

Matthew 23:33 – The Reptilian Image of the Pharisees as an Argument for the Demonic Origins of Hypocrisy

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Abstract:

This article aims to identify aspects of demonic possession in the hypocritical behaviour of the Pharisees, starting from the emphasis on “hypocrites” in Matthew’s passage and taking into account the severity of the Saviour’s critics in the eight “woes” in Matthew 23:13-33. In Matthew’s text, the Saviour reprehends (a technical term for exorcism) the Pharisees, in order to expel evil, the spirit of hypocrisy, which paralyzes their mind and heart, and prevents them from approaching the Messiah. We seek to demonstrate that hypocrisy is the devil’s influence which Christ wanted to hinder with unprecedented determination expressed in Matthew’s text through the excessive use of the expression “Woe to you!”.

Keywords:

Matthew 23, Pharisees, snakes, hypocrisy, demonic possession.

1. The Contribution of the Translation of the Greek Original: ὄφεις, γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν, πῶς φύγητε ἀπὸ τῆς κρίσεως τῆς γεέννης¹

Ὅφεις = snake, a malicious, shrewd person, especially Satan. The word from which it is derived, ὀπτάνομαι, contains the idea of high clarity, acuity of vision, fixed look, somebody with eyes wide open, as if they are looking at something remarkable (maybe a potential victim who can be hypnotized), a look which is thus

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¹ <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/poly/mat023.htm>>. 25. 10. 2014.

Revd. George Cosmin Piț

different from βλέπω, i.e. a merely voluntary observation and from εἶδω, which expresses the visual interest simply mechanically, passively or occasionally, while θεάομαι has a more intense accent, and θεωρέω means a serious and prolonged inspection, different from σκοπέω, which denotes watching from a distance. There is a strong antidote prayer in Orthodox liturgical practice for the evil eye, as bad influence over another person manifested through a mischievous, envious look. Matthew 23:33 becomes thus the biblical basis for the prayer against the evil eye („Remove, drive away and banish every diabolical activity, every satanic attack and every plot, evil curiosity and injury, and the evil eye of mischievous and wicked men from your servant”)².

γεννήματα = offspring, fruit, progeny, a new generation, survivors, descendants. From γεννάω, to procreate (a feature of the father, but means of the mother), to regenerate. γίνομαι is an extended and middle form of a primary verb: to come into being, to become (to be born).

ἐχιδνῶν = ἔχιδνα, viper or other venomous snake.

φύγητε = the verb φεύγω means to run away, to avoid something serious, to escape from a trap, by analogy, to vanish (so as not to be held liable). May the meaning of to make it through, once you got into trouble.

τῆς κρίσεως = condemnation, judgment. The term κρίσις emphasizes the ease with which one can deliberate, judgment given on a knife-edge, but after deliberation the gap between the two meanings widens; by extension, a court of law; the idea of justice (especially based on divine law), of accusation is also implied.

τῆς γεέννης = γέεννα, hell. The Valley of Hinnom (a foreign name, probably Jebusite); the Gehenna (or Gehinnom), a valley in Jerusalem, used (figuratively) as a name for the place (or state) of eternal punishment, the hell. גַּיְתָּה (gay‘ gay) is a mountain pass (with high sides, therefore very narrow, but not a trough). The idea conveyed is that the one who ends up in such a valley, does no longer have access to the surface, and is not likely to be freed from there. גִּבְוָה (gêvâh) means arrogance, hauteur, pride. תִּי (also Thi ‘ âh) is the primary root and designates a desire to mount something up; therefore, the desire to make something grow,

² *Prayer for the evil eye*, Cf. *Molitfelnic*, Tipărit cu aprobarea Sfântului Sinod, EIBMBOR, București, 2006, p. 379. A relevant excerpt: “Remove, drive away and banish every diabolical activity, every satanic attack and every plot, evil curiosity and injury, and the evil eye of mischievous and wicked men from your servant (Name); and whether it was brought about by beauty, or bravery, or happiness, or jealousy and envy, or evil eye, do you yourself, O Lord who love mankind, stretch out your mighty hand and your powerful and lofty arm, look down on this your creature and watch over him(her), and send him(her) an angel of peace, a mighty guardian of soul and body, who will rebuke and banish from him (her) every wicked intention, every spell and evil eye of destructive and envious men...”

