

MATTHEW AND MIDRASH:  
AN EVALUATION OF ROBERT H. GUNDRY'S APPROACH

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In a statement that summarizes a major thrust of his commentary,<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Gundry claims that "comparison with the other gospels, especially with Mark and Luke, and examination of Matthew's style and theology show that he materially altered and embellished historical traditions and that he did so deliberately and often" (p. 639). This conclusion renders inadequate traditional evangelical solutions to the problem of discrepancies among the gospels. Harmonization, besides sometimes being forced and unconvincing, ignores the fact that the changes Matthew introduces are not accidental but deliberate. And to suspend judgment over so large a number of discrepancies is intellectually dishonest. Still worse is the refusal to allow the clear data of the text to inform our understanding of the intent and authority of the gospels.

When the force of this data is recognized, according to Gundry, we are faced with alternatives of jettisoning belief in an inerrant Bible or of reorienting our conception of what Matthew was doing in his gospel. Rejecting alternatives to inerrancy as misguided and inadequate, Gundry opts for the latter. Matthew, he argues, never intended that all the events he narrates be understood as historical in the modern sense.

However, as long as Matthew's fabrications are regarded not as a deliberately misleading falsification of historical facts, nor as accidental errors, but as homiletical embroidery of traditional material of a kind widely accepted in Matthew's day, charges of error are unfounded. It is our insistence on reading Matthew as empirical history in a modern, positivistic sense that creates difficulties. Matthew furnishes to the discerning reader abundant clues that his gospel does not fit into this contemporary mold but is to be understood as an example of the ancient Jewish genre of midrash or, more specifically, midrash haggadah. This genre featured extensive unhistorical embellishment of Biblical narratives for the purpose of edification. In similar manner, Gundry suggests, Matthew has recast the historical tradition of Jesus' ministry in order to meet certain pressing needs in the first-century Church. While Mark and Luke preserve historical tradition, Matthew sermonizes on it. Differences between Matthew on the one hand and Mark and Luke on the other can not then be labeled contradictions, since the purposes of the narratives are fundamentally different.

Such is a very brief and undoubtedly inadequate description of Gundry's novel approach to the relation of Matthean redaction and Biblical authority. It is of

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<sup>1</sup>R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

course true that Gundry does much more than this in the 650 pages he devotes to Matthew, and he does much of it very well indeed. Particularly worthy of mention is a persuasive defense of Matthean authorship and numerous fresh exegetical insights. But in the last analysis it is his understanding of Matthew's purpose that stands out as the significant contribution of the commentary. In the interests of brevity, I may be forgiven if I direct my comments exclusively to this issue.<sup>2</sup>

Before assessing this approach to Matthew, two things should be said. First, it is true that evangelicals have sometimes skated rather lightly over the difficulties posed to a high view of Scripture by the synoptic gospels. Particularly has there been a failure to cope with the tendentious features of the evangelists' work, which a valid application of redaction criticism has brought to light. Secondly, Gundry's classification of Matthew as a midrash, with a mixture of historical narrative and nonhistorical embellishment, cannot *a priori* be ruled out of court because of a commitment to inerrancy. Evangelicals have always recognized the need to identify the inerrant meaning of a Scriptural passage within the parameters of its literary genre: OT poetry cannot be tested against the canons of a modern scientific textbook, apocalyptic must not be read as if it were an exact photograph of the future, and so on. If Gundry is right, the accuracy of Matthew's interpretation of Jesus cannot be assessed by modern historical standards. It is not, then, because of any theological conviction that I must criticize the approach Gundry has taken in his commentary on Matthew. It is because I am convinced that Matthew did not write the kind of book Gundry thinks he did. The radicalness of his solution is demanded by the massive dimensions of the problem that his methodology has laid bare, but I question whether the problem is nearly as large as Gundry makes it. And even if the problem were as large as Gundry claims, I would not think that the characterization of Matthew as a midrash was an acceptable solution. These two points provide the outline of my critique. I will begin by indicating three ways in which, it seems to me, Gundry has unfairly magnified the problem posed by Matthew's redaction.

