

Robert Gundry's View of Midrash in Matthew's Gospel by Dan Fabricatore

INTRODUCTION

In 1982 Robert Gundry caused quite a stir in the evangelical community with the release of his commentary titled *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). This was because Gundry proposed that Matthew was not always recording events as they took place in time and space. On the contrary, Matthew wrote events so as to fit his theological message, using midrashic techniques common in his day in rabbinical circles. Some of what Matthew wrote as historical events did not actually take place. In many instances, Matthew takes what Mark wrote as history and reinvents the account to fit his purpose. This reediting is so dramatic that the two accounts have nothing in common, resulting in what on the surface seems like two separate events. However for Gundry, one is historical (i.e. Mark, Q) and one which is theological (i.e. Matthew). Gundry's commentary is the fruit of *redaction criticism* (RC) gone awry.

Gundry's commentary is called "The first full-scale critical commentary on the Greek text of Matthew to appear in English since 1915."¹ It may be a commentary on Matthew but it is nowhere near to being a "full-scale critical commentary" on the Greek text. I am not convinced that it is even a commentary in the true sense of the word. Instead it is as Gundry states in the subtitle: *A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*. Gundry's commentary is on what Matthew is doing with the text. More specifically, what Matthew is doing with Mark and Q to accomplish his own purpose. And what Matthew is doing is an "art."

The commentary has what can be called a very brief introduction (1-11). This is followed by "The Commentary Proper" (13-597). Gundry then follows up with "Some Higher-Critical Conclusions" (599-622) dealing mostly with the authorship, issues that are usually found in standard commentary introductions. Gundry admits that his commentary is not a typical kind that is heavily documented, but one that he has developed along his own line of interpretation.²

It is in "The Theological Postscript" (623-640) where Gundry attempts to justify his conclusions regarding what Matthew did with the text through the midrashic technique that he employs. Gundry really never deals with the definition of midrash which is crucial to his commentary on the theological art of Matthew.³ He simply assumed that he is doing it on the other assumption

¹ *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). cf. editorial blurb on the inside jacket.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ For an excellent critique of this point regarding Gundry's commentary, see Philip Barton Payne's article, "Midrash and History in the Gospels with Special Reference to R. H. Gundry's *Matthew*" in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography*, vol. III, ed. by R. T. France and David Wenham, (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983): 195.

that his differences with Luke and Mark are so great that what he doing with the text cannot be anything but midrash, a technique heavily employed among first century Jewish exegetes.⁴ These Jewish techniques will be addressed below.

TERMINOLOGY

The term “midrash” is a Hebrew noun (*midrāš*; pl. *midrāšîm*) derived from the verb *dāraš* which means “to search” (i.e. for an answer). Therefore *midrash* means “inquiry,” “examination” or “commentary.”⁵ The word has come to refer to rabbinic exegesis. In this sense it is a process, a technique for approaching the sacred text. As we will see, Gundry has elevated it to a genre that needs to be interpreted in its own right, even when used with historical narrative.

Rabbinic Midrash did in fact hold to seven rules of interpretation around the time of Christ (These were expanded to thirteen in the second century). For instance, the first of these seven rules was called *Qal wāḥômer* or “light and heavy.” In this rule, what was true in the light (less important) was true in the heavy (more important). A New Testament example of this line of argument might be Luke 12:24:

24 “Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and *yet* God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!

If God care for birds, surely he cares for us.

Rabbinic midrash has two major areas: *Halakah* and *Haggadah*. Halakah midrash refers to legal interpretation while haggadah midrash refers to the interpretation of narrative and is normally understood as homiletical and therefore applicable and not legal interpretation. It attempted to fill in gaps in the Scripture and reconcile apparent contradictions.⁶ Gundry would see Matthew as employing the latter.⁷

Rabbinic literature of Matthew’s day did employ midrash on a large scale.⁸ Gundry holds that Matthew has employed these techniques therefore for his own theological purposes. However, what is controversial about Gundry is not so much that aspect of midrash that reworks of the text (“implicit midrash”) so much as the using of the Old Testament Scripture to make up new narrative that really never took place. As we will see later, this assumption of Gundry has no real validation from the Jewish hermeneutical practices of the first century.

