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“People of the Book”? Textuality and Orality in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Abstract: The frequently used catchphrase “Mosaism and Christianity – religions of the book” places the origin and centre of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the sacred texts, to the expense of the orality of the teachings. The historical source of the assertion – i.e. the Qur’an, which refers to Jews and Christians as “people of the Book”, and which proves that it is a late one – 7th century AD – may cast doubt. After all, is it an absolute nature of the written word in this specific religious context? My article provides an answer to this question. Using a classical rhetorical perspective, we will determine the proper relationship between text and orality in Judeo-Christian culture and identify those reductive and subjective approaches that can lead to a distorted perception of the present topic.

Keywords: orality, textuality, Judeo-Christian tradition, people of the Book, classical rhetoric.

1. A classical legend

The platonic *Phaedrus* dialogue relates the story of the god Theuth, who first discovered numbers and counting, geometry and astronomy, backgammon and dice. In the end, the Egyptian god also discovers letters, and goes to King Thamous to introduce him to all the arts he has invented. To justify the usefulness of letters in the Egyptians’ lives, Theuth, who would later become the protector and inspirer of scribes (Liiceanu 2016, 169; Cornea 1988, 135), says to Thamous: “Your highness, this science (of letters) will increase the intelligence of the people of Egypt and improve their memories. For this invention is a potion for memory and intelligence” (*Phaedrus* 274e). King Thamous’s response is completely unexpected, contradicting the supposed advantages mentioned by “the father of the

letters”...It will atrophy people’s memories,” “Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their own inner resources, and so writing will make the things they have learnt disappear from their minds,” “Your invention is a potion for jogging the memory, not for remembering” (*Phaedrus* 275a).

On the possible wisdom gained from the knowledge and use of letters, Thamous is even more unrelenting: „You provide your students with the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence. Because your students will be widely read, though without any contact with a teacher, they will seem to be men of wide knowledge, when they will usually be ignorant. And this spurious appearance of intelligence will make them difficult company” (*Phaedrus* 275a-b).

I consider that the arguments of King Thamous from *Phaedrus* may also be relevant to the famous quote in which Christianity is categorized, alongside Mosaism, as *stricto sensu*, “a religion of the book” (Behr 2022, 20). In the understanding of this article, the “Mosaicism and Christianity – religions of the book,” which is mainly used in Western Europe, sets the focus on the birth and rise of Judeo-Christian teaching exclusively and incorrectly to the biblical texts at the expense of its orality. The reductionism of the phrase “Mosaicism and Christianity – religions of the book” is also exposed by its historical source, which is the Qur’an – the sacred book of Islam, which refers to Jews and Christians as “people of the Book”¹ (Qur’an 4:171). The Qur’an affirmation, as Dionisie Constantin Pîrvuloiu observes, is thus both a late one, given the century in which it appeared – the 7th century AD – and a subjective one, coming “from a new religion built on a remarkable synthesis of several heterogeneous elements, among which the Christian and Jewish ones played an important role” and having as its basis “the well-known distorted image of Christianity and Judaism in the Qur’an, an image justified by polemical necessities” (2009, 194). Pîrvuloiu points out that this “absolutization of the written word” in Judeo-Christian history was valid only for some intermediate periods.

2. Jewish discursive context

For Judaism, the “people of the book” statement is undoubtedly confirmed only for the Judaism of the Diaspora and, in particular, for that of the Greco-Roman period, after the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 AD (Pîrvuloiu 2009, 194). Without a temple to worship

¹ “People of the scripture” in other translations.

in, Jewish people everywhere had to adhere strictly to Scripture. Researchers have documented that Moses and the other Old Testament writers recounted the events before them “not only based on written documents but also on oral traditions that were passed down from generation to generation” (Anania 2009, 8).

Some Old Testament oral traditions have survived into the 1st century AD. For example, the Apostle Paul writes that the men who opposed Moses (Ex 7:11) were two in number. Their names were Jannes and Jambres (2 Tm 3:8), but this information is not found in the Old Testament but came to Paul through oral tradition (Mircea 1995, 415; Pruteanu 2010, 8). The Apostle Jude, brother of the Apostle James, also mentions in his epistle two episodes that came to him through tradition: the argument of the Archangel Michael with the devil over the body of Moses (Jude 9) and the mention of the prophecy of Enoch, “in the seventh generation from Adam” (Jude 14). Also, through the exclusively oral “old tradition,” the names of the parents of the Virgin Mary, namely Joachim and Anna, are known (Mircea 1995, 415). Some etymological precisions also refer to the orality of the Mosaic tradition. For example, the general, broad meaning of the Hebrew word “Torah” (the *Pentateuch* or the Five Books of Moses) is that of “oral teaching that is transmitted from schoolmaster to student or from father to son” (Gavrilyuc 2018, 20). We should also not omit that the Hebrew alphabet consisted only of consonants, and the intercalation of missing vowels and the pronunciation of words was probably carried out over time within the oral tradition, following the teacher-disciple model (Anania 2010, 10).