The first point relates to Gundry's identification of Matthew's sources. The issue is important because our ability to isolate Matthean redaction depends considerably on the extent to which we can determine the tradition available to him. Gundry's view of Matthew's sources can be summarized with four propositions: (1) Matthew used Mark in essentially the form we now have. (2) Matthew used an expanded Q, which included, for example, the infancy narrative and several parables usually assigned to peculiarly Lucan material. (3) In most cases Luke preserves the original wording of Q. (4) Matthew had little access to any traditions beyond Mark and Q.

Most scholars would agree with the supposition that Matthew has used Mark. But it is surprising that Gundry accepts the theory with so little argumentation, since searching—and some would say damaging—criticism has been directed against it over the last couple of decades. And many who accept Markan priority in general, as I do, also think that Matthew on occasion preserves tradition more primitive than that found in Mark. Almost without exception, however, Gundry

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed critique see D. A. Carson, "Gundry on Matthew: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 3 (1982) 71-91 (copies of the fascicle may be secured by writing *Trinity Journal*, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, IL 60015).

assumes that any differences between Matthew and Mark are to be attributed to Matthean redaction.

Considerably more disagreement would be found over Gundry's belief that Matthew used Q. Many scholars in fact are not convinced that Q was a single written source of the sort Gundry supposes. But granting this for the moment, the real problem with Gundry's view is the greatly expanded size of his alleged Q. We may take the case of the infancy narrative as an example. The consensus is that Q began with the ministry of John the Baptist—justifiably so, in my opinion, for this is where the first real verbal and conceptual agreement in material shared by Matthew and Luke and omitted in Mark begins. What evidence does Gundry adduce for the unusual view that Q included an infancy narrative? He points to about fifteen linguistic parallels between Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2. But many of these are common terms (such as "righteous," "the child," and "great joy") or items that could hardly be omitted if the story is to be told at all (such as Bethlehem, the fact that Joseph was Mary's husband, or the reference to Herod the king). Still others are extremely forced, such as the suggestion that Mary's "finding" favor with God in Luke 1:30 corresponds to Mary's being "found" pregnant through the Holy Spirit in Matt 1:18 (p. 20). A few similarities are more striking, but they are surely insufficient to demonstrate direct dependence of Matthew on a tradition substantially identical to Luke 1-2. Now certainly not all the decisions Gundry makes as to what belongs in Q are as questionable as this. But it does not seem to me that Gundry has convincingly demonstrated the existence of a Q two or three times larger than the customary 250 verses or so normally assigned to it.

Equally problematic is Gundry's third and related source-critical proposition: that Luke has made few changes in Q. As evidence he adduces Matthew's known habit of adding his own diction to Mark. But of course Luke does the same, and it is debatable whether he does so any less often or less extensively than Matthew. Most scholars think that Luke has preserved the order of Q more faithfully than Matthew, but many would argue that Matthew has preserved more accurately its wording. In any case it is most unlikely that Luke has been anywhere near as conservative in transmitting the Q tradition as Gundry supposes.

The cumulative effect of Gundry's first three hypotheses about Matthew's sources is to provide us access to a substantial amount of the tradition Matthew has used and in precisely the form he used it. The fourth hypothesis augments the significance of this conclusion by asserting that Matthew used very little material of any sort beyond the tradition already identified in Mark and Q. Thus, while there are exceptions, Gundry tends to dismiss the possibility that texts unique to Matthew have any source other than the evangelist's imagination. Nowhere is the effect of this supposition clearer than in the infancy narrative. Gundry argues, as we have seen, that this narrative is based on Q. The further assumption that Matthew uses only Q as a source at this point means that virtually all the details of Matthew's narrative are to be traced to an exceedingly creative use of Q. As a result Gundry asserts that Matthew transforms the Lucan angelic appearances to Zechariah and Mary into the nighttime dreams of Joseph under influence from the Genesis accounts of the patriarch Joseph (p. 22); that Matthew's adoration of the Magi corresponds to Luke's visit of the shepherds; that the sacrifice of two young pigeons in the temple becomes Herod's massacre of the innocents; and so on. Only if one were unshakably convinced that Matthew could