Matthew 23:33 – The Reptilian Image of the Pharisees

(figuratively) to be majestic, glorious, triumphant, and high. This root somewhat concludes the explanation. Gehenna is a place for those who proclaim themselves triumphant before the end of the fight, before the ruling is issued, for those who love glory, glorification, full of desire to be referred to as the top-placed (as the Pharisees wanted the first row in the synagogue benches and the places of honour at banquets), as the triumphalist, the ones who want to be always looked up to: whoever exalts himself will be humbled (Matt. 23:12a).

2. The Serpents, the Vipers and Their Symbols

The serpent, although laden with negative connotations is one of the oldest, most revered and most universal symbols in mythology, a symbol of renewal, thanks to its unique capacity to put on a new skin, which replaces the old one. Being a creature that crawls on the earth and lives in holes in the ground, the serpent has connections to the world below, to the dubious, to the hidden, to the dangerous. The main biblical allusions to this animal insist on its appearance, which denotes subtlety³. The serpent played an important role in the temptation and fall of man, is full of deep interest and curious (see Genesis 3). The devil, who appeared to Eve as a serpent and deceived her, is referred to in the Scripture, as the “serpent of old” (Rev. 12:9). The text in 2 Cor. 11:3 shows the contemporaneity of the serpent’s deception: “as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ”). Any tempter must resort to perversity (per verso - by reversing)⁴, describing evil as good, so that the serpent in Eden showed the fruit of sin, “but did not show the true nature of evil, for man would have not been tempted by it. But showing it in a pleasant guise, the woman found it acceptable”⁵. The snakes’ custom of hiding under hedges is an allusion to the lie hidden behind the image of some innocent things. The text in the Eccl. 10, 8: “He who digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent”, refers to the huge spiritual effort, required for the removal of the prejudice and hypocrisy that are exposed at some point. First, this reptile is considered a sly creature. A description of the word reptile in Scriban’s dictionary⁶ generates more similarities between human hypocrisy and this species that

³ Samuel W. Barnum (editor), *A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Bible*, New York, D.Appleton &Co., 1868, p. 999.

⁴ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Vol. I, EIBMBOR, București, 1996, p. 322.

⁵ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, P G, 44. col. 200.

⁶ August Scriban, *Dicționarul limbii românești*, Institutul de Arte Grafice Presa Bună, București, 1939: Animal which crawls, such as serpents, then lizards, crocodiles, turtles. a. Fig. Infamous and flatterer. – And reptile f. - Reptiles are cold-blooded and generally oviparous, with

Revd. George Cosmin Piț

the Saviour used to describe the Pharisees. The serpent symbolized lying, betrayal and evil. In the Old Testament, Numbers 21:6-8 refers to the serpents sent by God to bite and kill the Israelite sinners, becoming tools in the hands of the Lord. There are cases when serpents are sent by God to repair an injustice or a lie as in the following situation, by punishing the one who had sworn falsely: "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established." (Deut. 19:15). But who knows [all], the Lord of [man's] thoughts, will punish every man. Barely emerged [from that place], when a snake bit him and [the man] died"⁷.