I would also like to mention here a famous classical saying which nowadays has come to express the exact opposite of its original meaning: “*Scripta manent, verba volant*” (“What is written remains, what is spoken vanishes into the air”). As Alberto Manguel (1996) points out, since the time of the Sumerian tablets, written words were intended to be spoken aloud, implicitly carrying a “soul,” a particular sound (45). Therefore, “*Scripta manent, verba volant*” was, in its original sense, a eulogy to the word spoken aloud, “which has wings and can fly, as compared to the silent word on the page, which is motionless, dead. Faced with a written text, the reader had a duty to lend voice to the silent letters, the *scripta*, and to allow them to become, in the subtle biblical distinction, *verba*, spoken words – spirit” (45). It is not a coincidence, writes Manguel, that the primary languages of the Bible – Aramaic and Hebrew – do not differentiate between the act of reading and the act of speaking, and they both use the same word (1996, 45).

Other authors consider that the perception of the Jews as a “people of the book” is not far from the truth. A noteworthy perspective on

orality-scripturality in Judaism is that of the classicalist Andrei Cornea's *list principle*, presented in the volume *Writing and Orality in Ancient Culture* (1988). Referring to the myth of Theuth and starting from the order of words of the Platonic passage, the author draws attention to the difference between *anamimnéskomai-anámnesis*, which refers rather and more directly to "inner recollection," while *hypomimnéskomai-hypómnesis* would have to do with the use of an external instrument of recording – the writing ("Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their inner resources – *anamimneskoménous* –, and so writing will make the things they have learnt disappear from their minds. Your invention is a potion for jogging the memory – *hypómnesis*, not for remembering – *mnéme*) (Cornea 1988, 13). There would, therefore, be two techniques of memorization, retention and reproduction in ancient culture, in opposition to each other – *the anamnestic technique*, which involves the reduction of information by developing "networks of connections" within the material, and *the hypomnestic technique*, which uses the external recording of rich information by a list. These two techniques form two principles: that of organicity, specific to Greek culture, and that of the list, specific to the culture known as "fertile crescent area" – Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria (Cornea 1988 23, 29, 35).

Temporally, the organicist culture succeeds the list culture; it is not by chance that Theuth first discovers numbers, and Prometheus mentions numbers first among the gifts to men. Both in prehistoric Sumer, in the Egyptian tradition, and in Plato, an anteriority of counting and calculation overwriting is suggested (Cornea 1988, 135). The distinction is crucial because it would lead to the hypothesis that Plato, through the mouth of the legendary king Thamous, does not find writing per se reprehensible², but the possibility of substituting the anamnestic technique with the hypomnestic technique: "By making use of the too great accessibility of writing, the list could be extended even where it would not be appropriate to do so" (Cornea 1988, 23), and the chance of "superior recollection" – *anámnésis* would be curbed or even blocked.

In the case of Greek culture (at least until Roman times), from this anamnestic perspective, the attitude towards the book is to "certify the existence of a relative cultural exclusion of the book in favor of orality" (Cornea 1988, 56). Isocrates' opinion from *Areopagiticus* – "Those who

² "It's perfectly clear, then, that speech-writing is not shameful in itself. (...) What's really shameful, though, is getting it wrong – speaking and writing shamefully badly" (*Phaedrus* 258d).

are rightly governed, on the other hand, do not need to fill their porticoes with written statutes, but only to cherish justice in their souls; for it is not by legislation, but by morals, that states are well directed” (41), and Plato’s *Republic* – “They pass and amend the sorts of laws we have just been describing, and are always expecting that they will find a way to put a stop to cheating on contracts, and the other evildoings I mentioned just now, not realizing that they are really just cutting off a Hydra’s head” (426e), are also in this sense. Not coincidentally, says Cornea (1988), Plato “pointed the finger” at the myth of Theuth outside of Greece” (30).