only have had access to tradition as preserved in Luke 1-2 could such correspondences be seriously proposed. But there do not seem to me to be adequate reasons for holding such a conviction. Luke's gospel, which Gundry claims to be historical in purpose, contains much unique material. If he had access to historically reliable tradition not preserved elsewhere, surely Matthew could have. Particularly is this so if Matthew was, as Gundry argues, an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry. In fact Gundry's consistent refusal to allow Matthew's own eyewitness reminiscences any significant influence in the composition of his gospel is one of the strangest aspects of his commentary.

The implications of Gundry's suppositions about Matthew's sources for his view of Matthew's redactional activity are major. For it is only by assuming that we can know so precisely the tradition Matthew has used that Gundry can so assuredly assign to Matthean redaction so much of the gospel. If, however, we cannot know with such precision the tradition actually available to Matthew, and if we must reckon seriously with the possibility that much more material than we have access to was used by Matthew, then we must be much more cautious about assigning particular items to Matthean redaction and can legitimately expect that much more of Matthew's gospel rests on solid tradition than Gundry supposes.

A second way in which I think Gundry exaggerates the extent of Matthean redaction is by categorizing too many words as distinctly Matthean. The presence of Matthean language is one of four indicators used by Gundry to identify Matthean composition, the other three being a tight parallelism of style, conformity to OT language, and certain theological emphases. In general I have no quarrel with the use of any of these criteria, although I would be considerably more cautious in concluding that such factors could not have been present in Matthew's tradition. And the radically different theological concerns attributed to the first gospel by different Matthean scholars should give us all pause in relying overmuch on this criterion. But my main concern is with the method used by Gundry to isolate Matthean diction. On virtually every page of the commentary, word statistics are cited as demonstration that such and such a word is a "Matthean-ism." Two statistics are cited as particularly crucial by Gundry: the number of times Matthew inserts a word into the tradition, and ("of secondary importance") the frequency with which Matthew uses a word in passages peculiar to his gospel (cf. p. 3). The citation of these statistics lends to the presentation an air of objectivity that is impressive. But closer inspection reveals that the statistics are not always as significant as they may seem.

For instance, Gundry bases the calculation of the first figure—Matthean insertions—on a comparison between the relevant text in Matthew and the corresponding paragraph in Mark or Luke (as printed in Aland's *Synopsis*). This means that where a paragraph in Matthew is paralleled by only a verse in, say, Mark, all the Matthean words not found in the Markan verse are to be categorized as Matthean insertions. The decision to base this crucial statistic on the paragraph rather than on the sentence reflects, according to Gundry, "an openness to Matthean creativity, as opposed to form critics' assigning unparallelled sentences to earlier traditions of a piecemeal sort" (p. 4). But not only is the antithesis a false one; Gundry is here in effect assuming as the basis for his statistical procedure precisely what he ends up proving with those statistics: Matthean

creativity. Identifying insertions by comparing clearly parallel sentences is the normal procedure and surely yields a more accurate figure, for only where Matthew clearly depends on a verbal parallel is it justified to speak of an insertion. When this procedure is followed, figures significantly different from Gundry's result. For instance, Gundry's figure of seven insertions for *ethnē* drops to one; the change with *eis* is from 24 to nine; with *dynamai* from 13 to seven; with *pas* from 63 to 38. On an average, according to my random sample, Gundry's insertion figures are halved when the sentence is made the basis of comparison.

To be sure, the effect of this is to increase Gundry's second category—occurrences unique to Matthew—by almost exactly the same number as the first figure is reduced. But this shift is significant since Gundry cites the insertion figure as the most important, and the figure for unique occurrences must be interpreted before it can be regarded as significant.

