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Lecture 6: The Book of the Gospel Rediscovered

Wherever I go to lecture I hear one question first of all: “What is the true Gospel of Jesus (as)?” There is always someone who wants to know whether the book of the Gospel has been irretrievably lost, or whether it is to be found among the apocryphal gospels not included by the Church fathers in the canon of the New Testament.

I have invariably had to answer that unfortunately all of the books which claim to be the Gospel of Jesus (as) contain passages that are clearly corruptions of the original text, so that even if we could point to one or another book as that received by Jesus as the Gospel, it would not be perfectly intact. This is an area in which historical criticism has served us well.

The canonical gospels, or the books in the Christian Bible which are called gospels, do not claim to be the message of God sent down to Jesus (as). They do not correspond to what the holy Qur'an calls the Injil or Gospel, nor is such a document mentioned in them. They bear the title in Greek, evangelion, from which comes the Arabic word Injil, but they do not claim to be divine messages as such.

Rather, they are collections of stories about what Jesus (as) did and said. As such, they are much more in the character of Islamic hadith literature than they are in the character of a revealed book as Muslims think of it. Some of the gospels not included in the Bible are collections of sayings, but even these generally remind us more of ahadith than of the holy Qur'an or the Hebrew prophetic writings.

None of the so-called gospels even claims to be a book sent down from God to Jesus (as). All of them claim to be the work of one author-witness, not always an eye-witness, but historical criticism leads us to doubt even that in most cases.

Much has been written about the value and validity of the Gospels, both canonical and apocryphal, that we have in our possession. This scholarship might make us turn our sights towards other sources, such as new archeological finds, in our search for the Injil mentioned in the holy Qur'an. So far little in that way has turned up. The Qumran texts, to cite the most popular source, might contain some passages worthy of examination by the criteria presented below, but do not provide us with a book that in itself

could be considered the lost Gospel of Jesus (as).

There is another possibility. It may be that the true Gospel, the book of revelation sent down to Jesus (as) lies buried, not in a cave or under debris of dust and stones, but under the encrusted additions to one or another of the Gospels we possess. The possibility that the true Gospel might be a portion, rather than the whole, of any one of the candidates, seems to have escaped the notice of most seekers.

An examination of the extant Gospels may well bring to light such a document, a book which can be truly considered the revelation once sent down to Jesus the Messiah (as). Before beginning such an examination, however, it is necessary to lay down some criteria by which we might recognize a book of revelation. I offer the following criteria.

- 1) The Gospel might exist as fragments of the original, part of which has been lost and part of which may have been preserved imperfectly.
- 2) A book of revelation will be couched mainly in words that can best be ascribed to God Himself, rather than to the prophet.
- 3) A book of revelation will be highly relevant to the specific religious problems of the time. It will point out innovations as false, and call people to return to forgotten or neglected principles in earlier revelation.
- 4) A book of revelation will not conflict with the basic principles of faith declared in earlier revelations.

Thus there are considerations of the state of the document, style of speech, relevance, and consistency. By applying these four criteria, there is every likelihood that if any portion of the true Gospel of Jesus (as) remains hidden within the extant gospels, we shall be able to identify it. The criteria are precise enough to distinguish the true Gospel from other material.

Although the material at first appears rather abundant, the second criterion, that of style, requires us to examine only the discourses, and to choose among them those which are couched in words that might best be ascribed to God rather than the prophet. Such an exercise immediately excludes the bulk of material.

Some passages in the apocryphal gospels might require further examination, but among the canonical Gospels only the following remains as a candidate after applying the criterion of style: Matthew 23. The contents of this passage are found scattered through discourses in Luke 11–13, but far more fragmented than in Matthew 23.

This suggests that other parts of Jesus's discourses may also be quoted from the original Gospel, without this being apparent. The passage in Matthew 23, however, is clearly one which demands closer examination.

The criterion of style is difficult to apply in detail, because the Gospel must have been originally given in Hebrew or possibly Aramaic, while it has come down to us in Greek. The original language is lacking altogether, although the Syriac versions may come closer to it than the Greek ones, despite the fact that they are probably further translations from the Greek.

The first stylistic criterion is the ascription of speech to God. The whole passage is consistent with this beginning with verse two and ending with verse 35. Verse 36 begins with the words "Truly I say to you" and this may mark the point at which Jesus (as) speaks with his own words. Verses 37 and 38 are therefore ambiguous as to whether they form a part of the divine revelation or constitute the commentary attached to the revelation by the prophet.

Verse 39 includes the expression "you shall not see me," with the word "me" clearly referring to the speaker, that is, the prophet himself. Thus verse 39 forms the last possible limit of the divine revelation. We can conclude that at least verses 2–35 may form the text of the Injil sent down to Jesus (as) or a part of it.