Although it admits, following the opinion of C.H. Roberts (1970, 49), that in Jewish tradition, there was also the *Oral Law*, which Moses would also have received on Mount Sinai together with the Torah, and that its sacredness is what made this oral law remain unwritten for a long time, as well the fact that in Judea, near our era, “the superior teaching in the so-called bet hammidrash was still oral” (152), Andrei Cornea (1988) refers to Mosaism as a culture of list and discontinuity, as opposed to the Greek tradition, perceived as a culture of organicity and continuity.

The arguments are various: except the prophetic writings, a series of *Old Testament* writings, especially those of the *Pentateuch*, seem to constitute a code of laws, a list of regulations, a contract paragraph, more precisely, lists of generations, lists of peoples, of cities, of chiefs, etc. (for example, the first biblical text – *Genesis* – seems to be, from a stylistic-literary point of view, a “minute process”) (40-52); the foundation of civilized society among the Israelites “is associated with a land discontinuity, a rupture: Old cults and traditions are suspended or forbidden by the newly written law” (65); Joseph, who by a combination of circumstances became viceroy in Egypt, knows, “also relying on the instrument of writing and lists, how to inventory and organize the surplus of food, obtained during seven years of abundance” (67), and Moses, educated and brought up from infancy also in Egypt, having a speech defect³, was not an orator and did not convince his “hard-headed” nation by appealing to specific persuasion, but by “signs” and “powers” (67); the Hebrew *dabar*, the most common expression for “word” (Bălașa 2022, 49), for “utterance” and for “speech,” also meant “thing” (77), while the Greek *lógos*, which comes from the verb *légein*, meaning “to gather,” “to gather,” “to associate,” was not only a phonetic reality but also a mental one, by gathering the words, seen as phonetic discontinuities, together in

³ “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Ex 4:10).

the circuit of ideas (89)⁴ – there is, therefore, a clear difference between the *word-thing* and the *word-thought*⁵; among the ancient Hebrews, like other oriental peoples, study “consisted, in principle, in the insistent, repeated reading, guided by a master, of an essential book” (126), the strict discipline of reading being carried out according to the Talmudic tradition “between reading the Torah a hundred times and reading it a hundred and one times there is a big difference”, as opposed to the Hellenic study, where “listening”, “total hearing” by the disciple of the master, is the rule; even with regard to the unity between painting (image) and writing, which, in the author’s view, represents “a primary datum of civilizations at the dawn of their existence”, the ancient East, faithful to the principle of the list, develops, refines and preserves it, while Greece, determined and guided by the principle of organicity, “methodically eliminates writing from the field of painting. ... developing a *non-graphic* image and art, determined and guided by secondary orality and the *principle of organicity*” (111); Yahweh himself wrote the tablets of the covenant “with his finger” and gave them to Moses (62).

As for the biblical episodes of the covenant, it can be said that these are an argument for the scriptural condition of the Jewish tradition. God says to Moses in Exodus 34:27: “Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel,” and in Exodus 24:4 it is written that “Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord,” as in Exodus 34:28: “And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.”

In any case, the existence and, in some cases, the prevalence (at least chronologically) of the orality of the Mosaic tradition cannot be objectively disputed. I consider the opinion of the scholar Ioan Ică Jr. relevant on this subject: “Without excluding texts of a legislative nature or prophetic oracles set down in writing, God’s revelation was an active one, the living word of God being transmitted as a living, dynamic oral tradition, in which the ancient forms were constantly re-told, reinterpreted, abandoned, reworked and transformed in a process both oral and scriptural. Religious traditions were always reflections of the history of the chosen people of Israel” (2008, 158).

⁴ As Thomas Tobin (1992, 349) points out, *The Septuagint* takes the use of *logos* with the meaning “word,” translating over 90% of the time the Hebrew *dabar* as *logos* (quoted by Hărlăoanu 2014, 195).

⁵ See also Leenhardt 1968, 10; Dascălu 2000, 36: “Characteristic of the two biblical perspectives (Hebrew and Greek) is that one incorporates in the same vocabulary *to speak* and *to act*, while the other joins the verbs *to speak* and *to think*.”

3. Christian discursive context

As regards the New Testament tradition, with the mention of *Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum*, the thesis on the preeminence of orality over scripturality is more prominent.