⁴ Ibid., 628.

⁵ C. A. Evans, “Midrash” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 544.

⁶ Ibid., 545.

⁷ *Matthew*, 628.

⁸ cf. my discussion of Ellis and Longenecker. Ellis does a good job showing the differences between implicit midrash (the reworking of the text) and explicit midrash (citing of a text followed by an exposition of that text and then an application).

GUNDRY'S PRESUPPOSITIONS

Matthew was dependent on Mark and Q, apparently not on any of his own recollections.⁹

Since Mark is a main source for Matthew, when Matthew departs from Mark it is not additional material, but Markan or Q material reworked. For Gundry, the issue of wholesale rewriting exists whatever one's view of the Synoptic Problem. He notes,

We are not dealing with a few scattered difficulties. We are dealing with a vast network of tendentious changes. Taking a different view of the synoptic problem (e.g. that Mark and Luke used Matthew) offers no escape; for the tendencies merely run in another direction (Mark blackballed the disciples, relaxed Jesus' rigorism, and so on). Whatever synoptic theory we adopt-and even though we remain agnostic on the synoptic problem-somebody was making drastic changes.¹⁰

For Gundry, we might simply say that he benefits from two assumptions: First, that Mark wrote prior to Matthew, and secondly, that Mark's account was historical and Matthew's so theological; from Gundry's point of view. However many have called this into question. How can Gundry be so sure that Mark is not being theological with his sources while Matthew is being historical? Payne notes regarding this assumption of Gundry,

If he (Gundry) really believes this was true, how does he so confidently affirm the historical worth of Mark and Luke? He has no objective evidence that Mark and Q treated their sources in a qualitatively different way than Matthew. Perhaps they, too, were theologically motivated, not historically, and embroidered their sources unhistorically.¹¹

Midrash was an acceptable rabbinical practice of their day.¹²

The implication here is that the church simply failed for almost 2000 years to see what Matthew had done, until thankfully, the church came to reap the benefit of the historical-critical methodology of the past few centuries. The early fathers missed what Matthew was doing with midrash, Gundry believes, because they were cut off from the synagogues where such practices were "at home."¹³ While other scholars have no problem admitting the fact that midrash was a common practice of the day, it still has to be proved that it is being done all over the gospel of

⁹ D. A. Carson, "Gundry on Matthew: A Critical Review." *TrinJ 3 NS* (1982), 72, 88.

¹⁰ *Matthew*, 625.

¹¹ Payne, "Midrash and History in the Gospels with Special Reference to R. H. Gundry's *Matthew*," 203.

¹² *Matthew*, 628.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 634.

Matthew, as Gundry assumes.¹⁴ Ellis notes that such midrash does not twist the Old Testament in such a way so as to create stories about Jesus as Gundry has done with Matthew.¹⁵

Matthew's use of Mark is so loose, it must be midrash.

Gundry actually hides behind the doctrine of inspiration to validate his presuppositions regarding Matthew's theological approach to the life and ministry of Jesus. In other words, because of inspiration, we must assume that the changes were intended and sanctioned by God. God was behind the "looseness of informal language."¹⁶ Matthew's reinterpreting of existing sources is acceptable since it is in the text that God has approved. But this assumes that what Matthew wrote could not be historical.

Gundry writes,

Combinations of Matthew's favorite vocabulary (as shown by comparative word-statistics), style (especially the tight parallelism characteristic of extemporaneous speech), theological emphases, and habit of conforming traditional phraseology to the Old Testament-combinations of these features where he differs from and even disagrees, at the historical level, with Mark and Luke signal his redactional activity. We have also seen that at numerous points these features exhibit such a high degree of editorial liberty that the adjectives "midrashic" and "haggadic" are appropriate.¹⁷

Simply put, because Matthew differs at all signifies someone was editing.

