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# **The Midrashic Construct of Early Christian Texts in Light of Early Homiletics in the Synagogue**

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**THE MIDRASHIC CONSTRUCT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TEXTS IN LIGHT OF EARLY HOMILETICS IN THE SYNAGOGUE**

*Asher Finkel, Ph.D.*

The Gospels preserve the preaching of Jesus as well as his early Jewish followers who penned these works, during the decades before and after the destruction of the Second Temple in the Christian first century. They offer a witness to homiletic midrash as distinct from the exegetical midrash. The latter governs the different approaches to the Biblical text and its wording. The priestly teachers of the Sadducees in the Temple area and of the Essenes at Qumran apply an “Urthum” method in their interpretation. This approach I described in the past articles published by this World Congress<sup>1</sup> as distinct from the Pharisaic midrash that is rooted in the rules of logic. Two schools of Shammai and Hillel emerged in Herodian times. The former with strict construction was in the majority prior to the destruction whereas the latter took a liberal approach prior to the destruction. The Shammatic followers with the zealots were killed during the war. However Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, the disciple of Hillel departed clandestinely during the War.<sup>2</sup> He established his academy at Yavneh with the future emperor’s support and his schools stamped the Mishnaic tradition of Halakhah in accordance with Hillelitic exegetical view.<sup>3</sup> However, the homiletic midrash enjoyed other distinct determinants that rest on the correlative use of the Pentateuchal and Prophetic texts.

“Torah and the Nevi’im” became the biblical canon during the Hasmonean and Herodian periods. They governed the life of theocratic state which was rooted in Ezra’s activities during the Persian period. Ezra the Scribe read and preached at people’s gathering in the Temple square during the Fall festivals. He read selected Pentateuchal texts on the New Year day and during the festival of Sukkot.<sup>4</sup> His innovative concern was the presentation of the Biblical text in Assyrian square script. He offered the authoritative presentation of the Torah for the Jewish State of “Yahud” in contradistinction to the Samaritan use of ancient Canaanite text with its particular corrections. In addition, Ezra introduced the cycle of readings not only on the Sabbaths and holidays but also at market days on Mondays and Wednesdays.<sup>5</sup> A canonical collection guided the people’s present life, as the Torah of Moses from the past with its focus on the laws for a theocratic state, as well as its compliment, the Nevi’im that offers the prospect for their future. This very Biblical collection enjoys a canonical stamp on the two parts of Scriptures in the last two verses of Malachi 3:22-24. It closes the prophetic collection that follows the Mosaic text with the promise of Elijah’s final coming before the “Great Awesome Day.” History under

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<sup>1</sup> “Oracular Interpretation of the Torah and Prophets,” Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A, Jerusalem 1994.

<sup>2</sup> “The Departure of the Essenes, Christians and R. Yochanan ben Zakkai from Jerusalem,” Festschrift Reinhold Mayer, Bleicher, Verlag, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Contra J. Neusner’s approach that R. Yochanan revolutionized the rabbinic tradition of pre 70. Clearly in Mark’s Gospel 12:32, 33 offers a Hillelitic Pharisaic position based on Hosea 6:6, that R. Yochanan maintained. Mark’s Gospel attests to predestruction tradition of the Pharisees.

<sup>4</sup> See Nehemiah 8, 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Bab Talmud Baba Qama 82a.

God guides the Jewish people during the Greek and Roman periods. They rebelled against the Greek religious culture and they established a unique theocratic state of the Hasmoneans during the Seleucid period. Prior to that the Jerusalemian priestly scribes were willing to translate their Bible into Greek by the invitation of Ptolomian ruler.<sup>6</sup> The Hellenistic world was now aware of the Biblical teaching and its philosophical approach was introduced by the synagogal preacher-teachers in Diaspora. A noted figure of the first century was Philo of Alexandria, whose works can be studied also by the homiletic midrashic view as related to the public readings.<sup>7</sup>

