiah 9:1. It is as though Matthew wanted to emphasize the fact underscored in Ezekiel that the aim of the exodus was to have the people experience the “wilderness (of the nations/peoples)” before reaching Judea and Jerusalem:

I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out; and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples (*tōn laōn*), and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, says the Lord God. (20:34-36)

What about the rest the Pentateuch? The last Matthean pericope with Jesus delivering his farewell speech to his disciples is reminiscent of Deuteronomy where Moses does the same to his people. In the case of Moses we hear, in the neighborhood of Mount Nebo, a “re-issuance” of the law that was delivered earlier on Mount Sinai/Horeb and is now made applicable to subsequent generations (Deut 5:8-10).<sup>10</sup> One can make the case for a similar handling in Matthew. The scenario of Matthew 28:16-20—Jesus appearing on a Galilean mountain and commissioning his followers to share with others a set of commandments for generation after generation to abide by—is very similar to that found in 17:1-13 where selected disciples heard the heavenly voice ordering them: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; *listen to him.*” (v.5b) This decree is soon followed, after the second foretelling of the sufferings of the Son of man (17:22-23), by the lengthy passage 17:24-18:35, where Jesus issues his directives concerning life within the *ekklēsia* (18:17 bis), which is the noun used to refer to God’s congregation in the wilderness at Nebo (Deut 31:30) as well as that at Horeb (4:10 LXX; 9:10; 18:16). The importance of Matthew 17:24-18:35 for our investigation lies in that not only is half of it unique to Matthew, but also the term *ekklēsia* appears only in Matthew among the Gospels, and no less than three times, two of which are found in 18:17.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Jesus’ teaching to the *ekklēsia* in 17:24-18:35 would correspond to that of God

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase “the third and fourth generation” is to be taken from the perspective of the living hearer—otherwise, the threat loses its bite—and thus, practically speaking, is intended to mean “all upcoming generations.” My understanding is corroborated in the later statement, “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.” (7:9)

<sup>11</sup> The third instance occurs in a context closely related to ours, as is evident from the exact statement following the reference to *ekklēsia* in each case: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19). This occurs

through Moses to the *ekklēsia* on Sinai/Horeb (the latter part of Exodus and Leviticus); the passage of the torch from Moses to Jesus has been prepared for in the pericope of the Transfiguration (17:3, 8).

This reading is corroborated in what we hear at the end of that teaching: “Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.” (19:1) This statement opens a new period in Jesus’ teaching culminating with “When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up to be crucified’” (26:1-2). The impression given to the hearer is that between 19:1 and 26:1 Jesus, having finished his “sayings” in Galilee where the “mountain” of teaching (5:1; 15:29; 17:1; 28:16) lies “in the wilderness” (14:23 with 14:13 and 15), heads toward Jerusalem via Trans-Jordan and then up to Judea proper and Jerusalem through Jericho (20:29). During that period when he is on the move, Jesus’ teaching alternates between debates he carries on against opponents as well as with members of his inner circle. The entire scenario seems to follow the pattern of the Book of Numbers, which is positioned between the teaching to the *ekklēsia* on Sinai/Horeb and the recapitulation of that teaching in Deuteronomy.

What Matthew is doing in his Gospel is following in the footsteps of Paul and applying the scriptural Law—in its five Books—to the Gentiles, thus in this way inviting them into the membership of the scriptural *ekklēsia*. That mission falls, as we learn from Isaiah, on the servant of the Lord, which explains Matthew’s quoting in extenso both Isaiah 9:1-2 (Mt 4:15-16) and Isaiah 42:1-4 (Mt 12:18-21). However, Matthew goes beyond that and does what Paul did in Romans, that is, to introduce the Gentiles to the entire scripture: Law, Prophets, and Writings.<sup>12</sup> His interest in the first two is evident in his predilection for the phrase “the law and the prophets” (Mt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40) which is also found in Romans (Rom 3:1). Matthew first asserts that Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Mt 5:17); then, again following Paul’s lead, twice he uses the phrase “the law and the prophets” in conjunction with stating that their entire teaching is subsumed in love for the needy neighbor (7:12; 22:40; see Rom 13:8-10 and also Gal 5:14). References to the fulfillment of the prophetic sayings abound in Matthew.

