

Wise and Sagacious Vistas: The Past and Future of a Sapiential Reading of Matthew---

My earliest memories of serious study of the Gospel of Matthew come from my time in college at UNC. There was this book by a Harvard Professor name Krister Stendahl about the School of St. Matthew, suggesting that it reflected a school setting, or production in a school. Little did I realize then I would end up studying with the man at Harvard some years later when I did my masters work in the Boston area. What came to intrigue me most about this little book by Stendahl full of big ideas was that it suggested that scribes had something to do with the production of the Gospel of Matthew. This was a germinal seed that has grown and flowered over the years in the work of many Matthean scholars. What is odd about this, is that in some ways it has not changed the way scholars have view Matthew's approach to the Mosaic Law, or law in general. But in light of what we know about scribes it should have done so.

Yes, there have been along the way revelations that Matthew's Gospel not only reflects scribal practices, but more specifically the practices of sapiential scribes. One thinks for example of the work done on Matthew 11 by Marshall Johnson, or Elizabeth Johnson, or even Ulrich Luz to some extent. There has been a recognition as well, however grudging, that Jesus is, at least in some Matthean passages presented both as a sage and as God's Wisdom come in person, but the connection between this fact and how the Law is presented and viewed in Matthew has seldom been made.

When I wrote Jesus the Sage, some fifteen years ago now, as a sequel to my The Christology of Jesus, what surprised me the most was the paucity of consistent sapiential readings of so much of the NT, even though it had long since been admitted that Wisdom literature, in tandem with, and sometimes in combination with apocalyptic literature had become a dominant train of thought in early Judaism by Jesus' day, and indeed even before then. It was hard to ignore the evidence of Wisdom of Solomon or Sirach, but many scholars managed to do so, continuing to present us with an anachronistic portrait of the Matthean Jesus, as if he were like later post-70 A.D. rabbis or 'talmudim' in his teaching and use of the Law. Thankfully, Jacob Neusner managed to convince most of us, that post-70 A.D. Judaism should not be read back into pre-70A.D. Judaism willy-nilly, and especially not when it came to approaches to the Law.

It is in light of this culmination of studies of early Judaism, and Law in early Judaism and our increasing knowledge about scribes and sages in early Judaism that I set about to provide a comprehensive sapiential reading of the two Gospels which naturally lent themselves to such a reading--- Matthew and John. I pursued this agenda by writing commentaries on the two books, not least because I figured the inch worm approach would help me avoid oversights or missing something that might be a problem for such a reading. These projects were undertaken in the 1990s and the early part of this century, in the case of Matthew, with interesting results. Had I to do it over again, one thing I would certainly now do is take full advantage of the landmark work of Karel van der Toorn on Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible, (Harvard, 2007). Had this work appeared soon enough it would have provided far more ammunition for my thesis about scribes and sages in regard to Matthew's production and its presentation of Jesus as the ultimate sage and God's Wisdom. Going forward, someone needs to take full stock of this work for Matthean studies. Here I only have room for a précis or brief summary of some of the things he says of relevance. Lets start with a few basic assertions and assumptions.

Firstly the culture into which Jesus was born and which produced the Gospel of Matthew was a Jewish oral culture. Clearly, an oral culture is a different world than a largely literate text based culture, and texts function differently in such a world. All sorts of texts were simply surrogates for oral speech, and this statement applies to most of the Biblical texts themselves, including Matthew's Gospel.¹

It is hard for us to wrap our minds around it, but texts were scarce in the Biblical world, and often were treated with great respect. Since literacy was largely a skill only the educated had, and the educated tended to be almost exclusively from the social elite, texts in such a world served the purpose of the elite—conveying their authority, passing down their judgments, establishing their property claims, indicating their heredity and the like. But since all ancient people were profoundly religious, the most important documents even among the elite were religious texts, sacred texts. And of course the most literate of all in such a culture were scribes, whose stock and trade was the copying

