The Pattern Beneath the Sermon on the Mount

Linking existing maps of conceptual transfer to a map of thinking

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Abstract

This essay starts with a simple question. Where does the Sermon on the Mount come from? The search led beneath the text. Almost every element has older forms. They appear in Jewish, Greek and Asian sources. The Sermon sits on a crossroads of trade routes. The pattern beneath it is the transfer of concepts. People carry them along routes, through space and time.

At the end of the search a second finding appeared. Many researchers have already mapped parts of this pattern. Each map uses its own unit: a word, a place, a society, a story or a letter. Nobody maps a single concept. Nobody links the maps. This essay proposes a step up. Link the existing maps to a map of thinking, the Encyclopedia of Thinking. Do this by reference, not by copying. The concept then becomes the unit that connects them.

Keywords: Sermon on the Mount; Golden Rule; conceptual transfer; trade routes; digital humanities; Axial Age; Spinoza.

1. Research means searching beneath

The Dutch word for research is *onderzoek*. It holds two words: *onder*, beneath, and *zoek*, search. Research looks under the surface. Here the surface is a famous text, Matthew 5–7. The question was its origin.

The usual answer names an author, a date and a source. Matthew wrote around 80–90 CE. He used a lost collection of sayings, called Q. Luke used the same collection for his shorter Sermon on the Plain. That answer is correct, but it stays on the surface. It describes the text, not what the text is made of.

This essay follows the material beneath the text. It does not seek one origin. It seeks the pattern.

2. What lies beneath the text

Four layers became visible.

- **Composition.** Hans Dieter Betz reads the Sermon as an *epitome*. That is a Hellenistic genre: a short summary of a master's teaching. The form is Greek.
- **Jewish roots.** A Qumran scroll, 4Q525, already holds a series of beatitudes. The phrase "poor in spirit" appears in the War Scroll (1QM 14:7). Psalm 37:11 promises the land to the meek. David Flusser reads Matthew 5:17–48 as Torah interpretation in the school of Hillel.
- **The Golden Rule.** Tobit 4:15 and Hillel give the negative form. The Letter of Aristeas gives a positive form before Jesus. Isocrates gives it in Greek. Confucius gives it in Analects 15.24, five centuries earlier.
- **Further east.** Dhammapada 1.5 says that hatred never ends through hatred. A Buddha statue found at Berenike, on the Red Sea, dates to 90–140 CE. It proves contact between Egypt and India. It is later than Matthew, so it cannot be his source.

No element has a single, unique origin. Each one has older forms elsewhere.

3. A crossroads of routes

Jesus taught around Capernaum. Capernaum lay on the Via Maris, the road from Egypt to Damascus. Gadara lay across the lake. It was known as a city of philosophers, among them Cynics. Hillel came from Babylon. Alexandria linked Jewish and Greek learning. Ships sailed from the Red Sea to India with the monsoon.

Route	Connection	What it carried to the Sermon
R1 Via Maris	Egypt – Capernaum – Damascus	Traders, tax, Roman presence
R2 Decapolis	Gadara, across the lake	Cynic sayings; the epitome form
R3 Babylon – Jerusalem	Parthian empire	Hillel; the Golden Rule as summary of Torah
R4 Red Sea – India	Berenike, Muziris	Contact with Buddhist teaching; trace in text not proven
R5 Alexandria	Mediterranean	Aristeas, Philo, Greek ethics
R6 Silk Road	Han China – Parthia – Syria	Route existed; trace in text not proven
R7 Local Judean	Temple, synagogue, Qumran	Beatitudes, "poor in spirit", Two Ways

The starting point here is simple. All cultures travel to trade. Contact is the normal state, not the thing to be proven. A claim of unique origin is itself a belief.

Two explanations must stay apart. A concept can travel along a route. That is *transfer*. A concept can also arise again from the same human situation. That is *echo*. Both are real. A map must show which is which.

4. Form changes, structure stays

The Golden Rule has many wordings. Confucius, Hillel and Matthew use different words. The structure stays the same: treat the other as yourself. Words are sounds. What travels is the structure.

The same holds for the scholarship. Ulrich Luz sees a ring around the Lord's Prayer. Dale Allison sees Moses on the mountain. Betz sees a Greek summary. Flusser sees the school of Hillel. Each says something true, in his own words. Together they describe one pattern.