But what about the Writings? Matthew’s special interest in the third part of the Old Testament scripture is betrayed in his use of wise versus foolish terminology, which is a staple of Wisdom literature. A quick browse through a Greek concordance will show the high incidence in Matthew of *sophos* (wise) and *phronimos*, (sensible; thoughtful; wise) on the one hand, and of *mōros* (fool; foolish), on the other hand, when compared with the other Gospels. A closer look at the occurrences of these adjectives will reveal their strategic positions and thus programmatic value. Matthew follows Luke in putting the parable of the two individuals who build on rock and on sand, respectively, at the conclusion of Jesus’ teaching to the disciples and crowds (Lk 6:47-49; Mt 7:24-27); however, unlike Luke, he specifically calls the former individual *phronimos* and the latter *mōros*. The hearer cannot miss Matthew’s intention to underscore that wisdom (literature) is a

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immediately after “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (v.18) and “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (18:18) immediately following “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (v.17).

<sup>12</sup> See my *Romans: A Commentary* (the Chrysostom Bible Series), OCABS Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2010.

necessary ingredient in dealing with “the Law and the Prophets,” whose lead the first of five sets of sayings of Jesus follow (Mt 5:17; 7:12). At the end of the spectrum, toward the close of the last set of Jesus’ sayings, Matthew does two things that are distinctive. First he transposes the Lukan parable of the *phronimos* servant (Lk 12:41-48) at the end of Jesus’ eschatological speech (Mt 24:45-51) making of it the first of four parables dealing with the last judgment. However, and more importantly, he adds immediately after it and before the parable of the talents, which he borrows from Luke (Mt 25:14-30//Lk 19:11-27), a parable specific to his Gospel, that of the ten virgins who are divided repeatedly between the *phronimoi* (Mt 25:2, 4, 8, 9) and the *mōrai* (vv.2, 3, 8). If one considers that the servant in 24:45-51 is a stand-in for a church leader and the virgins represent churches,<sup>13</sup> then it becomes clear that Matthew is reminding his hearers of the importance, if not necessity, of wisdom literature as authoritative reading in the church gatherings alongside the Law and the Prophets. Indeed, concluding the first and the fifth discourses by pitting wisdom against folly cannot be happenstance.

The importance given to the “wisdom” required especially of leaders is further evident in how Matthew rephrases as well as relocates the Lukan material he borrows. The parable of the blind guiding the blind, which Luke has as part of the sermon in the plain, is used twice in Matthew to attack those in positions of leadership. The first time, he inserts it at 15:14, in the passage against the tradition of the elders (15:1-20) that he borrows from Mark (7:1-23). More importantly, however, is the way Matthew incorporates it into his famous harangue against the synagogue—and thus church—leadership in chapter 23. Whereas Luke refers to the leaders simply as blind, Matthew addresses them as “fools and blind” (*mōroi kai typhloi*; Mt 23:17). This addition becomes essential in view of Matthew’s rephrasing a few verses later of Luke’s “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute’” (11:49) into “Therefore I send you prophets and wise men (*sophous*) and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town” (Mt 23:34), spelling out the tripartite division of the Old Testament scripture. One can even surmise that the sequence “prophets and wise men and scribes” is intentional in that it makes wisdom literature as much an introduction to the hearing of the Law as the prophetic literature, which is precisely what the prologue to Sirach underscores twice at the conclusion of its first and third sections. The importance given to wisdom in Matthew explains the otherwise strange teaching at the beginning of the Messiah’s eschatological Law, “and whoever says, ‘You fool! (*mōre*)’ shall be liable to the hell of fire” (5:22c), since the accuser is actually issuing the ultimate sentence against a brother whom he accuses of not abiding by the divine law. Such is the sole prerogative of God himself. Matthew’s interest in the Old Testament scripture qua scripture is further evident in his rephrasing of Luke’s presentation of Jesus’ response to those who were inquiring about a sign from heaven corroborating Jesus’ authority. Having established—unlike Mark where Jesus refuses to give any sign—that the only sign is the sign of Jonah, Luke enhances its ultimate value by presenting it as the second chance offered to the Gentiles similar to the wisdom of Solomon that attracted the Queen of the south (Lk 11:29-32), which is the biblical story sequence: first Solomon, then Jonah. Matthew, however, both switches the sequence and adds the extra sign prefiguring the resurrection of the Son of man (Mt 12:39-42). Both changes fit perfectly

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<sup>13</sup> See my *Matthew and the Canon* (The New Testament: An Introduction; vol.4); OCABS Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2009, 258-9.

