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MATTHEW 23 - MATTHEAN COMMUNITY AND JUDAISM
A HISTORICAL, EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

PhD Thesis

SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

KEY-WORDS: *Matthew, Matthean Community, Moses chair, Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrisy, Judaism, grave, covenant, conflict, Gehenna, Israel, Jerusalem.*

This paper is entitled “Matthew 23 - Matthean Community and Judaism. A historical, exegetical and theological perspective” and aims to analyze the text of chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew from a historical, exegetical and theological perspective, starting from the historical and doctrinal coordinates of the Matthean Community. In New Testament research, chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew raised many questions: a) from the perspective of the paternity or affiliation of the text to the original text of the Gospel according to Matthew, b) from the perspective of the intention or purpose for which it was written, c) from the perspective of the historicity or authenticity of the text, d) from the perspective of the aspects related to the historical, religious, social (community) and cultural context that underlie the drafting of this text. Not coincidentally, theologian Robert K. McIver believes that the Gospel text in general sums up important details that reflect aspects of the environment and context in which the text appeared, and I believe that Chapter 23 is no exception to this premise. For this reason, I believe that a first approach to Chapter 23 must involve a thorough research on the community for which the Gospel according to Matthew was originally written, a community entitled by most biblical scholars with the title: *Matthean Community*.

Chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew has generated controversy over time due to the harsh and combative tone of the Savior Jesus Christ's speech to the religious leaders of Israel, targeting primarily the Scribes and Pharisees. The text of this chapter has been perceived over time in very different ways by scholars, but the general view is that this chapter is an indictment made by Jesus to the Scribes and Pharisees. This indictment is a culmination of the differences between Jesus and His disciples on the one hand, and the religious leaders of Israel on the other. The accusatory speech of Jesus in the Temple to the hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees marks a final rupture between these two sides, a rupture that will culminate in the Crucifixion of Jesus on the Cross of Golgotha.

The text of chapter 23 requires special attention in the context of the Gospel of Matthew from the perspective of the blatant contrast between the commandment to love one's neighbor expressed by the Savior Jesus Christ in Mt. 22, 39: "... Love your neighbor as yourself!", and the very serious accusations made by Jesus against the Scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23. This gap between the two totally contradictory messages or attitudes of the Savior Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Matthew, imposes the position of chapter 23 in the sphere of problematic texts that require a very careful approach. The most important questions regarding Matthew's chapter 23 that require a better elaborated answer refer to the origin of the text, the initial intention of the evangelist Matthew that was the basis for writing this chapter, the use of the text in the context of anti-Jewish controversies during the first two Christian centuries, the reflection of a conflicting situation facing the Matthean Judeo-Christian Community, the identification and explanation of the meanings of the terms and expressions used by the evangelist in this chapter, and, last but not least, the identification of current theological resonances of this chapter.

From another perspective, chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew, although portraying the Scribes and Pharisees, is also a suggestive image of the Savior Jesus Christ from the perspective of his moral authority and teaching dignity. The accusations against the Scribes and Pharisees concern first of all their attitude towards the Torah, towards the Mosaic Law. The term ὑποκριτής, used repeatedly by the evangelist in this chapter, sums up and expresses the superficial attitude of Jewish religious leaders toward the Law. Their superficiality consists in the obsessive attention to fulfill the precepts of the Law only in order to build an impeccable external image, neglecting the gap between the impeccable exterior and the lack of their inner substance. The inner substance or consistency of man is given by the correlation between intention and deed, but the method of the Scribes and Pharisees is that "they say, but they do not." (Matt. 23: 3) Moreover, their superficiality in fulfilling the teachings of the Law is doubled by their teaching about the Law, a teaching that distorts or perverts the authentic meaning of the Law, a human teaching that contradicts God's will. (cf. Matt. 23: 13-33). However, after the moment when Jesus warns His disciples to beware of the "dough of the Pharisees," that is, of their teaching (cf. Matt. 16: 12), in Matt. 23: 3 the same Savior Jesus Christ urges them to keep and fulfill all that is said by the Scribes and Pharisees. This contradiction of the Matthew's Gospel text, as well as other apparent inconsistencies, raised issues regarding the composition of the text of Chapter 23 and the

proportion of the influence of the historical context on the Gospel text at the time it was written by the evangelist.