For example, in *The Gospel According to Luke*, the fourth chapter is related to Jesus coming to the synagogue on a Saturday, when he stood up to read, and they gave him the book of the prophet Isaiah: “He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: «The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor»” (4:17-19). The following verses in the Lukan gospel can be interpreted as having a special symbolism and relevance: “And he *rolled up* the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, «Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your *hearing*». All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Lk 4:20-22). So this episode may suggest that, from the very beginning of the Christic preaching, the importance fell on the orality of the message and the suspension, at least temporarily, of its scripturality.

One of the well-known and quoted Bible verses on the importance of Christian orality is from *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, where the Apostle stated that “...faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (10:17), with direct reference to another verse: “...our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2Cor 3:5-6). Even some of those who dispute the existence of persuasion in Christian discourse, such as Vasile Florescu (1973), admit the rhetorical importance of the oral teaching of Jesus, who “was a speaker far above the level, and his parables, even in translation, impress even the most profound opponent of Christianity” (91).

The biblical episode recounted above generally fits into the oral-dominant culture of the classical Greco-Roman world, present and valid at the dawn of Christianity, as John H. Walton and Brent Sandy (2013) point out. Thus, the world at the coming of Jesus Christ was still predominantly oral; the Christic truth was proclaimed in oral form, and the disciples of Jesus were commanded to do the same. Based on these analyses, John H. Walton and Brent Sandy conclude in their well-researched *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* that New

Testament genres are more connected to orality than to textuality. The thesis is also confirmed by George Alexander Kennedy (1999), who also groups the Gospels in terms of the rhetorical techniques used. In this scholar's opinion, *The Gospel According to Mark*, presumed to be the earliest⁶, is an example of "radical Christian rhetoric," relying on an authority that does not appeal so much to logical argumentation. In contrast, in the Gospel of Matthew, rational arguments are used, and facts taken or inspired by Mark are turned into *enthymemes* (147).

The fundamental difference, notes Kennedy, Pelikan, and Ică Jr., between the *dromena* of pagan religions and the *legomena* of the revealed religions is also important (Ică Jr. 2008, 205-206). Judaism and Christianity relied on sacred writings and evolved preaching as a feature of their rituals. This is not the case with paganism; "pagan priests performed rituals and sometimes delivered prophecies, but they did not preach" (Kennedy 1999, 137). The apostles, however, were commanded from the start to preach the Gospel first of all: "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20).

The claim "Christianity – a religion of the book" ignores that Christian preaching has always been predominantly oral. "The Gospels and the non-testamentary Epistles did not, in the early Christian ages, play anywhere near the role they play today in Christian life and mission", says Pîrvuloiu (2009, 193). In the same way, Paul Gavriluyuc (2018) points out something particularly important: "The main difference between us who live in the twenty-first century and the apostles, who knew Christ in the flesh, lies in the fact that for us the Gospel is primarily a book, whereas for them the Gospel was the living word of preaching, of the Good News, which was transmitted from mouth to mouth" (20). "For us, the evangelists are primarily the authors of writings, while for the early Christians, they were the «heralds of the Good News», that is, the preachers and missionaries who worked with the apostles", concludes Gavriluyuc (2018, 20).

The words of the priest Dumitru Stăniloae, considered to be one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, can be understood in this sense:

⁶ See also Louth 2013, 50: "Mark's Gospel, it is claimed, is the earliest, and was used in different ways by the authors of Matthew and Luke. They also supplemented the material from Mark with other material, some of which both authors used, and some of which seems to have been special to each of the two Evangelists".

“The *Scripture* does not tell us whether anyone would have come to faith simply by reading the words of God contained in it. Of course, this could be explained by the fact that there was no Scripture about Christ when we had the above testimonies. In general, however, the word of Scripture has power when it is *communicated* by one believer to another, either by repeating it as it is or by explaining it, for it is by the faith among them that the Holy Spirit works. Faith, as the work of the Spirit, comes into one through another, but only when that other communicates the word of Scripture appropriated and confessed with faith or with the sensibility of communion in the Spirit. Scripture activates its power in communion between persons, in transmitting its word in faith from one person to *another*, throughout the generations. From the beginning, there must have been persons who believed not by reading Scripture but by contact with a Person who gave them faith in its content and, on that basis, they believed in that content: at first spoken, then fixed in writing. That Person was Christ. And the full insight into His divine depths and sensitivity to them was given to them by the Spirit of Christ, Who worked in communicating this insight and sensitivity. Since then, the words of Christ or about Christ, whether or not fixed in Scripture, are the outward means of expressing, transmitting, and refreshing the faith within the Church or from the Church to those outside it, while at the same time transmitting and refreshing it through the Holy Spirit” (1996, 41).