within the Matthean purview. The reference to Jesus' resurrection posits the call to repentance offered to the Gentiles (the Ninevites and the Queen of the south) as post-resurrectional, which is precisely what is presented in Matthew's ending (28:16-20). However and again more importantly, the Matthean sequence—Jonah and then Solomon—is the canonical sequence of Prophets followed by the Writings, the latter being the presumed literary product of the penitent Solomon who, through repentance, acquired the true wisdom reflected in the books attributed to him.<sup>14</sup>

Matthew's interest is to show that the apostolic mission of peace is patterned after the wisdom literature which invites rather than forces the nations to endorse God's law. This is reflected in the otherwise enigmatic special Matthean *logion*, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise (*phronimoi*) as serpents and innocent (*akeraioi*) as doves" (10:16). One can understand the first part which is meant to offset the previous saying found in the Messiah's law, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (7:15). The second part, however, combines "wisdom" with behaving like "doves," dove being both a sign of peace and the meaning of the Hebrew *yonah* (Jonah); this combination prepares for the sign of Jonah *logion* (12:39-42) where, as I have just shown, the message of repentance is offered to outsiders through the scriptural wisdom and prophetic literature. On the one hand, Matthew 10:16b—so be wise (*phronimoi*) as serpents and innocent (*akeraioi*) as doves—prepares for 23:33-34 where Jesus's messengers (prophets and wise men and scribes) are to counteract the work of the "serpents, brood of vipers" that "murder the prophets" (v.31). The "serpent's" wisdom of Jesus' messengers is to be unlike that of the serpent that led Adam and Eve to disobedience due to its being "wisest" (*phronimōtatos*) of all God's creatures on earth (Gen 3:1). On the other hand, the immediate source of Matthew 10:16b is unequivocally Romans 16:19-20 which combines wisdom, innocence, peace, and Satan, in conjunction with obedience to the apostolic message: "For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I would have you wise (*sophous*) as to what is good and guileless (*akeraious*) as to what is evil; then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."<sup>15</sup>

In Matthew 11, the Evangelist collates passages from different parts in Luke (chs. 7, 10, and 16) in order to produce a masterpiece whereby the tripartite Old Testament scripture is not only held together as one, but also is presented as the basis for and forerunner of the Messiah's eschatological law that applies to Gentiles as well as Jews. Matthew refers to the Prophets as prophesying about the kingdom of heaven (Mt 11:12-14) by casting Jesus' precursor, John the Baptist, as another Elijah. However, he appends "the Law" to "the Prophets" in v.13: "For all the prophets and the law *prophesied* until John."<sup>16</sup> This addition is easily understandable in view of the mention of "wisdom" a few verses later in v.19, still in conjunction with John the Baptist. Once the entire Old Testament scripture, in its three parts, is mentioned, Matthew can follow Paul in

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<sup>14</sup> See my *Psalms and Wisdom* (The Old Testament: An Introduction; vol.3); SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1996, 127-8.

<sup>15</sup> The Romans-Matthew connection is corroborated in that these are the only two instances of *akeraioi* in the New Testament besides the one in Phil 2:15 where the context is the same as the one in Romans: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent (*akeraioi*), children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." (Phil 2:14-16)

<sup>16</sup> I consider "the Law" as an addition since elsewhere Matthew either uses the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" (Mt 5:17; 7:12) or relegates "the Prophets" to an appended position (On these two commandments all the law depends and [also] the prophets; 22:40).

Romans by threatening Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum with Tyre's and Sidon's acceptance of the scriptural message (Mt 11:20-24): outsiders leaving behind the insiders. That Matthew is following Paul's lead is corroborated in the following verses (25-27) where we hear Jesus belittling those who falsely consider themselves wise in the words of 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the passage ends with a specifically Matthean *logion* where Jesus is inviting all to submit to the gentle "yoke" of his law which he expounded upon in Matthew 5-7. Indeed, as Paul already penned in Romans, Christ's teaching is *telos tou nomou* (10:4), the end of the road that starts with the Law and goes through the Prophets and the Writings. Thus, the Gospel of Matthew brings together as a "closure" not only the New Testament canon, but also the entire scriptural canon, establishing both "until the end of the age."

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<sup>17</sup> See my *Luke and Acts* (The New Testament: An Introduction; vol.2); St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001, 87-8.