

## A RESPONSE TO "METHODOLOGICAL UNORTHODOXY"

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Anybody who believes both that truth is what corresponds to an actual state of affairs and that what the Bible says, God says, as Norman Geisler believes, might ask himself whether his understanding of inspiration corresponds to the actual state of affairs in the Biblical text. He might also remind himself that a text may address different kinds of states of affairs—e.g., historical kinds ("Jesus went into Galilee"), theological kinds ("God is spirit"), and mixed kinds ("Christ died for our sins")—and that truth and methods of communicating it fall into separate categories. Many intermediate points mark the spectrum from purely historical reporting to purely fictional writing. To fix this or that document or passage at this or that point on the spectrum, and to do so because of a conscious or unconscious judgment concerning what method of communication an author chose to use, says nothing about truth versus error. For an author's statements are true if they correspond to an actual state of affairs in the way he intends his words to be taken.

The exercise of hermeneutics—i.e., the application of exegetical rules for discovering the meaning intended by an author—necessarily precedes asking whether the intended meaning is true. Despite his stout affirmation that "a statement . . . means what the author meant by it," Geisler scarcely sticks a toe on the hermeneutical turf, where the real debate is taking place. This failure leaves his acceptable points of argument high and dry and irrelevant. For all one can tell from his discussion, no problems of interpretation exist in the Biblical text. Either that or they have all been solved. Yet he knows they are there, for if he had not happened on them before, he heard me recite a number of them when I read my paper "A Response to Some Criticisms of *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*" at the ETS meeting last December. And he has a copy of that paper. (Readers may get their own copy by writing to me at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California 93108, asking for it by title and sending \$1.00; it consists of fifty-one close-packed pages.)

Alongside the ignoring of textual problems stands Geisler's apparent insensitivity to differences in literary art. The Bible is anything but cut-and-dried. It has spice, dash, flair, variety. This fact is lost on Geisler's argument, which would look far different if it took into account a wider range of literary possibilities.

The ignoring of textual problems and of wider-ranging literary possibilities leads to equivocation on the term "methodological." In Geisler's overall thesis this term refers to a device used to reach an interpretation of the text. In the particulars of his argument it usually refers to a way of understanding the text—i.e., to the interpretation itself. Thus Geisler thinks that he is arguing against hermeneutical devices decided on in advance and brought to the text, but it turns out that he is arguing against hermeneutical decisions arrived at in the course of studying the text in its historical milieu. He needs to recognize that an exclusively historicizing view such as he favors for Biblical narrative may be just as much a

device brought to the text as any other device. Moreover, it stands in equal need of justification by a demonstration that it makes the best sense of the text in its milieu. Geisler does not provide such a justification. His argument pretends to deal with devices used to interpret the text. In fact, it presumes a certain interpretation against which he judges other interpretations false. But presumptions are not arguments.

To cite the truism that sincerity does not guarantee truth raises a question of meaning, not a question of method. Geisler says nothing about my method of studying Matthew's text in detail, comparing it with the other gospels, taking into account the ways in which Jewish authors of Matthew's era handled their sacred traditions, and in the light of the observed data making a considered judgment concerning his intended meaning—in short, the grammatical-historical method. Does Geisler have a better method? If so, I should like to know it. If not, let him show on the grounds of this method where I have erred. I only want to understand Matthew's meaning better so as to believe it more accurately and practice it more faithfully.

Both Geisler and I affirm that all Scripture is true. But neither his nor my saying so determines what truth a given part of Scripture is conveying. I do not hold to the truth of anything, let alone "many things," that contradict the truths of Scripture. Even if I did, how I could hold contradictories would be a philosophical rather than methodological question. Evangelicals have long worked with the principle of authorial intent and increasingly extended its application as the results of modern historical-critical and scientific studies have come in. We need only to think of the acceptability—even among those who hold to a young earth—of positing gaps in early Biblical genealogies. My interpretation of Matthew extends the principle of authorial intent yet farther and has the effect of relieving apparent contradictions in the Bible. In other words, it offers a better harmonization than traditional harmonizations have offered.<sup>1</sup>