The serpent is present in the Bible from its beginning to its end. The book of Genesis tells us how an intelligent serpent persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of Consciousness. The appearance of the biblical snake is controversial. The Genesis does not provide an accurate description. Some illustrations of the snake in Eden depict an intelligent guileful reptilian-humanoid. But his envy, i.e. the evil in him, caused his own fall. Although in rabbinic literature, the Psalms⁸ that refer to evil embodied in reptiles were used for protection against demons, there is evidence that they were also used during exorcism services in first-century Palestine⁹. In the New Testament, Jesus acknowledged the serpent's wisdom in the statement: "Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16). The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, refers to opponents of the Church, rulers and beasts of the Earth and of the sea, dragons or snakes, even the devil himself. The concept of the Antichrist was developed in the second Christian century. The Antichrist will have all the power of the devil and will attract the most outstanding worshippers¹⁰. Then, St. Irenaeus argued that the

pulmonary respiration and organized for terrestrial life, although some, especially crocodiles, can stay more or less under water. Thanks to an unusual faculty to widen the mouth and esophagus, they can swallow their prey without chewing. In major species, digestion is slow and in some kind of lethargy. Finally, some are venomous, and cause death through their bites (such as the viper, the cobra, the horned viper). Very strong and resistant to all causes of damage, they can suffer mutilation without dying, reptiles are spread all over the globe and those living close to the Equator are bigger (like gavials, pythons), without however reaching the colossal shapes of fossil reptiles, some of which reached up to 30 metres in length. – Some are useful to man. Such as lizards and colubers (small, black snakes, like those in the Snake Island), which eat harmful insects.

⁷ Mekhilta Kaspā III, alin. 31-41, in Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70, Part I, The Masters*, Leiden E. J. Brill, 1971, p. 86.

⁸ Psalm 91: "Lest you dash your foot against a stone. You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra. The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot" (cobra=venomous snake, viper; serpent=fairy tale animal, similar to a snake, which is believed to be able to kill with the look in its eyes).

⁹ Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A History of Religions Study*, Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1981 (text dactilografiat), p. 35.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. and London, 1981.

best defense against the devil was Christ. Prayer and reciting the Name of Christ casts out the demons.

3. Snakes, Vipers, Scholars, Pharisees: Is there a Total Synonymy?

The Saviour's conduct in Matthew 23 has triggered numerous comments. J. Nolland calls verse 33 of this chapter "Matthew's conclusion to the whole set of woes"¹¹. Our Lord uses very severe, harsh and violent language because of His fidelity to the Father: "in Chapter 23, Matthew ignites the material found in Q (see Lk. 11:37-53) in a devastating denunciation of the Pharisees and scholars for their hypocrisy manifested in their claim to provide spiritual leadership for the Jewish people"¹². A good surgeon cuts deep; this is exactly what Christ did Matthew 23. Many of today's preachers do not speak like this, even when they have to deal with Pharisees and scholars. Most loving, however, is not the one who speaks with soft words; true love often compels an honest man to say what hurts him more, even if this hurts his listeners too. How does the kindness recommended in the Sermon on the Mount fit amongst the Saviour's anger, wrath, irony, and sarcasm when he addresses the scholars and the Pharisees. The answer is that "hypocrisy triggered His deepest disgust"¹³.

In a study which starts from verse 33, K. S. Keener notes, based on the original Greek, the difference between children and brood in antiquity: "Matthew reduces the risk that we may deduce the idiom "children of" (in reference to the human race), preferring a term rarely used, γεννήμα, which appears in the New Testament only with respect to brood of vipers"¹⁴. That we may better understand Christ's severe way of addressing the Pharisees, we need to find out what the ancients knew about the vipers. Mediterranean traditions refer to the offspring of vipers, which kill their mothers in the process of birth. This is their revenge on their fathers, who were killed by the mothers during mating. Here are the words of Herodotus about a species of vipers in Arabia, "when the male is in the act of mating, while it is releasing the seed, the female grabs its neck and does not let it go until the male dies. (...) but the female pays for her revenge upon the male in this manner: the offspring, while they are still in the womb, avenge their father,

¹¹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, W B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, p. 942.

¹² Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, "Why Did Matthew Write a Gospel?", in *The Bible Today*, 2011, vol. 49, nr. 1, p. 8.

¹³ James Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Edinburgh: T. & T. CLARK, 1906, p. 143.

¹⁴ Craig S. Keener, "Brood of Vipers (Matthew 3,7; 12, 34; 23, 33)", in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Sept. 2005, vol. 28, p. 6.