The Torah scroll was introduced by Ezra with its successive cycles of readings within a Sabbatical count of years. It culminated on the Sukhot festival in Fall of the eighth year, on the day of Haqhel (the great gathering of the pilgrims in the Temple, Deut 31:10-13). The head of the Jewish State offered the public readings of the Torah,<sup>8</sup> as Ezra did. Thus, his innovation was to imitate cycles for public reading throughout the year on the Sabbaths and holidays. The Torah was divided in successive 168 portions (*sidrot*) to be read in two successive cycles, from Fall holidays to Spring after 3 ½ years and from Spring to Fall of the eighth year. After the Destruction of the Temple, the cycle was reduced to one year in Diaspora but it remained a triennial cycle in Palestine, as the Genizah findings offer. However, another cycle of readings was connected with the holidays during the Jewish year.<sup>9</sup> The readings relate to the festivals themselves as written in the Torah and their Prophetic promise particular to these redemptive days. A unique example can be seen from the transmitted teaching<sup>10</sup> guiding the Babylonian Gaonate as founded in the Talmudic tradition, namely the Haftarah, the Prophetic reading for the Sabbath of Passover with the theme of resurrection in Ezek 37 and the Haftarah for the Sabbath of Sukkot on the theme of the final World War of Ezekiel 38. This expression of eschatological hope governed the mindset of Jewry during the First Century and clearly affected the faith of early Jewish Christians.

Already in my original publication of “The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth,” I offered at the end how Jesus preached in the synagogue with the reference to the canon of “Torah and Prophets” as it related to the two types of homilies, the proemic and the didactic. The proemic homily rests on the thematic connection of the Torah text as related to the Prophetic text, the very sequence for public reading. In addition, the preacher may select a Hagiographical opening, usually from the book of Psalms, as it relates to the theme. Following the destruction, the Jamnian academy stamped the Holy Writings as canonical. The proemic sermon was a governing feature of the synagogue, for it related the promised future to the present community’s life now. This phenomenon governed not only Jesus’ preaching but also his Jewish followers in the early period that is preserved in the Gospels as well as in the Epistles. At this occasion, I shall only focus on the Gospels, as attested by the early Christian fathers but regarded with skepticism in contemporary scholarship.

First I shall demonstrate this witness with reference to the earliest Gospel of Mark, that relates how a disciple of Peter was instrumental in recording his own account of preaching (Mark 1:1-3). Then, I shall focus on a learned Jewish disciple, who is called a “*grammateus*,” a scribe who sought to relate “the new and the old” (Matt 13:52) from the treasure of Jesus’ preaching, namely Matthew. Finally, I shall rely

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<sup>6</sup> See Letter of Aristeas and Tractate Soferim 1, 9.

<sup>7</sup> See Harry A. Wolfson, Philo, Cambridge, 1948.

<sup>8</sup> Mishnah Sotah 7:8.

<sup>9</sup> Mishnah Megillah 3:5,6.

<sup>10</sup> See Yaakob ben Asher Tur, Orakh Hayyim 490.

on how Jesus taught in the synagogue, according to Luke. For he was a learned proselyte seeking to inform the basic details of Jewish praxis for the reader Theophilus, a proselyte. Mark and Matthew wrote already from knowledge of Jewish involvement with their religion from childhood. Thus, they omitted a basic depiction of known practice and custom in their days. Luke, however, offered descriptive details in how Jesus practiced his faith as he entered a synagogue on the Sabbath. These three examples will suffice to show the exegetical dynamics of Biblical preaching in the synagogue that provided the very setting for Jesus and his Jewish followers to preach the “good-news.” No wonder that the early Church preserved the Jewish lectionary for the particular readings of their calendar that was so demonstrated by Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (N.Y. Schocken, 1970).