A second stylistic criterion might be whether the text shows any likeness to earlier texts of revelation. In terms of length, it is short, but within the bounds of known texts of revelation. The book of the prophet Obadiah consists of only 21 verses, and several others are not much longer. On that basis, the passage in question could actually be the entire text of the Injil, or the greater part of it.

As it stands it forms a coherent whole. Most prophetic writings echo something of the revelation to Moses (as). The greater portion of Matthew 23 consists of woes. Woes are known as a literary device in several prophets and are one of the most prevalent forms of Hebrew prophetic utterance. The canonical paradigm is in Deuteronomy 27: 15–26, but the form is otherwise common. Jesus himself (as), like other prophets before him, uses the device in his own words in Luke 6:24–26.

In sum, the criterion of style, based on literary form, length of the document, and ascribability of the speech to God, is consonant with the theory that Matthew 23 is a text of divine revelation.

The third criterion is that of relevance. The times of Jesus (as) gave evidence of very particular problems. These were based on the ways in which the various sects of Judaism, faced with Roman rule, sought to accommodate the principles of their faith in view of survival. Two issues were crucial: first, to minimize the principle of divinely appointed leadership which might be seen as a threat to Roman power, and second, to circumvent any practices which might conflict with Roman life.

Finally, we should expect to find a condemnation of any who engaged in these two forms of accommodation to Rome. In brief, we should expect Jesus to point out 1) a weakened reliance on divinely appointed leadership which might be a threat to Roman rule, 2) specific features of neglecting the law or misapplying it, and 3) condemnation for such.

An examination of the text of Matthew 23 reveals that every verse falls into one of these three categories. The text is thus established as relevant to the times, and therefore consonant with the theory

that it is a text of divine revelation.

The fourth criterion is whether or not the text conflicts with earlier revelation. An examination of the passage does not reveal any point which is in conflict with the earlier extant revelation as we have it in the Hebrew writings. Several passages of the law are cited and commented upon in ways consonant with the Hebrew prophets, namely, in terms of justice.

The final criterion is satisfied in this. However, the unicity of God is the central issue of revelation, and it is also explicitly maintained in verse 9. The passage can thus be seen not to conflict with earlier revelation, but rather to agree with it in both content and spirit, and to cite it in several matters.

On the basis of all four criteria, it is possible to say that Matthew 23:2–35 is a likely candidate as the Injil of Jesus referred to by the holy Qur'an, or a portion of it. The rest of the canonical gospel material is largely of the character of hadith or tradition, and describes more or less accurately, to the extent one can rely on the opinion of researchers, the words and actions of Jesus (as).

The True Book of the Gospel: Matthew 23

1) Then Jesus spoke to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 And said, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' place: 3 So everything they tell you to observe, observe and do; but do not follow their example, because they do not act as they speak. 4 For they mandate heavy burdens and hard to carry, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

The Beginning of the discourse establishes the theme of divine guidance and its misuse. The reference to Moses' seat (as) reveals this clearly. Those who have usurped this appointment are called scribes and Pharisees. The scribes probably relate specifically to the Saducees, who were the official guardians of the faith, collaborators with Rome. They limited the application of the law to its narrowest sense, thus minimizing any conflict with the ruling power.

The Pharisees dispensed with the need for divine guidance by laying down scholarly principles of interpretation. This rejection of the divinely appointed leader made it possible to apply the law, through rabbinical interpretation, to a broader segment of life without becoming a threat to Roman hegemony.

In verse three the Gospel recognizes that these two sects maintain the law in some sense, so that when they say that the law must be upheld, they are correct and may be followed. However, their own behaviour is not according to the law, at least in that they ignore divine guidance or the divinely appointed leadership.

This seems to be a citation of the prophet Malachi 2:7,8. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you are departed out of the way, you have caused many to stumble at the law; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts.

This text is relevant to the situation, but more importantly situates this passage as a continuation of Malachi, that is, as a prophecy which logically follows the book of Malachi. The book of Malachi is the last book of prophets, and in the Christian Scriptures immediately precedes the Gospel of Matthew.

There is some textual variation in verse four in regard to heavy burdens, but it does not modify the meaning. Verse four adds that their interpretation, which ignores divine guidance, is actually more difficult to observe than verdicts made under divine appointment. That is, qiyas or rabbinical method, is a burdensome approach and turns divine law into a harsh system difficult to carry out.

5 But everything they do, they do to be seen by others: they make their phylacteries broad, and enlarge the borders of their garments, 6 And love the highest places at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 And greetings in the markets, and for people to call them, Rabbi, Rabbi.

