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A Further Note on the Ancestry of Caravaggio's First *Saint Matthew*

Irving Lavin

In an article published some years ago dealing with Caravaggio's two altarpieces of the Evangelist Matthew for the Contarelli Chapel in S. Luigi dei Francesi, I assumed, as had earlier commentators on the subject, that the first picture was without precedent in showing the Evangelist writing Hebrew, rather than Greek or Latin.¹ This peculiarity was based on a patristic tradition that the Jewish tax collector Levi had written his Gospel in the language of his people after his conversion. I noted that Caravaggio copied the earlier of two Hebrew texts of Matthew rediscovered and published in the sixteenth century (1537, 1555).

The fact is, however, that Caravaggio was not the first artist to refer to this tradition concerning Matthew. The Antwerp painter Frans Pourbus the Elder had done something similar a quarter century before, in a panel in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, signed and dated 1573 (Figs. 1-2).² To be exact, Pourbus's Matthew uses Hebrew letters but writes Aramaic, an early form of Syriac that was indeed the dialect of the Holy Land at the time of Christ.³ Pourbus followed a Syriac version of the New Testament known as the *Peschitta* that had been published in two editions, both major achievements of the great florescence of Oriental scholarship in Northern Europe at this period.⁴ The *editio princeps* was printed at Vienna in 1555 using specially made Syriac characters. The *Peschitta* was next published at Geneva in 1569, except that, for want of Syriac characters, Hebrew type was used. What Pourbus had before him, no doubt, was this text as reprinted in 1571 in Volume v of the monumental polyglot Bible issued at Antwerp in the years immediately preceding his own work, 1569-1572 (Fig. 3).⁵ Since the *Peschitta* was thought to be the earliest extant version of the New Testament, Pourbus must have considered it more authen-

tic than the actual Hebrew texts, which were based on late and widely divergent manuscripts. Caravaggio, instead, preferred his Evangelist to use the ancestral language of the Jews, and followed the version that tended to corroborate Catholic teaching (Erasmus claimed that the first Gospel had been written in the same language as the other three).

Both artists' Evangelists have completed verse 1 and part of verse 2, but with important differences.

Pourbus:

- (1) [The book] of the generations of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.
- (2) Abraham begat Isaac; Isaac begat Jacob; Jacob begat Judah [and his bretheren.]

Caravaggio:

- (1) The book of the generations of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.
- (2) Abraham begat

Pourbus's Matthew omits the opening word (to be imagined as a decorated incipit on the verso of the folio?) and pauses, for no apparent reason, between Judah and his brothers. Caravaggio's scribe began at the beginning and is in the midst of forming the very word through which the seed of the first generation of Christ's ancestors gives rise to the second.

It is curious that other qualities of Pourbus's picture, notably the affectionate angel, also seem echoed in that of Caravaggio. Nothing is known of the origin of the Flemish panel, but one cannot exclude the possibility that Caravaggio had at least an indirect knowledge of its innovative character.⁶ Frans Pourbus the Younger brought many of his father's ideas with him when he emigrated to Italy in 1600, two years before Caravaggio's first *Saint Matthew*, and was appointed court painter at Mantua.⁷

¹ "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two *Saint Matthews*," *Art Bulletin*, LVI, 1974, 59-81; also, "Addenda to 'Divine Inspiration,'" *ibid.*, 590-91.

² 1.87 × 1.33m. From the Baillie Collection at Antwerp; acquired in 1862 from Étienne Le Roy. Édouard L. F. Fétis, *Catalogue descriptif et historique du Musée Royal de Belgique (Bruxelles)*, Brussels, 1882, 410f., No. 388; *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique. Catalogue de la peinture ancienne*, Brussels, 1953, 105, No. 360; Giorgio T. Faggini, *La pittura ad Anversa nel cinquecento*, Florence, 1968, 57, 63, ill. p. 267. (I owe this last reference to M. Philippe Roberts-Jones.) No one seems to have commented on Matthew's text.

³ For their help in deciphering and identifying the text, I am indebted to Professors Sholomo Goitein and Bruce Metzger.

⁴ See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament. Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations*, Oxford, 1977, 48ff.