¹ On levels of literacy and the creation of ancient texts see Harry Y. Gamble's Books and Readers in the Early Church. A History of Early Christian Texts, (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1995), pp. 1-41.

and composing of documents. We can make a distinction between sages as the oral carriers and conveyors of the wisdom tradition, and scribes who were the recorders and enhancers and consolidators and preservers of such a tradition. In such a setting Law was viewed as part of the larger corpus of divine wisdom which came from God. Torah was revealed by Wisdom to God's people, and as wisdom for God's people. This becomes especially clear in a book like Sirach, who far from dividing the Pentateuch from the Wisdom tradition, reads the Pentateuch in light of, and as an expression of the Wisdom tradition. This is a typical conservative scribal approach, seeking to synthesize the tradition, or at least make it coherent and consistent throughout.

How then did a sacred text function in an oral and rhetorical culture? For one thing it was believed that words, especially religious words, were not mere ciphers or symbols. They were believed to have power and effect on people if they were properly communicated and pronounced. It was not just the sacred names of God, the so-called *nomina sacra*, which were considered to have inherent power, but sacred words in general. Consider for example what Isaiah 55.11 says: "so shall my word be that goes forth out of my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing I sent it to do." The Word or words of a living and powerful God, were viewed as living and powerful in themselves.² You can then imagine how a precious and expensive document, which contained God's own words would be viewed. It would be something that needed to be kept in a sacred place, like a temple or a synagogue, and only certain persons, with clean hands and a pure heart would be allowed to unroll the sacred scroll and read it, much less interpret it.

From what we can tell, the texts of the NT books were treasured during the first century, and were lovingly and carefully copied for centuries thereafter. There is even evidence beginning in the second century of the use of female Christian scribes who had a 'fairer' hand, to copy, and even begin to decorate these sacred texts.³ But make no mistake—even such texts were seen to serve the largely oral culture. Before the rise of modern education and widespread literacy, it had always been true that "In the beginning

² See my *The Living Word of God*, (Baylor Press, 2007).

³ See K. Haines-Etzen, *Guardians of Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2000).

was the (spoken) Word.”⁴ All of this has implications for how we should approach the NT, and especially a Gospel like Matthew, which was, from what we can tell, by far the most popular Gospel in early Christian history, and the most copied.

How then would a better knowledge of both the Jewish sapiential culture and scribal culture help us better understand Matthew? Consider for a moment the remark of Van der Toorn---

Our concept of the author as an individual is what underpins our concern with authenticity, originality, and intellectual property. The Ancient Near East had little place for such notions. Authenticity is subordinate to authority and relevant only inasmuch as it underpins textual authority; originality is subordinate to the common stock of cultural forms and values....To us it would seem wrong to credit an editor with the work of an author. The author in our mind, is the intellectual source of the text, whereas an editor merely polishes; the former is the creative genius, the latter merely the technician. This distinction was obviously less important to the ancients. They did not place the same value on originality. To them, an author does not invent his text but merely arranges it; the content of the text exists first, before being laid down in writing.⁵

It is the premise of van der Toorn that scribes manufactured what Christians call the OT, and in particular scribes in Jerusalem who were employed by the Temple, or perhaps in some case by the rulers who lived there. “They practiced their craft in a time in which there was neither a trade in books nor a reading public of any substance. Scribes wrote for scribes....The text of the Hebrew Bible was not part of the popular culture. The Bible was born and studied in the scribal workshop of the temple. In its fundamental essence, it was a book of the clergy.”⁶

While this thesis certainly can be debated, let us assume for a minute it is true about the OT. This immediately raises the possibility that the NT is something quite different than the OT in this regard. The NT seems, on the surface to have been produced by and large by various non-Jerusalem persons who were not themselves scribes. They seem on occasion to have used scribes such as Paul used Tertius, but they do not seem to have been scribes, even in their pre-Christian lives, with one possible exception--- Matthew’s Gospel.