This text points out that the rabbinical method of attaining a verdict, or the use of qiyas, leads to action which may be termed mura'i, or action performed for the purpose of being seen and respected by others. Two examples of this are given in making phylacteries large, and lengthening the fringes on their garments.

The enlarged phylacteries and the extravagantly long garment fringes have become standard in modern Jewish practice, so that they are no longer a sign of mura'i action. The size of these no longer varies. It does not appear that phylacteries and fringes as such are condemned here. Both are based on Mosaic law, but it seems that the phylacteries arose through a misapprehension of Deuteronomy 6:8.

Once Hebrew lost its character as the spoken language of the people rabbis often erred in misplaced concreteness. The abstract meaning of the terms of Deuteronomy 6:8 are implicit from Exodus 13:9, where the same expressions are applied to unleavened bread, which cannot be placed between the eyes or worn on the hand.

By the same token, fringes refer in Mosaic law to the tied ends of the woof of a woven outer cloak in one piece, corresponding to a modern blanket. The application of such to an undergarment has no prophetic justification. Thus both practices as a form of spiritual show are irrelevant to modern life, but specifically relevant to first century Palestine.

The expressions of these verses make no comment on the validity of using phylacteries and fringes as such, or attending feasts, synagogues, and markets. The comment is purely in reference to seeking admiration and status. The use of the term rabbi is dealt with in the next verse.

8 But you, do not be called Rabbi: for your Master is one, even Christ; and all of you are brothers.

The use of the term rabbi is forbidden on the basis that it conflicts with the authority of the Messiah. The text here concentrates on the aspect of Jewish accommodation to Rome which denigrates divine guidance, that is, the divinely appointed leader.

9 And call no one on earth your father: for your Father, who is in heaven, is one.

This text continues the argument against the proliferation of religious authorities to the detriment of the authority of the divinely appointed. It does not refer to the physical, biological relationship, but to the use of the word father as a term of respect for those in authority. At the same time the text affirms the unicity of God.

The reference is oblique, because the unicity of God was never questioned in the context of Jesus (as) and first century Judaism. There is no need to belabour it.

10 Do not be called masters either: for your Master, even Christ, is one.

Here the text reaffirms the divine appointment of leadership. The reaffirmation takes the local situation into account. This was the principle that first century Judaism, particularly its leadership, denied.

11 But the one who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

Status-oriented Roman society had had an effect on Jewish society. The text here attempts to reverse that.

13 ¶ But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut people out of the kingdom of heaven: for you do not go into it yourselves, neither do you let those enter it who want to go in.

Here begin the woes, or condemnations. It has been established that the major sects and leadership of first century Judaism had accommodated to Rome by denigrating the role of the divinely appointed leader and by adopting illicit ways of interpreting and applying the law. These are condemned, with the series of woes following. As compared to the New Testament generally, this chapter is particularly well preserved. In some manuscripts, however, this and the following verse are reversed.

14 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you eat up widows' houses, and make long prayer for a pretence: therefore you shall receive the greater condemnation.

The social concern here is typical of the Hebrew prophetic utterance, and another evidence that this passage may be the lost Gospel of Jesus (as).

15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you go across sea and land to make one convert, and when he is made, you make him twice the child of hell as you yourselves.

Unlike today, first century Judaism was a proselytizing faith. The matter dealt with here is the fact that the proselyte would be unaware that changes had taken place in the faith through accommodation to Rome, and thus would be more likely to embrace the wrong system wholeheartedly. The convert is more enthusiastic than one born in the faith.

16 Woe to you, blind guides, who say, Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is responsible. 17 Fools and blind ones: which is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 And, Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is responsible.

19 Fools and blind ones: which is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 Whoever therefore swears by the altar, swears by it, and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it, and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And the one that swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God, and by the one who sits on it.

This is a reference to the kind of misapplication of the law which arises through the use of a false method of attaining a verdict. Application by the divinely appointed leader is always just, but application by the machinations of a scholar will provide means of circumventing the law for those who look up to his expertise.

The relationship which automatically arises between a scholar and an authority demanding a verdict from him is a corrupting one. The specific matter here is the formulation of a legal oath, with the specification that a formal error relieves the client of responsibility. The practice thus would be to include a formal error whenever one wished to give the impression of making an oath, yet with the intention of disregarding it.

The obvious injustice of such an action cannot be missed by the poorest observer, yet all non-imamic law is based on such circumvention. The common term is loophole.

The word “fools” in verse 19 is missing in some manuscripts.

23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: you should have done these, and not have left the other undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

Here the text reverts again to the typical social concern to be found in the Hebrew prophets. Again, this is evidence that this passage belongs to the same tradition as the Hebrew prophets in contrast to the rest of the material in the Gospel of Matthew. The clear implication is that this is a part of the book called Injil in the holy Qur'an and sent down to Jesus (as).

