

MODES OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN THE JEWISH/ROMAN WORLD OF JESUS

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To describe the modes of written communication used in the Jewish/Roman world of Jesus is important for the study of the Synoptic Gospels because it provides a better understanding and clearer interpretation of the content so as to understand what God is communicating and, in turn, so as to “be able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set men’s hearts on fire with the love of God.”¹ During the time



period of Jesus, the primary form of written communication was correspondence which can be classified within three sources: pagan, Jewish, and Christian. A more profound reading of particular writings from these sources helps to understand the basic biblical truth that God has acted in history and to value the superiority of the Inspired Writings above those writings not part of the Canon.

Some Roman correspondence, especially of writers like Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Tacitus, contribute a historical perspective and facts of our Savior Jesus Christ. In Pliny’s *Letter to the Emperor Trajan*, for example, “Pliny acknowledges the high moral principles of the Christians, admires their constancy in the Faith (pervicacia et inflexibilis obstinatio), which he appears to trace back to their worship of Christ (carmenque Christo, quasi Deo, dicere).”² In his *Annals*, Tacitus describes the persecution that the followers of Jesus faced. In addition, the Antimarcionite Prologue helps to narrow down the date when Mark may have written the Gospel to 67 a.d. Furthermore, twenty of the twenty-seven New Testament documents take the form of correspondence. This is noteworthy specially since St. Paul’s letters all adhere closely to and use the format of the Greco-Roman epistle.

The Jewish Apocrypha contains other forms of written communication that were used during the time period of Jesus. These consisted of books, such as the *Book of Jubilees*, of calendar form; testaments, such as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; Maccabean literature; the *Prayer of Manasseh* which falls in devotional literature; sibylline oracles of historical nature; and the *Assumption of Moses* which has apocalyptic tones. Other writing from the Jewish Apocrypha, the *Ethiopic Enoch*, parallels the Gospel of Mark’s opening theme of Jesus’ divine sonship. In the *Ethiopic Enoch* the Son of Man is “a heavenly individual who accompanies God (46:3). Named by God before creation (48:2-3), his destiny is to support the just and to be a light to the Gentiles (46:3).”³ The Gospel of Mark begins with this identity of Jesus the Christ as the Son of God. The Son of David at his coronation received the grace of Divine adoption whereby he becomes the Son of God, fulfilling the promise God made to David. In addition, King Solomon ruled with the wisdom of God and he passed this on to all the gentiles to inspire and illuminate them. After the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, *Enoch* was not favored in Judaism because of its apocalyptic tones and “rousing dreams of the future.”⁴ In the end, all of these Apocryphal writings are not in the canon because in second Maccabees 15:9 only writings about the law and the prophets are mentioned. Also, even though it was speculated that Sirach referred to them as “the rest of the books of our ancestors” Luke clarifies that “the rest of the books” are the Psalms (Luke 24:44). Reading them and knowing of their existence serve to appreciate the superior quality of the Inspired Writings and to explain why they are not part of the canon.

Other Jewish literature written during the time of Jesus comes from writers of the Biblical period and from the four periods of Rabbinic literature. Philo Judaeus was learned in Jewish tradition and in Greek secular studies and he wrote purely philosophical treatises and biblical studies. Flavius Josephus was a Pharisee whose writings contributed much “knowledge for Jewish history in the late period from Maccabean/Hasmonean times to the fall of the Masada in 73 AD.”⁵ The Scribes were the governing body of Judaism and during their period they issued laws and gathered the canon of the Old Testament. The Period of the Five Pairs of Teachers is named after a Jewish tradition which pairs off the great teachers of the period. “With the last pair of teachers just before the Christian era, two different schools of thought and practice in jurisprudence developed: Shammai and Hillel.”⁶ In Matthew 19:3ff, the Pharisees were presenting Jesus with a dispute between followers of these two groups. During the Period of the Tannaim, the oral decisions of the great teachers were collected and then taught by repetition, since tannaim means “those who teach by repetition.” Finally, in the period of the Amoraim, the Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud were written down.

Other forms of written communication during the time of Jesus are the Christian Apocryphal Gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Christian Apocryphal Gospels are studied as patristic writings and “refer to noncanonical books more closely related in form or in content to New Testament writings.”⁷ The Dead Sea Scrolls refer either to all the fragments discovered in various sites of the Dead Sea or to what was discovered at Qumran. About 600 manuscripts consisting of about 10 complete scrolls and thousands of fragments were found. They were written by the Qumran sect and describe their theology and piety.

Many different materials were used for writing during the biblical period. From the Book of Exodus (Ex 31:18) we learn that the Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets. In Mesopotamia and countries of the ancient Near East, clay tablets have been found. In Egypt and Palestine, wooden tablets were also used. The most common material in Egypt was papyrus. Parchment was another material commonly used in Palestine. Parchment was made from the skins of animals. A pen and ink were used to write on papyrus or parchment whereas a stylus was used to write on hard materials, such as stone, clay and wood.⁸

In God choosing to reveal Himself in Jesus Christ, the Word become Flesh, He gave ultimate meaning and expression to the written Word. Thus, Sacred Scripture is the most elevated language and mode of written communication of the writings that existed at the time of Jesus, when the living Word Himself lived, breathed, moved about, and concretely manifested His love for humanity as the Word was being written. A reading through the various writings of the time of Jesus leads one to appreciate and enflesh these words from the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation:

“However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion,⁹ the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words...For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.¹⁰ For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns

men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.^{11,12}

In the school of the Heart of our Lady, who pondered and safeguarded the things of the Lord in her Heart, may the living Word enkindle the hearts of all the faithful and set us out to proclaim in word and deed the saving Truth of the Gospel.

¹ II Vatican Council. *Dei Verbum*. n.23. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 18 Nov. 1965

² Maas, Anthony. "Early Historical Documents on Jesus Christ." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 2 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08375a.htm>>.

³ Brown, Raymond, et al. "The Jerome Biblical Commentary." Vol.2.Ch. 68. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

⁴ Ibid. n.12

⁵ Brown, Raymond, et al. "The Jerome Biblical Commentary." Vol.2.Ch. 68. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

⁶ Ibid, no. 120.

⁷ Ibid. no. 50.

⁸ Wigoder, Geoffrey et al. "Illustrative Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible. USA: Jerusalem Publishing House, 1986.

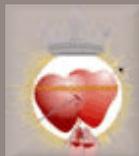
⁸ St. Augustine, "City of God," XVII, 6, 2: PL 41, 537; CSEL. XL, 2, 228

¹⁰ St. Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine" III, 18, 26; PL 34, 75-76.

¹¹ Pius XII, loc. cit. Denziger 2294 (3829-3830); EB 557-562.

¹² II Vatican Council. "Dei Verbum." Vatican City: Vatican City Press, 1965.

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