Mark opened his Gospel with a view of Jesus as “*christou viou theou*,” according to the reading of Vaticanus and Bezae Manuscripts. Then he presented a conflated proof text of “Torah and Prophets.” The first text is taken from the Torah (Ex 23:20), “Behold I send my angel before your faces who will prepare your way.” The second text is taken from the Prophet Isaiah: “a voice crying in the wilderness clear the way of the Lord, make the paths straight” 40:3. These two Biblical proof texts, following a particular Sabbath reading, determined his preaching in the synagogue as he related to the Torah promise in the past as fulfilled by the Prophetic projection now. He first opened with reference to “son of God,” which in Hebrew (*Ben Elohim*) represents the angel (so Job 2:1). However he, after this opening, sought to relate the arrival of John the Baptist as Elijah. This is the promise of the Prophets in its canonical ending (Malachi 3:23). The very “voice crying in the wilderness” is like Elijah. He was assumed into heaven and will return to clear the way in order to usher in the messianic coming, as a “*mala’ach*” i.e. messenger (so Mal 3:1). Apparently Mark distinguished between “*Ben Elohim*” (*vios theou*) and *Mala’ach* (*angelos*). The former represents the supreme angel Michael for Israel, so Dan 12:1, who is associated with resurrection. Thus, Mal 3:1 related the redemption to come first with God’s messenger to clear the way like Elijah. He continued “Suddenly will come the master” (Heb: *Ha’adon*) which is rendered in early First Century Aramaic Targum of Jonathan “*Rabbuna*.” Thus Mark 10:51 refers to Jesus as “*Rabbuna*,” when the blind man seeks healing.

Indeed, the opening of Mark reflects his preaching in the synagogue. For Mark is described by the Elder in his days as the “Hermeneutes” who accompanied Peter as he preached in the synagogue following the Sabbath reading. The earliest attestation to this role is offered by Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in the name of the Elder. The latter was an eyewitness of their preaching ministry in the synagogue. Therefore “hermeneutes” translates the Aramaic designation of “*meturgemman*,” whose role is to render a Greek elaboration of the Aramaic and Hebrew account of Torah and Prophets reading. From said testimony the very Gospel composition needs to be examined in light of the homiletic exegesis as it shaped the very units not in their chronological order but in their thematic order.

The Gospel of Matthew described obliquely the role of the scribe who prepared his material with five distinct accounts of Jesus’ teaching, a pentateuchal collection. In his third collection of parables, Matthew disclosed how he was engaged as a scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven. His collections would bring out didactic treasures of new and old i.e. the merging of Jesus’ teaching with the canonical tradition. He defines the canon to be “*Nomos kai ‘o prophetai*” with reference to the dual commandment of love (Matt 22:40). This is based on logical proof of “*lex taliones*” of the same Hebrew expression “*ve’ahavta*”. His familiarity with Pharisaic exegesis, which is evident in chapter 23 where he offered a list of woes that I have shown,<sup>11</sup> was directed to those Shammaitic rulings but not to

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<sup>11</sup> In my book on the “Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth,” Brill, 1972.

Hillelitic view. For Hillel himself taught the very principal commandment to love the person is foundational to the Torah (bab Talmud Sabbath 31a). Matthew's familiarity with halachic as well as exegetical approach of the Pharisees also sheds light on the opening of his composition as a "book" (*biblos*) in view of homiletics.

The wording "book of genealogy" appeared in the Torah with its genealogies (Gen 5:1). This account of generations governs the development from Adam to Abraham and from Abraham to six generations, a total of 26 generations that ends with Moses' death. The number 26 is God's name (YHWH) via gematria. Thus, the Torah reviews how generations of humankind did not know God's unique name until it was revealed to Moses (Exod 6:2). This very name reflects God's relationship to humanity with love and forgiveness (Exod 34:6-7). Thus, the sobriquet in Jewish prayer for this unpronounced name is *Abba* (heavenly Father), that defines His mercy. Note also that Matthew's prayer of Jesus opens with "*Pater*" who is in heaven (6:9). Thus, the book or *Sefer* in Hebrew narrates a historical account of this development. In Matthew's view, however, "*sefor*" represents the word count in Hebrew. This related a given number in each development of a succession of generations, namely fourteen. A suggestion was made last Century that 14 is gematria of David's name. However, Matthew describes Jesus as the Son of David and the Son of Abraham. The Messiah in the Jewish tradition was called a "Son of David" and not David. For the Son of David is Solomon, whose name is "peace" (*Shalom*), since the Messiah will usher in the era of *shalom*, as God's name is defined in Judges 6:24.