And this brings me to my second main criticism of Gundry's statistical procedure: He fails to interpret his raw figures by the use of comparable percentage figures from the other gospels or by the calculation of standard deviation. The point is that the number of unique occurrences of a particular word in Matthew becomes significant, however large it may be, only if it is demonstrated that Matthew used the term with greater frequency than would be the average for a Greek author writing on a similar subject. In addition, several words identified as "Mattheanisms" by Gundry simply do not occur often enough to justify a statistical conclusion. For instance, on p. 228 *hygiēs* is characterized as a term "well-liked" by Matthew, although he uses it only twice and Mark once.

My point is not that Gundry is always wrong in his identification of Mattheanisms or even that he is wrong most of the time. But I would contend that his statistical procedure results in a significant exaggeration of the number of Mattheanisms.

In my first two points I have argued that fundamental aspects of the procedure Gundry has used to isolate Matthean editorial work are highly suspect. The extent of Matthean redaction may not be nearly so great as Gundry contends. Even if we reduce the scope of Matthew's contribution, however, it is clear that he has edited the tradition that came to him—both in the choice of wording and in theological emphases. Ultimately the crucial question then is this: What is the nature of Matthew's editorial work? I have two criticisms of Gundry's approach to this issue.

First, he tends to assume that any Matthean redaction is theologically motivated. Matthew's addition of the reference to Judah and his brothers to the genealogy "prefigures the brotherhood of the church" (p. 14); the third person plural *kalesousin* in Matthew's quotation of Isa 7:14 turns it into a prediction of the Church's confession—even though Gundry recognizes the use of the third person "Aramaic" impersonal elsewhere in Matthew (p. 75); in 14:15, despite the fact that the phrase, as Gundry admits, is characteristic of him, Matthew's "when evening came" serves to associate the feeding of the 5000 with the last supper; and so on. Some of Matthew's changes are no doubt theological, but surely many more than Gundry allows are due to more prosaic factors such as variant traditions, stylistic considerations and the like.

A second criticism of Gundry's interpretation of Matthew's redaction is that he frequently moves too quickly from the identification of Matthean editorial

activity to Matthean creativity. We may take as characteristic Gundry's treatment of 14:28-31, the account of Peter's walking on the water. This is identified as a "haggadic midrash on discipleship" because of "the several echoes of the story about the earlier storm and of the preceding part of the present story, the heavily Matthean diction, the theological motifs characteristic of Matthew, and the possible allusions to the OT" (p. 300). Granting for the sake of argument the presence of all these characteristics, what can be validly concluded from them about the historicity of the episode? Some resemblances to both Matt 8:23-27 and 14:22-27 exist, but there are also obvious differences. And while the principle can be abused, it is important to remember that Jesus undoubtedly did and said similar things more than once in the course of a three-year itinerant ministry. The presence of Matthean diction in the account proves only that Matthew did not take over unedited any tradition he may have used. Whether he has rewritten a tradition, composed the narrative on the basis of his own eyewitness reminiscence, or fabricated the incident out of his head is simply not possible to determine on the basis of literary criteria. Nor, finally, does Matthean theological emphasis necessarily demonstrate Matthean creativity. We cannot assume that Matthew's theology was not also the theology of the tradition he uses or that an historical incident could not have contained the germ of such a theological perspective. All this Gundry recognizes, for he himself cautions against assuming that Matthean traits imply the wholesale creation of events (p. 584) and affirms the historicity of events that are narrated in texts containing such features (cf. p. 553 on 27:3-10). Yet time and again Gundry seems to ignore his own caution and decides against historicity for these reasons and nothing more.