5. The maps that already exist

At the end of the search came the main discovery. The pattern beneath the Sermon has already been mapped. Not once, but many times. Each project chose its own unit.

Project	Unit	What it maps
Religious loanwords (Blouin & Dyer)	word	Where five world religions arose and spread, estimated from loanwords
GEHIR (Masaryk University, Brno)	place	Spread of religious ideas in the ancient Mediterranean
Seshat Global History Databank	society	About 400 polities from 10,000 BCE to 1900
Database of Religious History	group	Features of religious groups through time
Folktale phylogenetics (da Silva & Tehrani)	story	Transfer by descent versus transfer by neighbours
Mapping the Republic of Letters	letter	Networks of scholars, 1600–1800
Axial Age (Jaspers; Alfred Weber)	idea / region	Same wisdom around 500 BCE in China, India, Persia, Greece, Israel

The Axial Age debate shows the issue clearly. Karl Jaspers saw parallel and independent breakthroughs. His contemporary Alfred Weber saw contact along routes of riders, pilgrims and traders. That is the distinction between echo and transfer again.

6. What is missing

Two things are missing.

- **No map per concept.** There is no map of the Golden Rule, with places, dates and routes. There is no map of non-retaliation.
- **No links between the maps.** Each project stands alone. A word map does not know the society map. A letter network does not know the Axial Age.

Each map shows a part of the same pattern. None shows the pattern as a whole.

7. The step up: linking to a map of thinking

The discovery raised a more abstract idea. Link these maps to a map of thinking.

Such a map exists. The Encyclopedia of Thinking (maze.swarp.nl/denken) maps thinkers and their relations. Together with The Golden Thread, a series on free thinkers from Socrates to now, it is part of the Spinoza project. It already uses Wikidata identifiers. Wikipedia is already part of the platform. A thinker is therefore already a node that other databases can recognise.

The proposal has three parts.

- **Add the concept as a unit.** A concept such as the Golden Rule gets its own node. It points to the passages where it appears, with place and date.
- **Refer, do not copy.** Each passage links to an open text library: Sefaria for Jewish sources, the Chinese Text Project, SuttaCentral, Perseus. Each place links to a gazetteer. Each existing map stays with its own team.
- **Keep transfer and echo apart.** A link between two passages is marked as transfer when a route or a person is documented. It is marked as echo when only the form is shared.

Building and maintaining one large map would be too costly. Linking is not. The maps are maintained by the people who made them. The map of thinking only needs the references.

The Golden Rule shows how this works. Confucius in Lu, around 500 BCE. Isocrates in Athens, around 370 BCE. Tobit, around 200 BCE. Hillel, carried from Babylon to Jerusalem. Matthew in Syria or Galilee, around 85 CE. Hillel to Matthew is a documented route. Confucius to Matthew is an echo. One concept now connects thinkers on two continents.

8. What a linked map may show

This research suggests a hypothesis. There are at least two kinds of concepts.

- **Shared concepts.** The Golden Rule and non-retaliation travel freely. They appear wherever people trade. Nobody owns them.
- **Identity concepts.** One truth, one orthodoxy, one chosen group. They travel with power and hierarchy.

Harvey Whitehouse describes a doctrinal mode of religion. It has standard beliefs, frequent rituals and large communities. Hierarchies guard orthodoxy and punish heresy. Concepts of the second kind fit this mode. They are often linked to conflict and war.

A linked map can make this visible. Do shared concepts follow trade routes? Do identity concepts follow routes of conquest? The question is open. The map would allow anyone to look.

9. Conclusion

The search for the origin of the Sermon on the Mount found no single origin. It found a pattern. Concepts travel with people, along routes, through time. Their form changes. Their structure stays.

Many researchers have mapped this pattern, each in their own unit. Linking their maps to a map of thinking turns separate pictures into one view. The concept becomes the thread.

Spinoza reduced Scripture to two things: justice and charity. The Sermon asks people to respect each other and live in peace. A linked map shows that this wisdom belongs to no one. It was shared long before it was written down. Sharing it again is the aim of the Spinoza project.

Annotated references

The list is grouped by theme. Each entry says what the reader will find there.