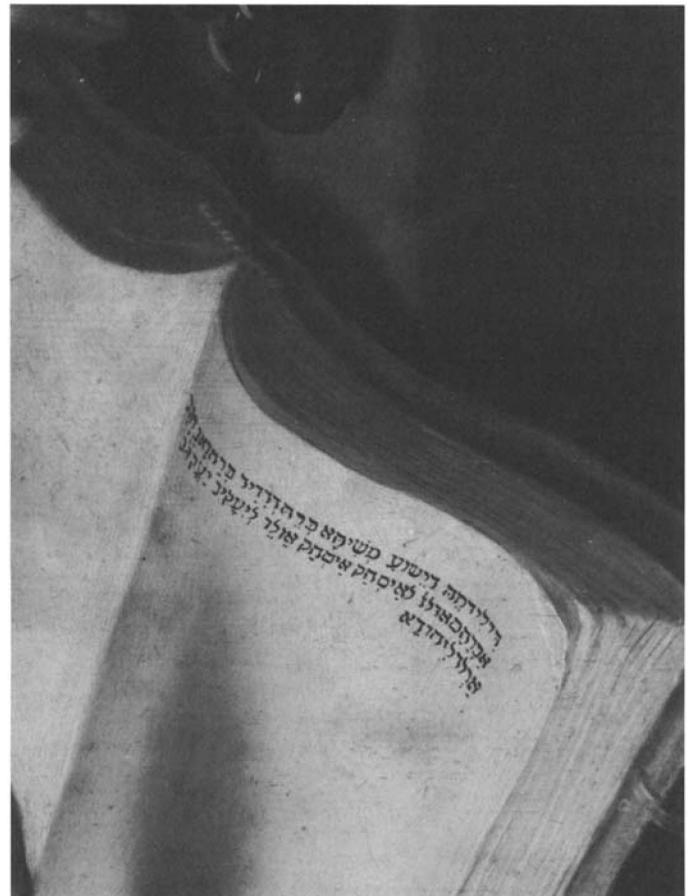
⁵ On these editions, see Thomas H. Darlow and Henry F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scriptures in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 2 vols., London, 1903-1911, II, 1528ff., 8f., 9ff. On the genesis of the Antwerp Polyglot, Colin Clair, *Christopher Plantin*, London, 1960, 57ff.

⁶ Professor C. Van de Velde has suggested, *in litteris*, that the picture may be identified with a *Saint Matthew* by Pourbus mentioned in an inventory of 1622 of an Antwerp collection (Jean Denucé, *Inventaire von Kunstsammlungen zu Antwerpen im 16. u. 17. Jahrhundert*, Antwerp, 1932, 33, also 237).

⁷ Cf. Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 37 vols., Leipzig, 1907-1950, xxvii, 315-19. A few years later, the younger Pourbus offered to negotiate for his patron the purchase of certain pictures by Caravaggio (Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, Princeton, 1955, 198f., 314).

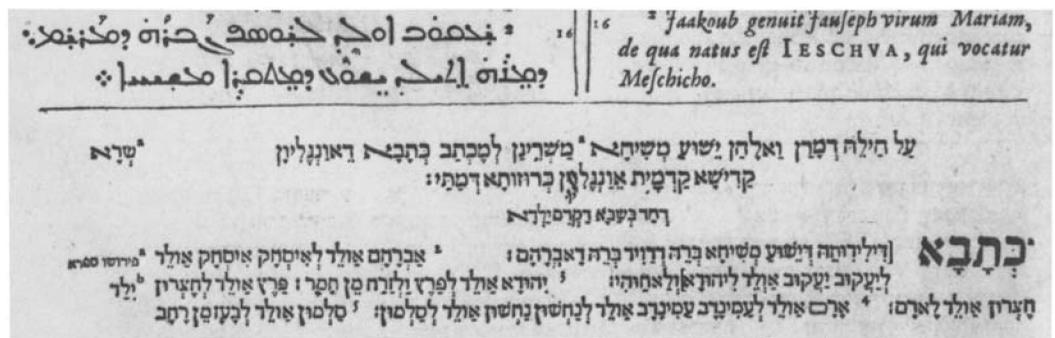


1 Frans Pourbus, *Saint Matthew Composing His Gospel*. Brussels, Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts



2 Detail of Fig. 1, turned 90 degrees

3 The opening verses of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Aramaic in Hebrew characters (from *Biblia Sacra Hebraice, Chaldaice, Graece, & Latine...*, 8 vols., Antwerp, 1569-1572, v, 2, detail). The section copied by Pourbus is enclosed in brackets.



In any case, it has become evident that there were at least three main antecedents for what might be called the Judeo-Christian aspects of Caravaggio's picture: the angel guiding the hand of an illiterate writer (Veronica da Binasco); the angel guiding the hand of an Evangelist as he records the Incarnation (Saint Luke portraying the Virgin and Child); and now an Evangelist Matthew who writes the genealogy of Christ in his native tongue. Surely

it was the association of Levi-Matthew with Socrates that conjured up Caravaggio's ironic image, in which all these ideas are implicit — the Evangelist through whose wise ignorance the first news of the fulfillment of the divine promise is mysteriously transmitted, in the Lord's own words.⁸

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⁸ I take this opportunity to provide some bibliographical addenda to the articles cited in n. 1 above: on the man responsible for the Hebrew version of Matthew published in 1555, Donald R. Kelley, "Jean du Tillet, Archivist and Antiquary," *Journal of Modern History*, xxxviii, 1966, 337-54; on Jan Gossaert's pictures of Saint Luke painting the Madonna,

E. De Jongh, "Speculaties over Jan Gossaerts Lucas-Madonna in Praag," *Bulletin Museum Boymans-van Beuningen*, xix, 1968, 42-61, and Wolfgang Krönig, "Gossaerts 'Lukas-Madonnen,'" *ibid.*, 62-72 (these last references kindly brought to my attention by Professor Keith Moxey).