Revd. George Cosmin Pit

consuming their own mother and chew on its belly in order to crawl out”¹⁵. Ancient listeners would have considered parricide as one of the worst imaginable crimes. Vipers’ guilt could be reduced to the fact that their offspring avenged their father. According to people’s beliefs, however, children who take revenge upon their parents are guilty of a huge sin and are worthy to be executed too. Calling His listeners “brood of vipers” was therefore tougher than the word itself. This word accuses them of parricide, symbol of morally ignoble people. Matthew 23:33 uses the same image. The scholars and the Pharisees are exposed as heirs of the prophets, but are described as children of those who killed God’s emissaries (23:30-31). The play on words was commonly used especially in insults during Antiquity. The irony of the Pharisees’ testimony was, probably unconsciously, self-accusing: “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets” (23:30). The Pharisees professed great respect to the prophets, who were persecuted and murdered, claiming that if they had lived back then, their attitude would have been different. However, they were made of the same fabric as the persecutors and killers, and thus had too much murderer blood in their veins: “the insufficiency of a mere genetic descent was a common idea in the Mediterranean area in the Antiquity. When the descendants failed to live up to the value of their ancestors, the others could deny that they were the true descendants”¹⁶. The forked tongue of snakes was another reason that inspired symbols and associations of duplicity, both in language and behavior: “Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). There is an offensive play on words behind the references to snakes¹⁷.

Newer research has shown an interest in rehabilitating the Pharisees¹⁸, who have been described as Matthew’s victims as a group, that in reality they were not as described in Chapter 23 by Jesus as “snakes, brood of vipers!” The idea behind this is that the anti-Judaism of the first Gospel cannot be assessed properly as long as no apparent reconfiguration of the first-century Phariseism has been accounted for so far. Nevertheless, Matthew 23 is not a group conviction of Judaism; only one type of attitude is condemned, not Judaism as a whole (there were just about 6,000 Pharisees and they were not all guilty of the crimes listed in the woes, as it was actually proved later on — see the case of Gamaliel Acts 5:34-40 and the

¹⁵ Herodot, *Hist.* 3.109, *The Third Book of the Histories, called Thaleia*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2707/2707-h/2707-h.htm#link32H_4_0001>, accessed on 26 October 2014.

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, art. cit., p. 9.

¹⁷ Michael P. Knowles, art. cit., p. 165-178.

¹⁸ Cf. Hans-Günther Waubke, *Die Phariseer in der protestantischen Bibelwissenschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 107, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1998.

indication that some of the Pharisees had become faithful, Acts 15:5), which was misleading the people.

4. Matthew 23:33: “Condemnation of Hell”, the Eschatological Alternative to the Kingdom of Heaven

A special note should be made on the comparison between the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12) and the woes (Matt. 23:13-36), which shows many parallels, similarities as well as differences. The Beatitudes opened with a reference to the receipt of the Kingdom (5:3), the woes begin with a reference to losing the Kingdom (23:13). The scholars and the Pharisees are exposed as sons of Gehenna who lead their prozelytes on the same path of hypocrisy, to finally become twice the same thing (23:15) and brood of vipers (22:23), which contrasts with the paternity of the peacemakers who are sons of God (5:9).

The word gehenna was used by Our Lord Jesus Christ 11 times, in places that fall under three categories: “(a) admonitions to the disciples about the stumbling stones (Matthew 5:29-30, 18, 8-9, Mk 9:43-48); (b) warnings to the disciples in relation to their personal destiny (Matt. 5:22, 10, 28; Lk. 12: 4-5), and (c) the condemnation of the scholars and the Pharisees (Matt. 23:15 and 33)”¹⁹. Judgment (condemnation) Gehenna (lat. iudicio gehennae) should be avoided at all costs, because it involves a great deal of suffering. The suffering there is related to the idea of fire, a descriptive detail that is present from the first occurrence of this concept in the literature. The New Testament presents the Gehenna as the eschatological alternative to the Kingdom of Heaven, as the irreversible punishment for the wicked. The text of the Gospel written and conveyed to the Christian community as remembrance of Christ’s words and a behavior guide, as in other cases in the literature of the time, becomes a tool for defining the identity of the community. Therefore, the serpent, an ancient symbol of wisdom and fertility, was transformed in Christianity into a symbol of evil, of the devil²⁰.