The text and its sources

Betz, H.D. (1995). *The Sermon on the Mount.* Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Reads the Sermon as a pre-Matthean epitome, a Hellenistic summary of a teacher's doctrine. The basis for the Greek layer.

Luz, U. (2007). *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary.* Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Standard commentary. Traces both the origin and the reception history. Shows the ring structure around the Lord's Prayer.

Allison, D.C. (1993). *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

Shows how Matthew models Jesus on Moses at Sinai. Explains why the Sermon is set on a mountain.

Puech, É. (1991). "4Q525 et les péricopes des béatitudes en Ben Sira et Matthieu." *Revue Biblique* 98: 80–106.

Publishes the Qumran series of beatitudes. Proves the genre existed before Matthew.

Flusser, D. (1997). *Jesus.* 2nd ed. Jerusalem: Magnes Press.

A Jewish reading of Jesus. Places the Sermon in the Torah interpretation of the school of Hillel.

Downing, F.G. (1992). *Cynics and Christian Origins.* Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Collects Cynic parallels to the sayings of Jesus. A minority position, but it documents the Greek route through Gadara.

Sidebotham, S.E. (2011). *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

The excavation of the Red Sea port. Documents trade with India and the later Buddhist presence.

Primary texts: Analects 15.24 (ctext.org); Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a (sefaria.org); Dhammapada 1.5 (suttacentral.net); Tobit 4:15; Letter of Aristeas 207.

The passages of the Golden Rule and of non-retaliation. All are freely readable in the open libraries named.

Existing maps of transfer

Blouin, A. & Dyer, J. (2025). "Reconstructing History: Using Language to Estimate Religious Spread." *Journal of Economic History* 85(4): 921–961.

Estimates where religions arose from loanwords. For Christianity the estimate points to where its scripture took shape, not where the religion began.

GEHIR – Generative Historiography of Religion. Masaryk University, Brno. gehir.phil.muni.cz

Models and maps the spread of cults and early Christianity in the Roman world, place by place.

Turchin, P. et al. (2015). "Seshat: The Global History Databank." *Cliodynamics* 6(1): 77–107.

Describes the databank of past societies. Useful for linking concepts to the societies that carried them.

Slingerland, E. & Sullivan, B. (2017). “Durkheim with Data: The Database of Religious History.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85(2): 312–347.

Introduces the Database of Religious History. Expert-coded features of religious groups through time.

da Silva, S.G. & Tehrani, J.J. (2016). “Comparative phylogenetic analyses uncover the ancient roots of Indo-European folktales.” *Royal Society Open Science* 3: 150645.

Separates transfer by descent from transfer between neighbours. The same distinction this essay needs for concepts.

Edelstein, D. et al. (2017). “Historical Research in a Digital Age: Reflections from the Mapping the Republic of Letters Project.” *American Historical Review* 122(2): 400–424.

Lessons from mapping a scholarly network. Shows both the power and the limits of such maps.

Jaspers, K. (1949). *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte.* Zürich: Artemis. — Weber, A. (1935). *Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie.* Leiden: Sijthoff.

The two sides of the Axial Age debate: independent breakthroughs versus contact along routes.

Concepts, religion and conflict

Whitehouse, H. (2004). *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission.* Walnut Creek: AltaMira.

Distinguishes the doctrinal and the imagistic mode. Explains how doctrine spreads and how it binds groups.

Toft, M.D. (2021). “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65(9): 1607–1634.

Shows that religious fault lines have become central in armed conflicts. A starting point for testing the two kinds of concepts.

Spinoza, B. (1670). *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 13–14.

Reduces Scripture to justice and charity. The philosophical anchor of the Spinoza project.

Linking infrastructure

Vrandečić, D. & Krötzsch, M. (2014). “Wikidata: A Free Collaborative Knowledgebase.” *Communications of the ACM* 57(10): 78–85.

Explains Wikidata, the shared identifiers that let separate maps refer to the same thinker, work or place.

Pleiades: A Gazetteer of Past Places. pleiades.stoa.org

Stable identifiers for ancient places. Lets a passage be placed on any map.

Konstapel, J. Encyclopedia of Thinking. maze.swarp.nl/denken

The map of thinking that this essay proposes to link to. Thinkers and their relations, anchored in Wikidata.