According to Geisler, however, my interpretation has a genetic code like Origen's allegorism, and adopting allegorism caused Origen to deny the truth of some parts of Scripture despite his affirming its inspiration. But Geisler has ignored an elementary contradiction between my interpretation and Origen's allegorism: I look for the meaning intended by the human author and equate it with God's inspired Word, but Origen uses allegory to go beyond the humanly intended meaning, especially when it offends him, so as to mine out a different, spiritual meaning intended by God. One might therefore argue that Origen adopted allegorism because he thought literalism resulted in absurdity and contradiction. But for the sake of the argument let us grant to Geisler that allegorism was the cause rather than the effect. He should have said that Origen denies what he (Geisler) literalistically takes to be the truth of some parts of Scripture. Geisler's interpretation of those parts may well be correct, but to make his point he will have to show why his interpretation is better than Origen's. If successful, he will then face the wholly new question: Are Origen's misinterpretations serious enough to bar him from membership in the ETS? (Certainly Geisler would not in-

<sup>1</sup>The harmonistic effect has led some people to ask whether my interpretation is falsifiable. For an answer see my *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 636-637, and my ETS paper, "A Response," p. 36.



sist on agreement in every detail of Scriptural interpretation before accepting another's orthodoxy.)

In the meantime, we may wonder how Geisler will treat the grand army of orthodox allegorists. Jerome, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas come to mind. Why does Geisler not mention them instead of Christian Scientists, whom he calls modern allegorists, before going on to discuss Jack Rogers and Paul Jewett? How slipshod is the argument comes out in his failure even to identify Rogers' and Jewett's methods. Yet the article supposedly deals with unorthodox methodologies. This failure re-exposes the fact that Geisler is taking primary aim at interpretations he disagrees with, not so much at methods of interpretation. With respect to Rogers, for example, Geisler only identifies what he thinks are two contradictory beliefs (in Biblical inerrancy and in the presence of factual mistakes in the Bible). No particular method comes into the picture.

Geisler does identify my method, however—the "midrash method," which "in many respects" is "a kind of allegorical . . . interpretation" like Origen's (and presumably like that of Christian Scientists, too). Or at least he thinks he has identified my method. In fact, the judgment that such and such a passage is midrashic is exactly that—a judgment, not a method. The method is grammatical-historical ("historical" meaning "studied in its historical context," not necessarily consisting in historical narrative—for, as everyone agrees, the Bible contains many literary forms different from historical narrative). For Geisler, however, my method lands in allegorism simply because I do not think Matthew intended certain elements in his gospel to be taken literally, whereas Geisler does think Matthew intended them to be taken literally.

But of course not even Geisler takes all parts of the Bible literally. Doubtless he accepts figures of speech. Parables, too, even when they are not introduced as such but start out and continue as historical narrative (e.g., "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho" [Luke 10:30]). Irony poses a particularly difficult problem to Geisler and others who demand explicit formal indicators of intended meaning (which in the case of irony would destroy it) where most people recognize irony and like figures by intuition, which works well enough in a shared cultural environment. If Geisler saw two Biblical proverbs that taken literally contradict each other (say, Prov 26:4a, "Answer not a fool according to his folly," and 26:5a, "Answer a fool according to his folly"), he would doubtless appeal to the literary character of a proverb as a generalization, hyperbole, or something of the sort.

Along with other evangelicals Geisler would doubtless allow advances in natural science, though they are hardly inerrant, to affect his understanding of some Scriptural statements. To take a very simple example, the Copernican revolution has taught him to deny that the sun literally rose over the land (even though the Biblical writer almost surely thought of the phenomenon that way) the day fire and brimstone rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:23). Somehow Geisler will get around the literal meaning—perhaps by saying the statement is phenomenological, perhaps by saying the unscientific standpoint reflected in the statement is not germane to the point of the passage. No matter. I only want to apply this kind of hermeneutics more widely, more consistently, and—in relation to literary norms in the Biblical environment—more sensitively.