From a strictly oratorical perspective, Dumitru Stăniloae’s view has common ground with those written by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus*:

“...there’s something odd about writing, Phaedrus, which makes it exactly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them a question they maintain an aloof silence. It’s the same with written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they’re saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on for ever giving the same single piece of information. Once any account has been written down, you find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn’t talk to. And faced with rudeness and unfair abuse it always needs its *father* to come to its assistance, since it is incapable of defending or helping itself” (275d-e).

An argument that places Christianity within the “principle of organicity” rather than the “principle of the list” is also that the first Gospel was written, according to Tradition, sometime after the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and that “the canon of the New Testament (the 27

books we know today) is defined and approved by the Church in 276 by the Synod of Laodicea” (Pîrvuloiu 2009, 193). It is certain that “The literary relationships between the Gospels, and the kind of material we find in the Gospels, make it clear, it is argued, that we are dealing with an oral tradition that was not written down until several decades after Christ’s death. Even at the stage of writing down, it looks as if this material was used very freely” (Louth 2013, 50). As we have already outlined, the earliest written account of Jesus’ sayings, which most scholars today identify with Mark’s Gospel, is usually dated to shortly before 70 AD, when the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies under Titus took place. The other three Gospels probably appeared even later, although, as Pelikan (2006, 18) notes, there is evidence that at the same time, many other writers compiled an account of the Christic events, following the oral traditions handed down by eyewitnesses and preachers of Christian teaching.

In any case, there were at least three or four decades during which the deeds of Jesus Christ were remembered, and his words were recited and transmitted strictly orally; written forms later incorporated these oral traditions. It is also known that, in general, until the mid-fourth century, there has been a reluctance on the part of Christians to transcribe certain traditions specific to the instruction of catechumens in the faith (Preda 2005, 313) and the assimilation them of “the whole structure of liturgical and sacramental life,” known as “unwritten habits” (Florovsky 1972, 86). The reason was simple: in this way, the possibility of the uninitiated discovering these traditions and possibly profane them was excluded (Pelikan 2006, 18; Florovsky 1972, 87). This *disciplina arcani* (“the discipline of secrecy”) did not refer, as Florovsky (1972) states, to the teaching or transmission of Christian traditions or customs in secret, but the correct version would be “«by the way of mysteries», that is under the form of rites and (liturgical) usages, or «habits» (86). This “discipline of secrecy” included, in the fourth century, The Creed, which was “reserved for candidates for Baptism, in the last stage of their instruction, after they had been solemnly “enrolled” and “approved” and which, being received orally, had to be “had to recite it by memory” before the bishop (Florovsky 1972, 88). *The Procatechesis of St. Cyril of Jerusalem* (c. 348), cited by both Pelikan (2006, 18) and Florovsky (1972, 88), encourages catechumens not to divulge The Creed to outsiders or to write it down, but it was to be “engraved “by the memory upon your heart.”⁷

⁷ “This summary I wish you both to commit to memory when I recite it, and to rehearse it with all diligence among yourselves, *not writing it out on paper*, but engraving it by

Another argument, also mentioned by H. Walton and Brent Sandy (2013), but which is explored by Jaroslav Pelikan in the volume *Whose Bible Is It? A Short History of the Scriptures* (2006) is the following: Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, left nothing written to posterity (17). The only paragraph in the entire *New Testament* where it is stated that “Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground” is found in chapter 8 of *The Gospel According to John*, when the scribes and Pharisees wanted to stone to death, according to Jewish law, a woman caught committing adultery. After saying the famous words “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her”, Jesus “once again he bent down and wrote on the ground”, at which point the scribes and Pharisees “went away, one by one, beginning with the elders.” The Gospel does not record what Jesus wrote on the ground, and theological interpretations have not reached a consensus.