In the field of current New Testament research, the 23rd chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew has a special importance due to its entire historical and theological load. Researcher David E. Garland, as well as other biblical scholars, believe that the nature of the controversy set forth in Chapter 23 can only be correctly explained by a thorough investigation of the historical context in which the Gospel text was born. However, the question of the historical context, the historicity of the Matthew evangelical text, the sources used by the evangelist to write The First Gospel, as well as the issues related to the authorship of Chapter 23 and its position in the First Gospel, remain issues that are still debated, and they still don't have fully satisfactory answers.

The text of chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew remains a captivating but also delicate subject in view of the fact that it is perceived as a deeply anti-Jewish text. What is certain is that this text represents the image of the conflict between the first Christian communities and the Jewish society that rejected Jesus. The recipients of the Gospel according to Matthew are the members of a Judeo-Christian Community that had not yet detached itself from the Jewish synagogue cult, a community that fulfilled the precepts of the Old Law through the spectrum of the teachings of the Savior Jesus Christ. This opposition between the two communities, the minority Christian-Jewish, and the majority Judaism, translates into a conflict that will result in a rupture and a final delimitation of Christians from the Jewish society. However, the researcher Ulrich Luz considers that if we consider the general message of the teaching of the Savior Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, that of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God by fulfilling the evangelical command to love enemies, then the so insensitive words of chapter 23 shouldn't be found in the contents of the First Gospel. Ulrich Luz considers that the message of God's love and the message of destructive judgment are two sides of Jesus' sermon that do not seem to reconcile in any way in the Gospel of Matthew.

All these considerations set out above led me to structure this paper into four major chapters, as follows:

1. Preliminaries
2. The Matthean Community - a historical perspective

3. Matthew 23 - the exegetical dimension of the chapter
4. Theology of chapter 23 - eschatological relevance

At the end of the paper I presented the results of the entire research approach in the chapter named "Final conclusions" followed by the mention of the bibliographic titles used, titles included in the "Bibliography" section.

1. The first chapter of this paper is entitled "Preliminaries" and in it we addressed issues related to the importance of the chosen topic, the current state of research, and issues related to the research methodology I have adopted and the objectives I set out to reach them at the end of my research. The chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew represents a subject that has been little explored in New Testament research in the field of Romanian Orthodoxy. For this reason, I approached this topic orienting myself according to three major coordinates: the historical, the exegetical and the theological coordinates. I consider that research into the historical context in which the text of Chapter 23 was drafted is of major importance because the text reveals the delicate situation of the Matthean Community in relation to the majority Jewish community from which it delimits itself.

Regarding the current stage of research on the topic of chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew, we can say that in the Romanian New Testament Theology, in addition to the biblical commentary of Father Professor Vasile Gheorghiu, *Sf. Evanghelie după Mateiu cu comentariu, vol. I-III*, Cernăuți, 1933, we also find the approach of this theme in works such as: Arhim. Iuliu Scriban, *Tâlcuirea Sf. Evanghelii*, Chișinău, 1931; Stelian Tofană, *Introducere în Studiul Noului Testament. Volumul II. Evangheliile după Matei și Marcu, Documentul Quelle*, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2002; Vasile Mihoc, *Introducere în Noul Testament*, vol. I, De. Teofania, Sibiu, 2001, or Constantin Coman, *Evanghelia după Matei*, Suport de curs pentru Studiul Noului Testament, published online at the web page: https://www.academia.edu/5192403/Coman_Constantin_Evanghelia_dupa_Matei. A recent work in the field of Romanian New Testament research, which has as its subject chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew, is that of George Cosmin Piț, entitled „*Vai vouă cărturarilor și fariseilor fățarnici!*” *O perspectivă istorică, literară, și exegetic-teologică asupra textului din Matei 23*. The main feature of this PhD thesis is to treat the discourse of "woe!" from the perspective of curses, but also from the perspective of exorcisms. Of course, the work explores many aspects of the Matthew evangelical