25 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you make the outside of the cup and the platter clean, but inside they are full of extortion and excess. 26 Blind Pharisee, first clean what is inside the cup and platter, so that the outside of them may be clean also.

27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you are like white-washed sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to people, but inside you are full of

hypocrisy and iniquity.

These condemnations turn on the matter of hypocrisy. The implication is that false methods of attaining verdicts, methods invented for the purpose of accommodating with Rome for survival, lead to hypocrisy if only because the verdicts so obtained do not correspond with the real needs of humankind, as do those attained through the intervention of a duly appointed divine representative. Justice cannot be attained or maintained except by following the divinely given process of prophecy and divine guidance.

29 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, 30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have participated with them in taking the blood of the prophets. 31 So you are witnesses about yourselves, that you are the children of those who killed the prophets. 32 Fill up then the measure of your fathers. 33 Serpents, generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?

The awfulness of these final woes perhaps goes beyond the expressions of the Hebrew prophets themselves, but is a logical continuation of them. The question of how to escape damnation is answered in the following verse, which is to follow the prophets, the divine guides (sophos), and scribes or transmitters of the written law.

Jesus (as) does not condemn building the tombs of the prophets and garnishing their sepulchres as such, any more than he condemns paying tithes. What he condemns is the hypocrisy of doing so while failing to follow the prophets. This is therefore an oblique justification for caring for and visiting the tombs of the prophets and divine guides (the righteous), a practice which has given rise to some division in Islam.

34 ¶ So see, I send to you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them you will kill and crucify; and some of them you will beat in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

The way of salvation is clearly given: it is to follow the instruction of the prophets, submit to the authority of the divinely appointed leaders (sophos), and follow those who transmit the written law. This is followed by the prophecy that the first century Jews will fail to do this, and rather participate in the destruction of those sent to them by God.

35 That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom you killed between the temple and the altar.

This prophecy probably refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., although the whole condemnation is addressed not to the Jewish people but to their leaders. Nevertheless, the innocent died with the guilty.

36 Truly I say to you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

Here no doubt begins Jesus's (as) commentary on the Gospel. He notes that it will be fulfilled on the

contemporary generation, which we see to be historically accurate. The attempted collaboration with Rome did not succeed, partly because of the irritation to the Romans caused by the Zealots and partly because of the perfidity of the Sadducees. The Pharisees survived to bring rabbinical method to a point of perfection.

Rabbinical method cannot be treated with the same condemnation as it is here, for it is no longer an attempt to accommodate to Rome, but has become crystalized into a religious system in its own right. It must be judged in part today for other features: 1) the misapplication of certain features of law, 2) failure to recognize the Messiah, 3) failure to recognize the final prophet, and 4) failure to integrate divine guidance into the establishment of right practice. These obviously have their roots in the original accommodation to Rome.

This should have been avoided (hindsight is unfortunately more clear-sighted than foresight) by recourse to taqiyya or disimulation following the example of Abraham (as), rather than any form of accommodation with Rome.

It ought to be pointed out that if this is the Gospel or Injil more or less as Jesus (as) received it, there are vast implications for Christianity. First of all, the Gospel relates primarily to the specific problems within first century Judaism. It does not support or imply the establishment of a system of faith distinct from first century Judaism, not to mention the faith implicit in the Hebrew Scriptures now contained in Christian Bibles.

The content of the Gospel emphatically opposes all accommodation with Rome. Unfortunately, Christianity as a historical phenomenon is hardly anything but an accommodation to Rome. The Gospel text does not support the doctrine of the Trinity.

Rather, it opposes it with the clear presupposition of the unicity of God. The Gospel text does not support the atonement for sin on the cross. Rather, it states categorically that salvation is the product of obedience to divine law as transmitted through the prophets, the divinely appointed leaders, and those who transmit the written law.

Finally, there is no justification for the establishment of any such institution as the Christian Church has become. On the contrary, the authority of divine guidance in the divinely appointed leader is maintained throughout. If the Gospel contains strong language in condemnation of the Jewish leadership in the first century, its implied condemnation of the Christian establishment is devastating.

Despite the fact that the text relates clearly to a particular time and place with its particular problems, it can still serve as a witness of what has always been the right way. First, there is a strong witness of the unicity of God in verse 9. Social concerns imply divine justice time and again. Then the principle of prophecy is strongly expressed.

The need for adherence to the divinely appointed leader is a central issue. Finally, human responsibility is maintained even in the face of oppression and the temptation to accommodate for survival in a world

without respect for divine law. All comes to a head in the proclamation of divine judgment. These five great principles of true faith are the core of the Gospel.

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