There are beliefs according to which snakes are guardians of some hidden treasures and prevent access to them²¹. The treasure found in the Gospel is equivalent to the entry into the Kingdom of Heaven: “the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13, 44). The Saviour’s infer-

¹⁹ Hans Scharen, *Gehenna in the Synoptics*, in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, Jan.-Mar. 1998, p. 324-337.

²⁰ Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Demons and Demonology*, Foreword by John Zafishte, Facts on File, New York, 2009, p. 229-230.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

Revd. George Cosmin Piț

ence right in the first woe is evidence that the intention of relating the Pharisees to snakes is not coincidental: “you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (23). Ambiguous and negative tones of the snake’s image, the Gehenna as sin inhibitor are consistently used within the period of the second Jewish Temple and in the Mediterranean region, where “plays on words and their application to the polemic between diverse communities, make the text a tool for defining the community”²². The Baptist and the Saviour use the same language about vipers, snakes, Gehenna, Pharisees etc., just that John uses the expression brood of vipers at the beginning of the book (Matt. 3:7), and Christ the Lord closes the polemic at the end of the woes, in the same terms (Matt. 23:33). Expressions of this kind serve Matthews mission to situate his community in relation to the Pharisees of Judaism.

5. The Demonic Origin of Hypocrisy and the Woes Uttered as an Exorcism

A. Reasons for Demonisation through Hypocrisy. In the expression “snakes, brood of vipers!”, the Saviour loads with a spiritual sense the hostility of vipers towards people, which offers the public a natural parable offering for the moral evil triggered by deceitful language and behaviour. The demonic source of hypocrisy is shown by the Lord’s tough, ruthless attitude towards sin, similar to the one He displayed in cases of expulsion of evil spirits. It has been argued that in the case of demonic possession, “the person is fully dominated by an odd subject which ate the person’s humanity to such an extent that the will and the words of the evil spirit and of the possessed overlap: one speaks through the mouth of the other”²³. The Hebrew Bible conveys similar images and usually associates them with the deadly poison of snakes: “They sharpen their tongues like a serpent; The poison of asps is under their lips”(Ps 140:3) and “Though evil is sweet in his mouth, And he hides it under his tongue,”(Job 20:12). The forked tongue of snakes is a sign of this double personality of the hypocrite. D. E. Aune emphasizes that of the most crippling human attitudes “hypocrisy is the one that greatly inhibits relationships between people”²⁴. The sin of hypocrisy is a sin in the catalogue of Satan, a vice, a form of demonic possession which was harshly reprimanded by Christ. Jesus had the greatest compassion for every man who

²² Michael P. Knowles, *Serpents, Scholars, and Pharisees*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 133, nr. 1, 2014, p. 165.

²³ Armand Puig, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

²⁴ David Edward Aune (editor), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson S.J.*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001, p.181.