GUNDRY'S PREMISE

Gundry is no fool and he knows exactly what he is arguing for in his commentary. Matthew has reworked the text and written narrative that did not exactly take place as he has written. Gundry's own words should speak for the man. In the opening words of his theological postscript he writes,

Clearly, Matthew treats us to history mixed with elements that cannot be called historical in a modern sense. All history writing entails more or less editing of materials. But Matthew's editing often goes beyond the bounds we nowadays want a historian to respect. It does not stop at selecting certain data and dressing them up with considerable interpretation (let alone reporting in the relatively bare style found on the front page of a modern newspaper). Matthew's subtractions, editions, and revisions of order and phraseology often show changes

¹⁴ cf. Payne, 194-209 who rejects this premise of Gundry.

¹⁵ E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 94. This assumption will be dealt with in a little more detail below.

¹⁶ *Matthew*, 625.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 628.

in substance; i.e., they represent developments of the dominical tradition that result in different meanings and departures from the actuality of events.¹⁸

At this point it would be helpful to show exactly what Gundry is saying that Matthew is doing with his sources. In other words, what does it mean that Matthew's tweaking of the text has resulted "in different meanings and departures from the actuality of events?"

EXAMPLES

While Gundry holds that Matthew is utilizing midrashic techniques in his entire gospel account, it is perhaps Gundry's comments in Matthew 1 and 2 that have generated the most controversy.

In Matthew 1:2-17 we have the genealogy of Jesus Christ that Gundry argues is not an attempt to trace Christ physically to David, Abraham, and Adam. Instead, it is a Christological statement that sets the tone for the kind of gospel narrative he intends to write.

Gundry states,

The massive transformation of a physical genealogy into a Christological statement has prepared us for the similar change of a historical report (cf. Luke 1:1-4) into a theological tale... We only have to suppose that Matthew had the traditions that later went into Luke 1-2 to see what happens under his artistry. He fuses the stories about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus just as he will assimilate their messages to each other in 4:17."¹⁹

Then in Matthew 1:18-25 the announcement and birth of Jesus is recorded. Gundry holds that it is a radical reworking of Luke. Matthew simply reinvents Luke in that he "turns the annunciation to Mary before her conceiving Jesus (Luke 1:26-38) into an annunciation to Joseph after her conceiving Jesus."²⁰ The Lukan account is historical, but Matthew's account is a theological statement, not an historical event.

In what is one of the most troubling of all examples, Gundry argues that the arrival of the magi never happened in Matthew 2:1-12. He states,

Matthew now turns the visit of the local Jewish shepherds (Luke 2:8-20) into the adoration by Gentile magi from foreign parts. Just as the four women (besides Mary) in the genealogy pointed forward to the bringing of Gentiles into the church, so also the coming of the magi previews the entrance of the disciples from all nations into the circle of those who acknowledge Jesus as the king of the Jews and worship him as God. The Matthean *ἰδοὺ* (34, 9) accentuates this role of the magi.

Characteristically, Matthew gets the magi from the OT- in particular, from Daniel 2:2 10 LXX Theod, a passage concerning a dream and therefore easily associated with this dream-

¹⁸ Ibid., 623.

¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

laden account (see 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; cf. also Theodotonic version of Dan 1:20; 2:27; 4:4; 5:7, 11, 15). The magi were astrologers. Matthew selects them as his substitute for the shepherds in order to lead up to the star, which replaces the angel and heavenly host in the tradition (Luke 2:8-15a).²¹

Matthew made up the magi to fit his own theological purpose. He even states that Luke's manger scene in 2:16 is replaced with Matthew's house visit (2:11) to facilitate a residence worthy of such noble visitors!²² Even the account of the gifts brought by the magi for the Christ child finds its source in the Old Testament.²³