⁴ It is interesting that an important literate figure like Papias of Hierapolis who lived at the end of the NT era repeatedly said that he preferred the living voice of the apostle or one who had heard the eyewitnesses to a written document. In this he simply reflected the normal attitude of ancient peoples, literate or not.

⁵ K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, (Harvard, 2007), pp. 47-48.

⁶ Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, p. 2.

When you have a group of writings produced in a variety of places by a variety of persons, the notion of central control of the sacred text, much less scribal control, would seem to go right out the window. Thus while it can be argued that the story of the making of the OT portion of the Bible can be said to be the story of the scribes behind the Bible,⁷ this thesis seems far less plausible, much less compelling when it comes to the NT. Yet van der Toorn is right to emphasize the fact that prior to the Hellenistic era (i.e. 300 B.C.) there seems to have been no such thing as books, as we know them, nor a trade in books, nor a book buying public. “Insofar as literature reached a larger audience, it was by way of oral performance.”⁸

Scribes in antiquity were not just secretaries copying documents. They were in addition the scholars of their world. They were usually recruited from the upper echelons of society, and far from just copying and preserving documents they created and interpreted them as well.⁹ They were also the lawyers of their day, which is to say the interpreters and adjudicators of the Law but they had a variety of other functions as well. This becomes important not only to the study of Jesus’ interchange with scribes and Pharisees in various places in Galilee and Judea, but even more tellingly it becomes possibly important when we are told in Acts 4-6 (see especially Acts 6.7) that various priests and Levites in Jerusalem were converted to the following of Jesus. If this is true, we may assume of course they brought with them not only their own literacy but probably also various scribes with them. This would explain then the production of some Christian documents in Jerusalem by James for instance (see e.g. Acts 15.23, and perhaps also the letter of James). And this brings us to the production of Matthew’s Gospel itself. Who produced it and how?

Firstly, scholars have quite rightly pointed to Mt. 13.52 as a clue about the person who produced this document. This saying follows the parable of the net, which speaks about the sifting process necessary for fishermen, which leads to this saying about the discerning teacher of the Law who brings out of his storeroom treasures both old and new. What is being described here is scribal practice. It is possible that Jesus is referring to a scribe schooled both in the OT and the new wisdom of the Kingdom, and so he is

⁷ IBID.

⁸ Van der Toorn, p. 5.

⁹ Van der Toorn, p. 6.

able to produce both sorts of wisdom, comparing, contrasting, combining them. Notice here the reference to ‘every scribe’, which likely includes our Evangelist. Just as Jesus is an example of adopting and adapting old and new wisdom, written, Torah wisdom and oral wisdom, so also the Evangelist. Notice that Mt. 23.24 suggests that there were scribes who were followers of Jesus.

Now it stands to reason that this Evangelist is not expecting everyone in his audience to become a scribe or scholar, only those like the Evangelist himself who was a converted scribe, perhaps one who formerly worked for the Pharisees or Sadducees or both. Possibly then the Evangelist has included this saying and the parable before it as a justification or legitimization of how he has put his Gospel together, critically sifting, weighing, limiting, combining OT material with the Jesus tradition. This saying of course comes at the very end of the third discourse in Matthew and at a climactic position after a considerable discussion of discipleship. It suggests that one form of discipleship was continuing one’s scribal activities in the service of the Gospel and the Kingdom it spoke of. And this brings us back to the school of St. Matthew notion of Stendahl’s.