has ever lived on Earth, guilty of all kinds of sins. He loved and forgave thieves, criminals, adulterers but his anger grew when he sternly chastised the hypocrites, and when he was before the demonic legions that brought havoc in man, God's creation. Unfortunately, in the 21st century, hypocrisy seems to be the number one charge brought against Christians by the unbelievers or by those who are living outside of the body of the church. Matthew 23:13-33 emphasized religious hypocrisy, not human hypocrisy in general. Rightfully, the Saviour take attitude towards concrete situations in the Jewish spiritual world. In Matthew 23, "the woes uttered by the Saviour against the Pharisees enumerate several cases of breaching the practical guidelines"²⁵. Jesus restated Isaiah's prophecy which accuses the disparity between lips and acts, between behavior and heart, not only in the case of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, but for all those who are experts or describe themselves as such in matters of faith. Self-sufficiency, the thought that we are able to find something good in us, something that originates in ourselves, not in God causes this deception reprimanded by the Fathers of the Church: "Christ did not come for those who are righteous and in good health. Even when Christ meets them, they fail to meet him. The fruits of the meeting with Christ were collected, without exception, only by those who discovered their own failures and sins"²⁶. In the Gospel of Matthew, "the central character is always Jesus, the absolute Master who both people and demons obey"²⁷. The hypocritical Pharisees and scholars do not obey Christ, but the people and the demons do. Their behaviour is however suspicious, questionable, they seem to resemble, through their hypocrisy, the serpent in Eden, which from the beginning has been the father of lies and hypocrisy. The hypocrisy, the falseness, the theatricality of the religious feeling, the lie which characterize the Jewish leaders prove that as long as hypocrisy is not separated from the human person it keeps drawing and leading people to hell, the place intended for the devil, the serpent in Eden, the humanoid-reptilian, who is intelligent and cunning, the prototype of those professionals of religion: "What image can be sadder than that of some scholars and Pharisees who, concerned about the daily religious life, searching for Christ, asking him and tempting him with their sincere desire to find the Messiah, come to discover in Him just a simple man"²⁸. Jesus's severe tone in

²⁵ Pr. Prof Dr. Vasile Mihoc, Asist. Drd. Daniel Mihoc, Drd. Ioan Mihoc, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament*, Vol. I, Teofania, Sibiu, 2001, p. 51.

²⁶ Protos. Ioan COJANU, *Argument*, în *Pocăință și Euharistie*, Epifania, Mănăstirea Sfântul Ioan Botezătorul, Alba Iulia, 2010, p. 5.

²⁷ Revd. Prof. Dr. Vasile MIHOC, *Aspecte ale spiritualității comunității mateiene în lumina textelor și a trăsăturilor specifice primei Evanghelii*, în *Teologie, Slujire, Ecumenism - Omagiu Î.P.S. Dr. Antonie Plămădeală*, Sibiu, 1996, p. 325.

²⁸ Protos. Ioan COJANU, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Revd. George Cosmin Piț

Chapter 23, which still seems disturbing today for a far too relaxed and comfortable religious consciousness, is just the expression of the hypocrisy hazard, of a “religiousness which is too sure and satisfied by itself, which tends to exclude those who do not practice the Law”²⁹.

B. The Woes as Jesus’s Exorcisms. Most scholars agree that Christ practiced exorcisms and healing, and he was considered, both in the Gospels and in the later Jewish tradition, as a healer and an exorcist. All noticed his miracles (παράδοχα ἔργα), which his disciples understood as signs from above (σημείων). His enemies failed to challenge his reputation as an exorcist and miracle maker³⁰. Describing the acts of Jesus, “the New Testament writers had developed the belief that is fundamental to stress the notion of exorcism: that exorcism is a confrontation between the divine and the demonic - between Jesus and demons - in which the demonic is defeated”³¹. Biblical dictionaries defines woe as an interjection which brings pain, discomfort, unhappiness, anger, distress, warnin³². On the other hand, some scholars argue that the “interjection woe! seems to have been mostly linked to mourning the dead and that is where the research into its origins should start rather than in the curses of worship” (the exorcism prayer reads: “I expel you, primal source of blasphemy...!”)³³.

The argument could be brought to another level, stating that the deception of the Pharisees is of demonic origin. Both the behavioral and the exegetic one. The option to see in Christ’s woes in Matthew 23 an exorcism is based on the Christ’s actual love for all creation. The Pharisees and scholars had a final chance to be saved, on the grounds that Christ thought that “man almost always retains in him some remnants of good, resistance to evil, powers to recover, powers to stop evil and repent”³⁴, having the power to deliver, especially after exposure to such a harsh confrontation with Christ. Moreover, the polemic against the scholars and the Pharisees in Chapter 23 aims to provide negative stereotypes or negative examples for the Christian community, a behavior that Christians must avoid. Matthew’s community is strongly warned against hypocrisy. The warning that

²⁹ Armand PUIG, *Iisus. Un profil biografic*, Traducere: Jana Balacciu Matei, Editura Meronia, București, 2007, p. 97

³⁰ Simon J. JOSEPH, *The Ascetic Jesus*, in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 8/ 2010, Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, p. 146–181.