Gundry's similar evaluation of Matthew's "literary and theological art" continues. The apparent flight of the Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Matthew 2:13-15 into Egypt was also theological and not historical. It was Matthew's reworking of the Luke's rendering of the Holy Family going up to Jerusalem for the presentation of the first-born (Luke 2:22f).²⁴ Matthew makes up the story of the family going into Egypt so he can use Hosea 11:1 to demonstrate God's outreach to Gentiles. The emphasis is on Jesus' sonship, not geography.²⁵

These "embellishments"²⁶ as Gundry calls them were put forward by Matthew so as to transform historical statements in the Old Testament "into messianic prophecies."²⁷ However detailed examinations of midrash calls into question the concept that exegetes had a propensity for creating narrative *ex nihilo*. Richard Bauckham is convinced of this truth after a thorough examination of Pseudo-Philo.²⁸ He states that his (Pseudo-Philo) "ingenuity in this field of exegesis is displayed not in creating events to fit prophecies, but in finding prophecies to fit events."²⁹ Bauckham goes on to say that as far as he could ascertain, the premise that New Testament writers would create events to fulfill prophecies has "no precedent in Jewish 'midrashic' literature."³⁰ R. T. France concurs with Bauckham's conclusion. France notes that

²¹ Ibid., 26-27.

²² Ibid., 31.

²³ Ibid., 32.

²⁴ Ibid., 32-34.

²⁵ Ibid., 34.

²⁶ Ibid., 37

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ R. Bauckham, "The *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* of Pseudo-Philo and the Gospels as Midrash," in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography*: 33-76.

²⁹ Ibid., 60.

³⁰ Ibid., 64.

there are great reservations that Matthew's embellishments were "typical of most first-century Jewish literature."³¹

Though many more examples can be used, these are enough to summarize the Gundry's view of the role of midrash in Matthew.³²

Perhaps what is most troubling about what motivates Gundry is what he views as the motivation of Matthew. Gundry holds that Matthew, in contrast to Mark, was moved by the remarkable life of Jesus to invent history. He declares,

Mark's gospel is relatively artless; and if it represents Peter's anecdotes concerning Jesus' ministry, as Papias's elder says it does, we have added reason to separate it from midrash and haggadah... We may put it this way: Jesus was so extraordinary that he evoked both efforts to recall his life as it was and efforts to amplify it. Evangelistic and pastoral purposes lay behind both kinds of effort. Amplification, no less than recollection, shows high regard for the historical Jesus.³³

This seems a bit bizarre to this writer. Gundry is stating that since Matthew reinvented, embellished, and transformed Mark to the point that he was making up new history, he in reality was declaring his high view of the historical Jesus.

Gundry goes on to state that none of what Matthew is doing "should occasion alarm."³⁴ Perhaps this was his hope, but in reality, his commentary started a firestorm among evangelicals. Anytime an evangelical commentary declares that a gospel author no less was not writing "reportorial history,"³⁵ he should not be so naïve about the response. It is enough to question one's claim about a high view of Scripture.

TENSION

Gundry's view of Matthew and his use of midrash leads to an inevitable tension. How can one be an evangelical and claim to hold to a high view of Scripture, and also think that Matthew is doing these kinds of things with the text?³⁶ This question has been raised about Gundry for some 20 years now.³⁷

³¹ "Postscript - Where Have We Got To, and Where Do We Go From Here?" in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography*, vol. III (289-99), 292.

³² cf. Carson, "Gundry on Matthew," 72-73.

³³ *Matthew*, 628.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 629.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 629.

³⁶ cf. Royce Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982): 245-51 for an excellent critique of Matthew, especially regarding the issue of Gundry's commitment to inspiration.

It seems that he is has covered himself by saying that midrash is a genre that has to be recognized and that midrash does these kinds of things with the text. What is the difference with this and “liberals” who see myth as a genre and then dismiss the first eleven chapters of Genesis as solely theological without any historical accuracy?

³⁷ There may be a shift going on in Gundry's thinking; cf. his latest book on John.