Time after time we read that I deny that the Bible is wholly true because I

deny that some events reported in the gospel of Matthew actually occurred. But Geisler can make this charge only by skirting the question whether Matthew really means to report actual occurrences. Geisler himself does not believe that everything reported in Matthew is historically true. He may believe in the historicity of Jesus' speaking parables, for example, but he hardly believes in the historicity of everything reported in the parables. According to everybody's exegetical estimate they carry a different intention (no less true for being different), a non-historical one. In support of my position the *Commentary* on Matthew and the ETS paper defending it both contain a mass of exegetical data, including comparisons with the other synoptics and with treatments of sacred traditions by Jewish authors starting in the OT period and extending right through Matthew's time. Until Geisler goes into these matters he has not earned the right to say that "to deny that what the Bible reports in these passages actually occurred is to deny in effect that the Bible is wholly true."

Geisler comes closest to exegetical considerations in his argument that Matthew reports items I attribute to midrashic embellishment "in the same sense that he reports other events" I believe actually occurred. "In the same sense" represents what Geisler has to prove, however. He does not prove it. He neither mentions nor refutes any of the evidence detailed in my *Commentary* and ETS paper. Nor does he put forward positive evidence supporting his own view, but offers the following statement: "In fact some stories that seem more likely candidates for midrash (for example, the appearance of angels to the Jewish shepherds in Luke 2) Gundry takes as literal, whereas the earthly pilgrimage of astrologers following a sign in the sky he takes as purely imaginary (i.e., midrash)." But why should Geisler think angelic appearances are more likely midrashic than the earthly pilgrimage of the Magi? Because angelic appearances are supernatural and earthly pilgrimages are not? If so, he is arguing on a prejudice against the supernatural that I have never made the basis of my exegetical judgments. Because angelic appearances abound in Jewish midrashic literature? If so, I urge him to broaden his comparisons with that literature and put them to interpretative use.

Again trying to expose an inconsistency, Geisler asks, "Why should one consider the report of the bodily resurrection of the saints after Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 27) allegorical and yet insist that Jesus' resurrection, which was the basis for it (cf. 1 Cor 15:23), was literal?" Before answering the question we should note Geisler's giving us a good example of misrepresenting the Bible in order to defend it, at least his view of it. Perhaps unconsciously, he makes things easier for his view by saying that Matt 27:51b-53 has the saints rising after Jesus' resurrection. But it does not. Matthew rather puts their resurrection in conjunction with Jesus' death, accompanied by the rending of the veil, an earthquake, the rocks' splitting, and the tombs' opening up. It is only the saints' exit from their tombs, entrance into Jerusalem, and appearance to many people there that come after Jesus' resurrection.

The answer to Geisler's question lies in the specifics of diction, parallelism, OT language, theological *Tendenz*, and omission by the other evangelists as compared with similar phenomena throughout Matthew, often where those phenomena resist traditional methods of harmonization but look like the practices of Jewish midrashists of the period. On the other side, Paul's listing people who saw the risen Jesus and his writing that most of the five hundred mentioned in the list



were still alive—with the implication, "If you don't believe, ask them"—show that he intends his references to Jesus' resurrection to be taken historically (1 Cor 15:5-9). After all, historical facts may be passed on unchanged in some reports, embellished and otherwise changed in other reports. Neither procedure rules out the possibility of the other. The question is one of textual, contextual, and as many other kinds of data as we can assemble for interpreting each passage accurately. Abstracted from such data, Geisler's "logical extension [of my recognition of midrash to a denial of major doctrines of Scripture such as Jesus' resurrection]" means little. Furthermore, we must allow those data to lead us. We should not manipulate them.

Beneath the opposition to midrashic style seems to lie a suspicion that it is deceitful. But once we get inside it by understanding its nature and purpose (as we do outside Scripture) it is no more deceitful than a metaphor, a hyperbole, or any one of a number of Biblical figures—right up to a parable.<sup>2</sup> To avoid deception we have to get inside them, too. But nobody denies their presence in Scripture because of that necessity. Furthermore, the evidence that Matthew treated Mark and Q midrashically is not affected by the question whether it was right for him to do so. If the evidence is convincing, evangelicals will have to defend the ethics of midrash, not deny the evidence for it.