text, being a complex work with many ramifications in various spheres of theology such as Liturgical Theology or Orthodox Spirituality. However, in his work, the author omits the treatment of the eschatological resonances that the text of Matthew 23 chapter entails, this being one of the main themes of this paper.

In the international community of New Testament research, there is a much richer literature that deals with various aspects of the text of chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew. I will mention only a few works, which I consider the most important, the best documented, and the most relevant in terms of dealing with chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew:

- Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, Ed. Fortress Press, Mineapolis, 2005.
- Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.
- David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23*, Ed. E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1979.
- Kenneth G.C. Newport, *The Sources and Sitz im Leben of Matthew 23*, Ed. Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1995.
- David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism. The History and Social Settings of the Matthean Community*, Ed. T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1998.
- David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic eschatology in the gospel of Matthew*, Ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996;
- John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Ed. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005;
- R.T. France, *Matthew – Evangelist and Teacher*, Ed. The Paternoster Press, Marea Britanie, 1989;
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Matthew 14-28*, editat de Manlio Simonetti, Ed. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2002;
- W.D. Davies, Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Ed. T&T Clark International, London – New York, 1988;

- Michael Douglas Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*, Ed. Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, USA, 2004;
- H. Benedict Green, *The Gospel according to Matthew in the revised standard version*, Ed. Oxford University Press, U.K. 1975.
- Roger Amos, *Hypocrites or Heroes? The Paradoxical Portrayal of the Pharisees in the New Testament*, Ed. Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2015;
- Mary Marshall, *The Portrayals of the Pharisees in the Gospels and Acts*, Ed. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen / Bristol, 2015.

Regarding the research methodology of chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew, I considered that the first direction of research should focus on the sources and historical context during the writing of the Gospel of Matthew and I focused mainly on the Matthean Community. The second piece of research I followed was to analyze the text of Chapter 23 from an exegetical perspective, trying to identify the connections between the Gospel text and the landmark events in the history of the Matthean Community. The third orientation approached during the research aimed at the theological notions outlined in the text of chapter 23, emphasizing especially the eschatological relevance of this chapter.

The proposed objectives are distinct for each research coordinate. Thus, the objectives of the Matthean Community research are as follows:

- a. the chronologically and geographically location of the Matthean Community;
- b. shaping an image of the Matthean Community from the text of the Gospel according to Matthew;
- c. outlining the way in which Matthew the evangelist reports to the Judeo-Christian community to which he addresses his evangelical writing;
- d. analyzing the way in which the Matthean Community reports to Judaism and especially to the Old Law;
- e. identifying the sectarian elements of the Matthean Community in relation to Judaism;

f. examining the dissensions and conflict between the Matthean Community and the majority Jewish community represented by Jewish religious leaders.

g. presenting the Scribes and Pharisees in the context of the Gospel of Matthew;

The second part of this paper is dedicated to the exegesis of the Gospel text that composes chapter 23. In this section we propose the following objectives:

a. Analysis of the origin and compositional theories of Chapter 23

b. analyzing the structure of chapter 23;

c. the exegetical analysis of the text of chapter 23

The third part of this paper is dedicated to the theological aspects of chapter 23 with special emphasis on highlighting the eschatological resonance of the gospel text that composes the chapter 23. In fact, the eschatological relevance of Matthew 23 is the innovative goal of this paper. In this final section I set myself the following objectives:

a. highlighting a Matthew's eschatological terminology;

b. highlighting the Matthean eschatological context in which Chapter 23 is situated;

c. highlighting the eschatological perspectives of chapter 23 by analyzing terms or phrases with an obvious or indirect eschatological resonance.