Only two factors appear to constitute genuine objections to the historicity of gospel events: contradiction in the accounts, and obvious anachronisms. Gundry does cite a number of contradictions, but they are not enough to bear the weight of the theory resting on them. Furthermore, while some of them constitute real difficulties, others are capable of reasonable harmonization. Yet Gundry rather offhandedly dismisses a number of such viable solutions and generally tends to magnify any problems he finds. As an example of the latter, Gundry holds that Matthew contradicts Mark by taking away the disciples' misunderstanding of the feeding of the 5000 (p. 292; cf. p. 624). Yet it is not all clear that Matthew does this. To be sure he excludes material that could be taken as heightening the disciples' misunderstanding. But I do not find indications in Matthew's text that the disciples were understanding. Indeed the retention of the disciples' statement that "we have *only* five loaves here and two fish" can be plausibly interpreted as preserving the note of misunderstanding.

A second valid reason for charging the evangelists with historical error is the presence of obvious anachronisms—or, in general, the reporting of activity or teaching that does not ring true to Jesus' ministry and teaching. Yet Gundry seems peculiarly uninterested in these considerations. He frequently dismisses the authenticity of words attributed to Jesus because they match a tendency discerned in Matthew's gospel. But very rarely is the question asked whether that tendency could represent an authentic strand of Jesus' own teaching.

Summarizing the first part of my critique, then, I suggest that Gundry has exaggerated the scope of Matthew's redactional activity by employing a dubious source theory and misleading statistics. Moreover Gundry frequently jumps il-

legitimately from the literary and theological dimensions of Matthew's work to issues of historicity. Therefore I am not convinced that the evidence forces us to jettison the Church's traditional view of Matthew's intent in order to preserve the Church's traditional view of Scripture. But to say that the problem does not require a new solution is not to say that that solution is necessarily invalid. Gundry's identification of Matthew's gospel as a midrash must be assessed on its own merits. Such an assessment encounters a preliminary obstacle in the ambiguity of Gundry's application of the term midrash to Matthew's gospel. Midrash is used in a bewildering variety of ways in the scholarly literature, being applied to everything from a world view to a literary genre. At times Gundry speaks of Matthew as a midrash in the latter sense. But the identification of Matthew as a midrash according to genre bristles with difficulties. As Gundry himself pointed out in a previous publication, the usefulness of genre classification in determining authorial intent is directly dependent on the degree to which that genre possesses specific, readily identifiable characteristics.<sup>3</sup> If an author expects his readers to interpret his work in terms of a specific genre he must provide clear indications of his intention to write in that genre. What are the specific features characteristic of the first-century literary genre "midrash"? The only one clearly identified by Gundry is the mixture of history and nonhistory. But this feature is both extremely difficult for the reader to recognize and so broad that an amazingly diverse group of writings can be classified as midrash. This is clearly revealed in the list of works that Gundry puts forward as comparable to Matthew: These date, in their written form, from 150 B.C. to A.D. 1000 or so and include everything from apocalyptic visions to loose paraphrases of the OT. In other words midrash, according to Gundry's definition, becomes so broad and undefined a category that it ceases to possess any value as a determinant of authorial intent. In my opinion—and I think a majority of scholars who have worked in the field would agree—one cannot speak of a literary genre "midrash" until the dissemination of the rabbinic midrashim.

How then could Matthew's first readers have identified Matthew's purposes? By comparing his gospel with the purely historical tradition preserved in Mark and Luke, Gundry suggests. But identifying the intention of a book by comparison with other books is a very precarious undertaking. Moreover it is at least open to question whether Matthew's readers would have had access to the tradition in such a form that such comparison was possible. And even if this was the case it is highly unlikely that the average reader would have spotted the sort of detailed discrepancies that Gundry highlights. I question, therefore, whether any first-century reader would have been able to recognize Matthew's intention to mix history with unhistorical elaborations.