Pelikan, following this trajectory of the importance of Christic orality, draws a comparison between Jesus and Socrates, both striking cases of antiquity’s reliance on orality at the expense of scripturality. Everything we know about Socrates, every sample of wisdom attributed to him, are secondary testimonies, coming not directly from their author but from disciples and hearers such as the philosopher Plato – who wrote *The Apology of Socrates* and *The Dialogues*, the historian Xenophon – with his works *The Memorabilia*, *The Oeconomicus*, *The Symposium* and *The Apology of Socrates to the Jury*, or the dramatic poet Aristophanes – who mentions him in his comedy *The Clouds* (Collina 2020, 19-26). Although he lived in the highly literate culture of Periclean Athens, where books had authority and influence, “Socrates himself did not write a book or even a jotting that has survived” (Pelikan 2006, 17). The same is the case with Jesus: His disciples, the evangelists transcribed what they heard themselves or through oral tradition. If Socrates was formally tried and sentenced to death for his spoken, unwritten ideas (Pelikan 2006, 16), the same happened with Jesus. Of course, the circumstances of the deaths of the two, the consequence of a “common” discursive trajectory, are nevertheless different, as Nicolae Steinhardt notes in *The Diary of Happiness* (2005, 64).

The assumption that the “organicity principle” took precedence from the beginning of Christianity also emerges from the cultural and communicative environment of the New Testament books, that is, *the Greek of Socrates and Plato*. “The books of the *New Testament* were written in Greek by and for speakers of Greek, many of whom were

the memory upon your heart” (*The Procatechesis of St. Cyril of Jerusalem*, quoted by Pelikan 2006, 18).

familiar with public address in Greek or had been educated in Greek schools. They thus employ some features of classical rhetoric combined with Jewish traditions and are modified by beliefs and values of Christianity”, writes Kennedy in *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian & Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (1999, 143). Jaroslav Pelikan, in the same vein, brings to attention in his volume *Christianity and Classical Culture* a significant historical, cultural, and linguistic fact:

“It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the *New Testament* happens to have been written in Greek—not in the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, nor in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, nor yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum, but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato, or at any rate in a reasonably accurate facsimile thereof, disguised and even disfigured though this was in the Koine by the intervening centuries of Hellenistic usage” (1993, 3).

As a logical, practical consequence of this convergence, “...every attempt to translate the *New Testament* into any of almost two thousand languages – including a Semitic language such as Syriac, despite all its affinities with Hebrew and Aramaic – has, on encountering any term, been obliged to consider above all its previous career in the history of the Greek language; and that was a problem of natural theology no less than a problem of philology,” Pelikan points out (1993, 3).

“Continuity in the transmission of teaching was very important,” and “apostolic succession consisted primarily in a dialogue with the saints, in which living tradition and episcopal power were transmitted from generation to generation,” Paul Gavrilyuc also states (2018, 70). In this regard, Gavrilyuc brings to the fore the example of Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, who, as a child, listened to the sermons of Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 69-155), later claiming that the teachings he received from eyewitnesses of the Word he inscribed “not on paper but in his heart.” Similarly, of Papias, bishop of Hieropolis (c. 60-130), Gavrilyuc points out that teachings from books did not have the same value for him as living and steadfast oral testimony (Gavrilyuc 2018, 70).

Some dispute a certain pre-eminence of orality over scripturality in Christianity. Vasile Florescu, in his book *Rhetoric and Neo-rhetoric* (1973) starts from the Pauline verse 1Cor 4:6 – “I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, «Nothing beyond what is written,» so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another” – and

thinks that in Christianity the importance given to scripturality reveals a real “Gutenberg galaxy” *avant la lettre*: “The importance of Scripture led to the cult of the book as an object. Even those who could not read kept books in their homes or on their person as amulets capable of protecting them from evil” (90). This Christian emphasis on the written word would have led to the common use of the topos “book as a symbol”: “In the Middle Ages, the Church often condemned the taste for the luxurious book – expensive calligraphy and highly artistic miniature illustrations – as a sin, because it showed a preference for the book as an object, not for the teachings contained in it. Hence the frequency of Curtius’ topos of the «book as a symbol»” (Florescu 1973, 90).

In *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (2008), Margaret Mitchell, citing several authors, shows that in the interval between Jesus’ death (c. 30 AD) and the writing of the first gospel, the one after Mark around 70 AD, the sayings of Jesus, like those of the early Christian saints and philosophers, were memorised, translated into Greek, retold, revised and recast in common forms as *chreiai* (also termed aphorisms, oral histories and *apophthegmata*), *parables*, *logia* (sayings), *apokalypseis* (revelations), *prophecies*, *macarisms*, woes and *gnomai* (maxims). A similar process occurred with the Jesus narratives and miracle narratives. Gradually, this process led to the development and collection of written material, sometimes in typologies (kingdom parables, cultic teachings, church order instructions, wisdom sayings, miracle stories), sometimes in more voluminous series arranged by keywords or thematic correlations (179). There were also times when orality and scripturality in Christian settings coexisted, with roughly equal importance; Koester notes the case of the “Lord’s Meal” tradition, which circulated for a time in both forms (quoted by Mitchell 2008, 180).