2. In the second chapter of this paper we have turned our attention to the Matthean Community. Most recent studies that have focused on researching the social, historical, religious and cultural context in which the Matthean Community was formed, start from a first premise, that of the growing conflict between the Judeo-Christian community of Matthew the Evangelist and the Jewish world. This state of conflict is manifested by the divergent attitude of the Matthean Community towards the great Jewish community from which it broke away, and the Matthew evangelical text perceived in its entirety represents the identity manifesto of the Matthew Jewish-Christian community.

The critical and defamatory attitude towards the religious leaders of Israel and then towards the entire Jewish world can be understood as a consequence of the excommunication of Christians from the Jewish cult, of their expulsion from the synagogue, but the main motivation for this drastic

attitude must be sought in the way of reporting of the members of the Matthean Community to the Savior Jesus Christ on the one hand, and how the Jews related to the Person of the Savior Jesus Christ, on the other. If for the Christians Jesus is the Messiah, the One who embodies all the Old Testament prophecies (cf. Matt. 11: 4-6, Isa. 29:18; 35: 5-6; 42:18; 61: 1), for the leaders and religious exponents of Israel Jesus is seen as the great blasphemer (cf. Mt 26:65) and the one who works with the "lord of demons" (cf. Mt 9:34). The Person of the Savior Jesus Christ and His Teaching represents that "corner stone" (cf. Mt 21:42) which was not taken into account by the workers and it was He who came to represent the cause of the collapse of the whole edifice or to lead to the irremediable fracture between Judaism and the Matthean Community. Referring to the Matthew evangelical pericope that constitutes chapter 23, we can say that it clearly evokes this reality of the painful rupture and the drastic delimitation between the Matthean Community and Judaism. Moreover, this text seems to be an exposition of the conflicting apogee between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, an apogee that led abruptly to the Crucifixion of Jesus by them.

Also, in the second chapter we analyzed the issue of the location of the Matthew Community, most opinions indicating the Antioch of Syria. Another important aspect that defines the Matthean Community is its relationship to the majority Jewish community. The most important aspects that lead to a clear delimitation of the Matthean Community towards Judaism are related to the attitude towards the Old Law, Judeo-Christians being faithful to the teaching of the Savior Jesus Christ in this regard and entering into open conflict with the representatives of Judaism. The Matthean Community is perceived as a sectarian community that conceives of Judaism as a bankrupt religion in light of the fact that they did not receive Jesus as Christ the Messiah. The conflict will lead to a drastic rupture and a final detachment of Judeo-Christians from the synagogue cult by introducing into the daily worship the nineteenth blessing, entitled *birkat haminim* or blessing against heretics or apostates. Although some voices still argue that this curse-prayer does not necessarily target Christians, we do believe that it was introduced into the daily synagogue worship precisely to drive Christians away.

3. In the third chapter of this paper, we paid special attention to the text of Chapter 23. In the first part of the chapter we pointed out some isagogic aspects, starting from the issue of paternity of the Gospel according to Matthew. The text of chapter 23 had a strong echo both in the Matthean Community and in other Christian communities where the Gospel according to Matthew

was received, an edifying example in this regard being the Greek parchment of Oxyrhinchos - Al Bahnasa. This parchment appears to be a small section of a larger document and the text it contains appears to be an evangelical text, probably from an apocryphal gospel. The connection between the Greek parchment from Oxyrhinchos and chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew is given by the obvious similarities in the theme treated in both texts, hypocrisy, and the style of the writing. The two texts have obvious similarities and can be seen as a mirror of the period of crystallization of Christian communities and the continuing tensions between Christian-Jews and representatives of the Pharisaic Judaism. At the same time, both the text of Oxyrhynchos 840 and the other non-canonical Christian-Jewish evangelical writings mentioned in the paper denote that the Gospel according to Matthew is a writing with a strong influence and authority for both early Christian and contemporary Christianity.