Gundry admits that it may have been difficult to identify Matthew as a midrash. But the real brunt of his argument is that, however difficult to recognize and whatever literary categories may be involved, Matthew does in fact mix history and nonhistory. In doing so Matthew gives us a gospel comparable to Jewish works that do the same thing without clearly stating such an intention. It is at this level—what Gundry terms "mode of communication"—that Matthew may

<sup>3</sup>R. Gundry, "Recent Investigations into the Literary Genre 'Gospel,'" *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 113.

justly be characterized as midrashic. Now the only way to refute this argument conclusively is to demonstrate that Matthew was not in fact writing this kind of narrative. To do this, however, would require a commentary at least as long as Gundry's, although the general points we have made earlier are applicable here. But what I would like to do at this point is to advance three reasons for questioning the appropriateness of comparing Matthew's narrative mode with that found in the Jewish books Gundry mentions.

First, it seems to me difficult to associate Matthew's narrative style more closely with that of Jubilees or the *Genesis Apocryphon* than with Mark or Luke. Yet this is what Gundry does. He refrains from classifying Mark and Luke as midrashic, characterizing Mark as "relatively artless" and Luke as manifesting a clear historical intention. But scholars who have carefully scrutinized Mark and Luke find as much evidence of redactional activity in them as Gundry does in Matthew. On what basis can their procedure be differentiated from Matthew's? And how could the first-century reader, however well-versed he may have been in Jewish literature, have recognized that Mark was writing straightforward history while Matthew was mixing history and nonhistory? And for that matter how can we, with no access to the events themselves, know, where disagreement occurs, which is the historical version?

A second crucial difference between Matthew and the Jewish midrashim lies in the basis for the alleged midrashic embellishments. The Jewish works are all of course expansions of OT material, and generally when the term has been applied to the gospels by scholars it has been to characterize the evangelists' use of the OT. Although Gundry is tempted to characterize Matthew as "a wholesale embroidering of the OT with the story of Jesus," he admits that Matthew must be viewed as a midrash on Mark and Q (p. 628). But is it justified to use the term midrash of the embellishment of any text? Are Shakespeare's historical plays then midrashim? More importantly, can one legitimately compare the homiletical expansion of a centuries-old religious text with Matthew's depiction of virtually contemporary events? Gundry recognizes this difficulty and suggests that the Jesus tradition quickly attained "a kind of canonical status" (p. 41). But this misses the point, for it assumes that Matthew was more interested in the tradition about Jesus than in the person of Jesus himself. Particularly is such a focus difficult to conceive in the case of an eyewitness to the events he narrates.

My third reason for questioning the legitimacy of comparing Matthew's procedure with that of Jewish "midrashists" is related to this last point. Not only does Matthew's close and personal involvement with the events he describes differentiate him from his Jewish compatriots, but the emphasis placed on the historical element itself also differs decisively. Midrashic expansion of OT texts had the purpose of drawing contemporary homiletical applications from OT narratives. The actual events in those narratives receded in importance, often acting simply as the "peg" on which new, unrelated teaching could be "hung." Matthew's perspective is entirely different. He writes from the conviction that the decisive revelation of God had recently been manifested in the historical actualities of Jesus' life and teaching. To say, as Gundry does, that "'Jesus said' or 'Jesus did' need not always mean that in history Jesus said or did what follows" (p. 630) attributes to Matthew an unconcern with history that seems to me at odds with one of the most distinctive features of the Christian message. I do not want to

imply that Matthew was a totally objective documentary historian of a kind that has never existed or that he was unconcerned about drawing out the significance of Jesus for the Church of his day. But I am suggesting that concern for historical actualities, which is the essential byproduct of the incarnation, kept him from combining history and nonhistory in the same way as did some Jewish authors.

In both these final two points I am arguing essentially that it is questionable whether the Christian community would have produced the same kind of literature as did the Jewish community. As Daniel Patte and others have pointed out, the differing presuppositions of religious communities give rise to very different modes of communication and literary genres.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that a Christian book like Matthew's gospel would not resemble Jewish literature in various specific characteristics. But it is to suggest the unlikelihood that Matthew would closely resemble Jewish midrashic work in his treatment of the area that most strongly differentiated Christianity from mainline first-century Judaism: the significance of the space-and-time facticity of historical events.

<sup>4</sup>D. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (SBLDS 22; Missoula, MT: Scholar's, 1975).