In any case, Margaret Mitchell’s analysis emphasizes the quite rapid transition from orality to scripturality in the early Christian setting, one argument being that after the passage of the first generation, there was a fear that with the death of the original eyewitnesses, important testimonies might be lost (2008, 180). Biblical quotations such as Jn 19:35 and Jn 21:24 seem to reinforce these assumptions. Mitchell goes on to set out a multitude of factors that shaped early Christian literary activity: The model of the Septuagint as a “sacred text”; the reading and interpretation of Scripture in synagogue worship, which served as a model for Christian practice; the geographical spread of missionary communities, which had to remain in communion in the face of challenges from outsiders (Gentiles and Jews), which required an organized and coherent response; the rapidity with which internal

community debates on praxis and faith arose, requiring decisions to be taken and attempts to achieve uniformity and universality through the writing and rewriting of texts; the increasing complexity of the hermeneutical tasks of self-definition and theological expression required for the new religious movement which was oddly situated on the axis of the preceding Jewish and Greco-Roman religious traditions; the remarkable literary skills of some key early leaders who made texts an effective vehicle for later Christian discourse (2008, 180-181).

The central figure in this transition of Christianity to textual traditions, according to *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, would be Paul, whose abridged version of the Gospel, of the “Good News”, has “the Scriptures” as its source from the very beginning: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the scriptures*, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the scriptures*” (1Cor 15:3-4). Not coincidentally, the earliest Christian text in Latin (ca. 180 AD) contains a North African Christian’s interrogation in which Paul’s “books and letters” are mentioned: Saturninus the proconsul said, «what are those things in your case?» Speratus replied, «books and letters of Paul, a just man»” (*M. Scil.* 12 quoted by Mitchell 2008, 177).

4. Concluding thoughts

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, with a few exceptions of limited and particular periods, divine revelation turns out to be rather “verbalizable, definable, transmittable in words”, as Ică Jr. (2008, 206) states. Any reader of the Bible, whether knowledgeable or not, will understand this from the first lines of the first chapter (*Genesis*) where it says that “...God said... and it was so.” And again in the last words of the last chapter (*The Revelation to John – Apocalypse*) which refer to the oral testimony – “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book,” “The one who testifies to these things says,” the importance of the divine words, which always precedes or follows (sometimes both) an important divine action for humanity, is stressed (Stăniloae 2005, 14). In the case of the *New Testament*, it is replete with references to the fact that Christian preaching has always been primarily oral.

It can be said also with certain caveats that a later branch of Christians, namely Protestants and neo-Protestants – followers of the “Sola Scriptura” principle – are “people of the book.” As far as the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church are concerned,

they have never absolutized Scripture (Pîrvuloiu 2009, 195), but have permanently linked it to the Tradition. From a rhetorical perspective, about Aristotelian means of persuasion, the claim about Christianity as a “religion of the book” is valid in the case of the pastoral *logos*, where biblical quotations help the discourse “by showing or seeming to show something” (*Rhetoric*, 1.2.1356a3).

I consider the words of John Chrysostom in the opening of *Homily I to the Gospel according to St. Matthew* to be indicative of the Judeo-Christian perspective on the rapport between *verba* and *scripta*. According to the Chrysostomic passage, God always prefers orality as the first form of communication with humans:

„It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit. But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course. For that the former was better, God hath made manifest, both by His words, and by His doings. Since unto Noah, and unto Abraham, and unto his offspring, and unto Job, and unto Moses too, *He discoursed not by writings, but Himself by Himself*, finding their mind pure. But after the whole people of the Hebrews had fallen into the very pit of wickedness, then and thereafter was a written word, and tables, and the admonition which is given by these. And this one may perceive was the case, not of the saints in the *Old Testament* only, but also of those in the *New*. For neither to the apostles did God give anything in writing, but instead of written words He promised that He would give them the grace of the Spirit: for «He,» saith our Lord, «shall bring all things to your remembrance»” (1996, 32-33).

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