In the second part of this chapter we analyzed the text of chapter 23 from an exegetical perspective, emphasizing and explaining certain key terms in the text. I noticed a double target of the discourse of the Savior Jesus Christ in chapter 23: the first target is represented by the Scribes and hypocritical Pharisees, this being the obvious target. The second target is represented by the disciples of Jesus, who will become the religious leaders of the Church, the accusatory words of Jesus in chapter 23 representing a warning to His disciples. The text of chapter 23 has many concordances with Old Testament texts because the mode of Matthew's exposition has an obvious Jewish specificity.

The text of chapter 23 exposes the accusatory discourse of the Savior Jesus Christ against the Scribes and hypocritical Pharisees, but chapter 23 represents both the image of the tense situation between the members of the Matthean Community and those of the majority Jewish community. Chapter 23 is an image of the Matthean Community that, through the voice of Jesus and His teaching, instills the hostile attitude of the religious leaders of Israel, who rejected the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew's evangelical view, the Scribes and the Pharisees are fully guilty of the inability of the entire People of Israel to perceive Jesus as the Messiah, the Redeemer prophesied in the Old Testament. This guilt is amplified by the fact that the Pharisees and hypocritical Scribes condemned by Jesus are the generation over which comes all the innocent blood shed by Israel, their parents. Their condemnation, that of Jerusalem, and of all Israel, cannot be avoided. The last part of chapter 23, v. 32-39, opens the eschatological perspective of the final

condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees who are not only hypocrites, but are murderers like their parents, or even more so than them by the fact that they are the ones who crucify the Messiah, not a prophet or a divine messenger.

4. In the fourth chapter we analyzed the theological notions that are highlighted in the text of chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew, the main concern being to emphasize the eschatological relevance of the gospel text of this chapter. For this, we have analyzed the eschatological resonance of certain terms used by the evangelist in this chapter, terms or phrases that are intended to inaugurate a perspective of interpreting Chapter 23 in the coordinates of Matthew's eschatology. The evangelist Matthew uses a few "key words" throughout chapter 23, words or phrases used in other parts of the First Gospel, and which indicate certain theological ideas or visions that the evangelist is targeting. For example, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is used throughout the First Gospel to designate the Kingdom of God that will be established following the Final Judgment that the Son of Man will perform with all mankind. In the Gospel of Matthew, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" has an obvious eschatological value and significance. Thus, the use of this phrase by the evangelist in Mt. 23, 13, the first "woe!" from the discourse of the "woe!" moreover, it is a stumbling block for other people, for the proselytes they make, closing their access to the kingdom of heaven. Their fate will be "the condemnation of hell" (Matt. 23:33). Thus, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" has an obvious eschatological meaning in the vision of the evangelist Matthew.

In the vision of the evangelist Matthew, hypocrisy is not a simple sin of the Scribes and the Pharisees, but it is the main cause of all the sins they are accused of, hypocrisy being the expression of the corruption of human conscience. Also, their hypocrisy is the expression of the distortion of their relationship with God and is the main cause of the haste of divine judgment. In Matthew's conception, hypocrisy is synonymous with lawlessness. (cf. Mt. 23, 28) Therefore, the meaning with which the term ὑποκριτής is used in chapter 23 indicates an eschatological perspective that cannot be denied or overlooked.

The discourse of the "woe!" is constructed by Matthew according to the Old Testament prophetic patterns, using the interjection οὐαὶ in order to delimit, mark and introduce texts (sentences) that indicate the eschatological reality of the eternal condemnation of those who are enemies of God. For Matthew, the Scribes and the Pharisees are not only forgers of the faith, but

are "sons of gehenna." (Mt. 23, 15). In other words, the "woe!" discourse (Matt. 23: 13-33) can be perceived as a discourse with resonances or eschatological echoes.

