**THE "STRANGER" IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW ΙN THE LIGHT OF THE GREEK TRADITION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*Workshop in Athens, 2023,* Sunday, May 28th

**INTRODUCTION**

The subject of this presentation is the contribution of the Gospel of Matthew in dealing not just with the stranger but with the barbarian. It should be noted that this Gospel is the most popular in the Christian community and played a crucial role in the formation of the identity of Christianity.

To achieve our goal, we will focus on characteristic passages of the Gospel, the treatment of the foreigner -ΧΕΝΟΣ as opposed to the barbarian in the Roman Empire, and how New Rome ultimately addressed the "foreigner-barbarian" dichotomy in texts of worship popular to this day.

**1. Matthew as the “Gospel of the Immigrant”**

We have unique references to the stranger at the beginning, middle, and end of the Matthew’s biography of Lord Jesus, projected as Emmanuel and the suffering servant of Isaiah.

**a**. Ruth appears in the 42 forebears of Jesus, specifically in the first fourteen, portrayed as the stranger (par excellence) in the relevant book and Judaism as a whole. The tree itself ascends to Abraham, the converts’ father, and archetype of the traveling Jew.

**b.** As a newborn, Jesus is presented as a refugee in Egypt, the most important country of asylum in the Bible.

**c.** A foreigner who struggles with Christ for the cure of her daughter also dominates the heart of the Gospel: The Canaanite lady from what is now Lebanon.

**d.** The Messiah is uniquely connected with the stranger, as with the prisoner, in the ultimate story of the Gospel, which applies to all nations. **“For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in**”. **(25:35)**

**e. Using a unique form of dramatic irony, the blood of Emmanuel, which, as only Matthew emphasizes, is poured for the remission of sins, becomes a means of burial for the strangers: “The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood". And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers.**”. **(27:6-7)**

**It becomes apparent that Matthew is the Gospel of the Stranger and even the Refugee, addressed most likely directed towards Jews, who were compelled to undergo trauma since they become refugees in Antioch, a cosmopolitan city, under dreadful conditions, following the fall of their Holy City to the Romans in 70 A.D. In their new “home”, they were also excluded from the synagogue, which served as a multi-purpose center for Diaspora Jews, because they believed in a crucified Messiah. But how did the Pax Romana feel about immigrants and barbarians?**

**2. The Stranger / Foreigner and the Barbarian in the Pax Romana**

We are aware that Christianity was born and perfected when, for the first time in the history of humanity, there was Peace (at least on a political level) and Early Globalization conditions. The listener's first impression is that, following Alexander's openness to foreigners, there is no longer a distinction between strangers and barbarians in the Mediterranean, but all humans flow equally across the internet of our roadways and our Sea. However, as the following reasons demonstrate, this is not the case:

**a.** As the tragedies about *“The Suppliants”*[[2]](#footnote-2) demonstrate, this privilege of philoxenia was mainly reserved for people who could prove common descent or some kind of kinship.

**b.** “The greatest example of Hellenistic Greek sculpture, the colossal Altar of Zeus at Pergamon”, glorifies the triumph of the barbarian. He is typically originating from the exotic East, having unusual features and an incomprehensible non-Greek voice.

**c.** The gift of foreignness and hospitality is distinct from the devaluation of the barbarian element in both ancient Hellenistic novel and in Philo.

**d.** Undoubtedly, the fact that Jews found themselves strangers in Egypt is a necessary component of their identity. However, this does not imply openness to every "barbarian" person or nation. Compare the Hellenistic and Jewish prayer formulae, in which the Greek man thanks fate for not making him **an animal, a woman** (gunh,) **or a barbarian** (cf. Diogenes Laertios 1:33) or where the Jewish man thanks God for not creating him **as a gentile** (gōj or nokri), **a woman** ('išāh) or **an ignorant man** (bōr; variant: as a slave / ‛aebaed), i.e. as a "Torah alien" (cf. tBer 7:18; pBer 9:13b,48; bMen 43b).

**The Christian Movement established a new treatment of the stranger by identifying the Messiah not only as a foreigner and an immigrant, but also as a refugee and a prisoner and by projecting Him as the brutal killed - Crucified Messiah. Already in Matthew, the Christian community in multicultural Antioch is portrayed as a "new nation" (21:43), one that, unlike the other Pax Romana nations, is not rooted in antiquity and mythical ancestors, but shapes its identity through (1) a Crucified One, (2) the proclamation "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female;" (Gal 3:28 NAU) and (3) the future participation in Christ's Kingdom. Early Christians were self-conscious about being "parochial" and transitory.**

**c. The PARADOXON in the worship of the Eastern Church**

**Although the first Christian communities saw the face of the Crucified in every "other" person, regardless of whether he was a foreigner or a barbarian, in the worship of the Eastern Church the following paradox is propagated: in the 6th century, on the occasion of the wars against the Persians, the very popular hymn "Save, O Lord, the people [....] victorious over the kingdom against the barbarians" is established. On the other hand, on Holy Friday, when the Epitaph enters the Church, the very beautiful troparion "Give me this stranger" is sung to this day. After all, as the poet Kavafis says, perhaps human nature, after the fall, needs barbarians to form an identity.**

**Give me this stranger[[3]](#footnote-3)**

**Having seen the sun hiding its rays and the curtain of the temple torn apart, after the death of the Savior**

**Joseph (of Arimathea)**[**1**](https://lyricstranslate.com/en/dhos-moi-touton-ton-xenon-give-me-stranger.html#footnote1_s16wtzs) **came to Pilatus, and he is begging him with these words:**

**Give me this stranger, who has been a stranger since he was a baby.**

Give me this stranger, whom his compatriots, hating him, killed Him as if he was a stranger.

Give me this stranger, whose strange death surprises me.

Give me this stranger, who knew how to welcome poor people and strangers.

Give me this stranger, whom Jews, out of envy, estranged from this world.

Give me this stranger, so that I hide him in a tomb, since as a stranger he had no place where he could lay his head onto.

Give me this stranger, whom his Mother, having seen him dead, was moaning saying:

*" Oh, my Son and my God, even if my entrails are consumed by pain, even if my heart is shaking seeing you dead, I glorify you, hoping for your resurrection."*

And with these words, having convinced Pilatus, the revered man, he takes the body of the Savior, which he wraps with awe in a sheet and smears with perfume before laying it in the tomb.

**He, who has offered everyone eternal life and his great blessings.**

1. Organizing Committee (in alphabetical order) Dr. Despotis, Dr. Kefalea, Dr. Michailidis from University of Athens  and  Dr. Kotsovili from Simon Fraser University **British Columbia, Canada** [**https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o5K\_pToYVoKI3GmWZsUHwrdB6m2erL0d/edit**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o5K_pToYVoKI3GmWZsUHwrdB6m2erL0d/edit) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Gr: *“Hiketides”*; Lat: *“Supplices”*) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This poem is a revised version of the longer one written by Georgios Akropolitis, set to music by Germanos Neon Patron, about the permission Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate so that he would take away the dead body of Jesus and bury it after his Crucifixion: [https://lyricstranslate.com/en/dho%CC%81s-moi-tou%CC%81ton-ton-xe%CC%81n...](https://lyricstranslate.com/en/dho%CC%81s-moi-tou%CC%81ton-ton-xe%CC%81non-give-me-stranger.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)