³¹ Graham H. TWELFTREE, *The Place of Exorcism in Contemporary Ministry*, Anvil Vol. 5, No. 2, 1988, p. 146.

³² David Noel FREEDMAN (ed. in chief), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v. VI (Si-Z), Doubleday, New York, 1992, p. 945.

³³ W. JANZEN, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle* in *BZAW* (Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft), 125, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1972, nota 56, p. 55.

³⁴ Revd. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică*, v. I, p. 310.

Matthew 23:33 – The Reptilian Image of the Pharisees

a Christian could have the same fate as that of the hypocrites in Matt. 24:51 is clearly presented in Matthew 23. Nevertheless, G.N. Stanton³⁵ pointed out that the juxtaposition of the polemic against the Jewish leaders in Chapter 23 with the threat to divide the Christian community in good and evil, in chapters 24-25, might suggest that they would be judged in a similar way.

Jesus's exorcisms, generally speaking, were a threat to the Galileean elite, and, consequently, to the Jewish elite. By interpreting the casting out of demons as a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God, and making the exorcism a part of a strategy to restore Israelite moral integrity, Christ was actually threatening the stability of the social order. The reaction of the residents after the Gadara exorcism, who asked Jesus to leave their region (Mk. 5:17), reveals that His exorcisms were perceived by ordinary people as surprising and dangerous, precisely because of the fact that they did not perceive the spiritual advantages compared with the material loss.

Conclusions

a) Matthew 23:33 and the severe expression it contains with reference to snakes and vipers, as portrayal of the Pharisees and the scholars is better understood once we have found out what the ancients knew about some types of reptiles in the Mediterranean area. Mediterranean traditions refer to the offspring of vipers which kill their mother in the process of birth. This is their revenge on their fathers, who were killed by the mothers during mating. In Matthew 23:33 the same image is used. Calling the listeners "brood of vipers" was an accusation of parricide. The scholars and the Pharisees are portrayed as heirs of the prophets, but also as the children of those who killed God's emissaries.

b) The woes are accusations that precede the coming of the Judgment Day. We argue that the exorcisms-woes are a final chance offered to the hypocrites to repent before it is too late. In its discourse about hell, Christian spirituality argues that its fire must devour only sins, vices, evil, and not people. However, as long as people remain under the rule of sins and vices they risk eternal conviction together with them.

c) The Lord's seven-fold exorcism in the Gospel of Matthew against hypocrisy includes in it the love of God towards all, without distinction, for the Son of God came to save the world not to judge it arbitrarily and out of revenge. Nothing more did Christ want than to see those experts of the Law that they renounced their too-risky self-sufficiency. According to the New Testament of our Saviour

³⁵ G.N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1992, p. 165.

Revd. George Cosmin Piț

Christ, the role of exorcisms in the Church is to separate the sin from the person at the right time, namely when the possessed can no longer fight alone, when evil has destroyed man's desire to be saved. A similar idea is promoted in Matthew's text. Jesus Christ started these exorcisms against hypocrisy in order to save the world.

d) This paper is an argument that the Saviour criticised the hypocrisy with the proper severity, and the Pharisees, as those who were full of hypocrisy, were victims of the spirit of falseness. They were separated by the people through a precise knowledge of the Law, which they wanted to expand in all areas of the life of Israel. However, they had not separated from falseness, which was not a model of behaviour for the people. This is the reason why the Lord was so harsh in relation to the Pharisees. Once freed of hypocrisy, exorcised by Christ who reprimands the "seven spirits of falseness", they can join the Saviour just as the possessed who was healed and who strongly wanted to live in the proximity of Christ afterwards.