The rise to prominence of the already extant Hellenistic schools used to train scribes in how best to use papyrus and scrolls coincides with the rise of the Roman empire, an enterprise which required many documents and long paper trails. And Jews realized they needed to respond to the propaganda of the Republic and Empire, especially once they became a conquered and dominated people. So it is of interest for our study that there was a rise of Jewish schools in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Already around 180 B.C. we hear of the school of Ben Sira (Sir. 51.23), and one Talmudic text tells us there were some 480 schools in Jerusalem alone (J.T. Meg. 73b). Doubtless this is an exaggeration even in the post-second Temple era, but there is no reason to doubt there were many such schools. Van der Toorn stresses “These Jewish schools arose in part in response to the Hellenistic policy of establishing Greek schools in conquered territories. As the tuition fee for the schools was substantial (Sir. 51.28) formal education was restricted to the well-to-do. Under the guidance of their teachers, students could familiarize themselves with the classics—Homer in the Greek schools; the Law and the Prophets in Ben Sira’s **bet midras** (Sir. 39.1-3).” Furthermore, it was possible for a Greek-speaking Jew like Paul or a ‘Matthew’ to get training in rhetoric in Jerusalem

itself. We must not underestimate the extent of Hellenization in the Holy Land and the length it had had its effect on early Judaism before we reach the time of the production of NT documents.¹⁰

Scribes did not generally see themselves as modern authors would. They saw themselves as the midwives of an ongoing process, their job being to deliver to the next generation the current and previous wisdom. When they produced documents, they were of course not mere editors, but they did not see themselves as authors either. They would ascribe their documents to their patrons, or their most famous sources. This, I would suggest, is exactly what we find in the First Gospel. Assembled by a scribe, possibly in a Jewish school setting in Galilee or Antioch, much as the Didache probably was, the most famous source for this Gospel was an important, literate early apostle named Matthew. Possibly the special M material in this Gospel and/or possibly the so-called Q material went back to him and his own assembling of Gospel traditions. And so the final composer and editor of this document ascribed the Gospel to its most famous contributor—not Mark the non-apostle non-eyewitness who was the other notable source for this document. But rather Matthew himself.

AND SO?

There is much more that could be said along these lines, and many good dissertations are waiting to be written about reading Matthew in light of sapiential literature and early scribal practices but I must conclude with a few final comments. Firstly, I think we have been thinking about the issues of authorship, when it comes to the Gospels, in the wrong way, and without regard to the probable social contexts out of which such composite documents arose—a scribal context. Rethinking is needed. Secondly, it is a consummation devoutly to be wished that some scholars would pursue more extensively than I could in my Matthew commentary the fact that the whole of this Gospel is a sapiential take on the Jesus tradition, not just containing wisdom's bits and pieces from the words of Jesus. If we want to unlock the treasures of this Gospel and produce things of lasting value, then we need to approach its treasures like the wise men of old. Thirdly, a sapiential reading of this Gospel unveils how Jesus is presented as

¹⁰ Van der Toorn, p. 24.

both sage and Wisdom throughout this Gospel, not just here and there. The Emmanuel theme frames this Gospel with good reason.

Fourthly, the approach to Torah in this Gospel is like unto the approach of that earlier Jesus- Jesus ben Sira, which is to say that Law is viewed as a part of, and in light of the larger Wisdom tradition, which had already been combined with the apocalyptic tradition, such that there was both revelatory wisdom that came down from above, but also wisdom to be learned from studying nature and human nature. Indeed, Law is viewed as part of the new covenant, for this Evangelist is not just suggesting that Moses' is reaffirmed for the new community. To the contrary, some of Moses has been fulfilled and is finished, some of it has been carried over into the new covenant, and some of the new covenant wisdom is indeed new. In Mt. 13.52 we also find then an eschatological hermeneutic that reveals how the Law was approached in an early Jewish Christian community. Jesus is not viewed as merely the prophet like unto Moses who fulfills the Law. He is Wisdom come in the flesh, and with new and sometimes radically new things to say. He offers six discourses when Moses only offered five, he not merely delivers them from Pharaoh, he saves them from sin, which is why Matthew suggests that the sagacious should still seek him. If we will pursue some of these leads more carefully and thoroughly, we scribes of the twenty-first century will have a chance to bring out of our own storeroom, something old, something new, something borrowed, and something true.¹¹

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¹¹ See in detail B. Witherington, Matthew, (Smyth and Helwys, 2006).