But if we allow a member of the ETS to recognize midrash in Matthew, Geisler argues, the statement of the Society ("The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs") turns into "an empty formula" that "does not imply that the Bible actually affirms anything in particular." Half-correct, half-incorrect, I think. That the statement equates the Bible with God's Word surely constitutes a meaningful doctrine that falsifies half of Geisler's statement, for lacking the equation we would have to search out another starting point for our other beliefs. That the statement does not commit anybody to a particular interpretation of the Bible makes Geisler's statement half-correct, and for this very reason the ETS calls its statement a "doctrinal basis" rather than a creed. Despite his arguing for an interpretative by-law rather than a change in or addition to the doctrinal basis, Geisler's observation tends toward adding doctrines, such as the fundamentals of Jesus' virgin birth and deity, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and return. For, as the Jehovah's Witnesses show us, equating the Bible with God's inerrant Word and using a literalistic method of interpretation do not guarantee orthodoxy.

To come at the issue another way, I could easily agree to the by-law that Geisler proposes: "Any hermeneutical or theological method the logically necessary consequences of which are contrary to or undermine confidence in the complete truthfulness of all of Scripture is unorthodox." But if he thinks the wording of such a by-law would rule out midrashic interpretation, on what grounds would it not rule out the day-age theory allowed by so sturdy a conservative as Gleason Archer, or the positing of six Petrine denials of Jesus by so stalwart a battler for the Bible as Harold Lindsell? Should Archer and Lindsell bow out of the ETS because they quite consciously and formally countenance interpretations that fly in the face of what the average reader would take the texts to mean? Does a geologi-

<sup>2</sup>Cf. J. R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* 6 (1974/75) 319-332, on the distinction between fiction and deception and on the mixing of fiction and nonfiction.

cal age have an "evening and a morning"? Would Geisler say he has three children if he has six (or five, as he actually has)? Would E. J. Young, author of *Thy Word Is Truth*, find himself, along with "most orthodox Protestant scholars," outside the pale because the history of the Hebrew language and other considerations hardly available to most readers made him deny Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes despite the seeming claim of such authorship, "supported by references to great wisdom (1:16) and great works (2:4-11), allusions which seem to refer to Solomon"?<sup>3</sup> Small points, perhaps—but, as Geisler says, the method behind them may "lead (by logical extension) to a denial of major doctrines of Scripture."

I may build my summary on Geisler's own summary, which takes the form of a syllogism: "(1) the ETS statement demands belief in the entire Bible; (2) Gundry denies part of the Bible; (3) therefore Gundry's view does not really conform to the ETS statement." Philosopher that he is, Geisler knows better than I the difference between validity and truth. His syllogism may be logically valid, but the truth of its conclusion depends on the truth of each of its propositions. I deny only some of what Geisler thinks the Bible affirms, not any of what I think the Bible affirms. So let Geisler prove by grammatical-historical exegesis the truthfulness of his minor proposition. He will, I believe, have to write his own detailed commentary on those passages where his judgment on their intended meaning differs from mine. My midrashic understanding of them is not an interpretative method but an interpretative conclusion. For me it has neither the purpose nor the effect of denying inerrancy. On the contrary, it better enables inerrancy to be held in the light of advancing scholarship. At the same time I deny adopting a midrashic understanding in order to defend inerrancy. The Theological Postscript to my *Commentary* was truly a postscript, thought out and written down after most of the exegetical and higher-critical comments, and at the suggestion of a former colleague. I took up his suggestion in order to allow my exegetical and higher-critical investigations and my theological presuppositions to inform each other.

To say more would be only to play variations on the theme that Geisler has not really entered the debate. He missed the point. But thanks to the editor of *JETS* for allowing me to reply, and assurances to both Geisler and all readers of this *Journal* that I take no offense whatever at being called to account. It is good for the soul.

<sup>3</sup>E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 347.