Newport's brief but analytical commentary and highlighting the connections between chapter 23 and other chapters or sections of the Gospel according to Matthew emphasize that the text of chapter 23 can only be perceived and understood in the context of the Gospel section of Mt. 21-25. Moreover, Newport notices the evangelist's obvious intention to imprint an eschatological substratum on the entire Chapter 23 by adding the last three verses of the chapter. Of course, the entire section Mt. 23, 32-39 has an eschatological resonance. Newport notices that the same intervention meant to change the meaning of the first part of the text and to give it an eschatological resonance, is also found in the parable of the tares in the country (Mt. 13, 24-30), where the explanation of the parable (Mt. 13, 36- 43) represents this eschatological addition, in the parable of the net (Mt. 13, 47-50), where verse. 49-50 seem to represent the eschatological key explanation of the parable, and in the parable of the king's son's wedding (Matt. 22: 1-14), where verses 11-14 seem to represent the addition that gives an obvious eschatological significance to the parable. From this perspective, Newport argues that we cannot completely rule out the hypothesis that Mt. 23, 32-39 to represent an addition with strong eschatological significance that would have the purpose of impregnating the entire previous discourse (Mt. 23, 2-31) with an eschatological significance. In my opinion, the last section of chapter 23 does nothing but confirm what had already been announced in Mt. 23, 13 or earlier, in Mt. 23, 3, because in the vision of the evangelist Matthew, the criterion of separating the righteous from the wicked is represented by the good deeds which means the concretization of the faith (cf. Mt. 25, 31-46).

5. In the last chapter of this paper we have pointed out the results of the research undertaken on chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew. The final conclusion is that the text of Chapter 23 must be perceived as having three levels of understanding or interpretation. A first level of interpretation concerns the historicity of the text, which means the fact that the text of chapter 23 evokes not only the harsh indictment that Jesus utters in the Temple to the hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees, but also brings to the fore the tense situation facing the Matthean Community in relation to the majority Jewish community. The second level of interpretation of chapter 23 concerns the parenthetical intention expected by the evangelist Matthew by portraying in very unfavorable light the Scribes and Pharisees as profoundly negative examples for members of the Matthew

community but also for the religious leaders of the Church, who should not run after titles of worldly glory but to consider all brothers in Christ (cf. Mt. 23: 8-12). The third level of interpretation of chapter 23 concerns the eschatological substratum printed by the evangelist by his way of using certain terms with eschatological connotation and by the way he composed chapter 23. I think that this last interpretive dimension of chapter 23 has the greater impact on the reader and arouses in the depths of his being the desire not to be counted in the "harvest time" with the tares (Mt. 13, 30) or with those left to the Son of Man at the Last Judgment (cf. Mt. 25). , 41). I also believe that the eschatological relevance of chapter 23 should not be neglected in any way during the Bible study as well as in the homiletical or catechetical exposition of this passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, because the eschatological echo of the text denotes its universality and revealed character.

Most modern biblical commentaries in the Protestant sphere make no reference to the revealed or inspired character of the biblical text. If we glimpse the work of the Holy Spirit beyond the lines of Scripture, then we will understand that the evangelist Matthew's attempt to write the gospel that bears his name is not accidental, just as none of the words in chapter 23 are accidental. 23 leads to the glimpse of the eschatological horizon. An example in this sense is the remark of St. Hilary of Poitiers regarding the first "woe!" from the discourse of "woe!", which says that the interjection "woe!" it is a voice of mourning or lamentation (it has an eschatological echo). For this reason the Savior says that they (the Pharisees and the Scribes) lock up the kingdom of heaven, because they hide (conceal) in the Law the consolation that comes through His truth. They have lost the horizon of the prophetic Advent. Through perverted teachings, the Scribes and Pharisees do not allow others to gain the kingdom of heaven. They do not prepare for anyone the way of eternity. (Cf. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Matthew 14-28 ..., p. 171.)

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