Matthew presented three groupings of fourteen generations. The first group from Abraham to Solomon is a peak period when God's presence appeared in the Temple. Then he offered a second group of fourteen generations on the decline that led to the destruction of the Temple, with God's ascension from the Temple. The last third group rises again to the birth of Jesus, who relates to God's manifestation (*Emanuel*, i.e. God with us, Matt 1:23). Apparently the count of fourteen rises and falls then it rises again. Thus, what guides Matthean view is a Psalmic poem on the count of generations. This poem is drawn from the third collection of Hagiographa, namely Psalm 72 (to Solomon) verse 5. "They will see you with the rise of the sun and to the face of the moon, generation of generations." Three accounts of generations represent luminescences of the moon before the ascent of the sun. Lunations are fourteen in number that rise to a full moon and fourteen in number till it disappears. There are three accounts of generation in the verse. Thus, from Abraham to David fourteen lunations and from Solomon (the full moon) to the Destruction fourteen lunations with the disappearance of the moon. Finally the third group of lunations leads to the full moon with Jesus' coming. In addition, the very account of the Magi's visit with offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt 1:11) is rooted in this Psalm 72:10. Such an account in Matthew reflects a scribe who seeks to blend the Biblical teachings of promise with the birth and the ministry of Jesus. Throughout the Gospel, he offers fulfillment verses from Torah and Prophets, as well from Psalms.<sup>12</sup>

The Gospel of Luke (4:16-22) offers the synagogal setting of reading and preaching for the initial proclamation of God's Kingdom by Jesus on the Sabbath. The other synoptic Gospels simply relate succinctly the message of Jesus without the particular setting of its delivery (Matt 4:7 and Mk 1:15). Yet, the very setting for preaching was the synagogue for Jesus and his followers, as Luke portrays in his dual work of Gospel and Acts. In the latter, Peter preached on the Festival of Pentecost's Haftarah (Acts 2:14-37). Paul too preached in Antioch of Pisida on the Sabbath following the reading of the Torah and Haftarah (Acts 13:14-41). Thus, Luke offers in the Gospel the initial preaching of Jesus in

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<sup>12</sup> Matt 1:23 (Isa 7:14), 2:6 (Micah 5:2), 2:5 (Hosea 11:1), 2:18 (Jer 31:15) 4:15-16 (Isa 9:1-2), 5:17 (Isa 53:4).

Nazareth on the Sabbath with a detailed depiction - for Jesus was proclaiming from the Haftarah, the opening verse of Isaiah 61, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me." For his very preaching was succinctly presented in the statement: "Today, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." However, he was also relating the prophetic text to the Pentateuchal reading. This very connection is offered in the interpolated comment of the prophetic initial two verses that Luke quotes. For it offers the thematic connection between the Torah lection and the Haftarah. He quoted the Prophetic text "to proclaim liberty (*deror*) to the captives" with an additional comment from the Torah text: "to set at liberty (*deror*) those who are oppressed." This interpolation is drawn from the Pentateuchal reading of Leviticus 25:10 "to proclaim liberty those who oppressed." He reads "*sebuyeha*" in lieu of "*yosebeha* (inhabitants)." The Pentateuchal text relates the announcement of Sabbatical year, which is the unique teaching of Biblical religion. The proclamation of God's year as one submits to his rule, i.e. God's Kingdom. For it releases the person from three types of human control, namely over their bodies (slavery), their land (confiscation) and their money (debt). The Sabbatical year is proclaimed for all people to live under providential care and deep sense of altruistic concern. Thereby, they enter the Kingdom of God, which according to the Synoptics Jesus is proclaiming in his teaching. Luke offered the *Sitz im Leben* for Jesus' initial preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth.<sup>13</sup> Thus, those who followed him on the road were pilgrims who enjoyed the fellowship of prayer and sharing food. They are the "blessed poor (i.e. '*ebionim*) who are in God's Kingdom," as Luke opens Jesus' sermon (6:20). They are on the road to God's Temple in Jerusalem with Jesus their anointed Teacher (*Rabbuna*). The Jewish followers after his death remained in Jerusalem and in Galilee, as they were called Ebionites. Luke's account offers the homiletic dynamics of Jesus' ministry in connection with his preaching that ushered a Kingdom of God in the proclamation of a Sabbatical year.

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<sup>13</sup> See my article, "Jesus' Preaching in the Synagogue on the Sabbath" in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, edited Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner, Sheffield Academic Press, England, 1994.