

IS THERE MADNESS IN THE METHOD? A REJOINDER TO ROBERT H. GUNDRY

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I. SOME IRONY

There is a certain irony about Gundry's response. He declares that his opponent has "not really entered the debate," and yet he debates with him. He insists that "Geisler scarcely sticks a toe on the hermeneutical turf," and yet he plants both feet there to remove me. He claims my presentation "missed the point," but he insists on attempting to refute it anyway. Gundry says that no real argument was presented against his view, and yet he uses some 3000 words to refute it.

One thing seems clear about this kind of response: It has the effect of convincing the unsophisticated reader that the opposing view has no real basis while one repeats his own argument. However, the serious reader wants to see the arguments; he does not want to argue about whether they are arguments.

II. SOME PLAUSIBILITY

On first reading of Gundry's response it appears plausible. The basic reason for this is found largely in his use of loaded terms. When describing his own view Gundry uses laudatory words such as that it takes "into account a wider range" of things; it is based on a "method of studying Matthew's text in detail"; it engages in "making a considered judgment." Thus he claims to understand the text "more accurately" and to apply his method "more widely," "more consistently" and "more sensitively." Further, Gundry describes his view as based on a "mass of exegetical detail about the text" that enables him to "get inside it by understanding its nature and purpose." In short, Gundry labels his method as "better . . . in the light of advancing scholarship." Of course, such praiseworthy self-descriptions have the effect of favorably disposing one toward his position.

However, when describing the opposing view Gundry uses loaded terms such as "truism," "literalistic" and "exclusively historicizing." It is based on "presumptions" and only "pretends to deal with" but "has ignored" and "scarcely sticks a toe on" the turf. Further, Gundry declares that our criticism is based on "suspicion" and calls our analysis "slipshod." The use of these words by Gundry has the effect of prejudicing the reader against the objections raised against his view. However, the serious reader will cut through the literary verbiage to discover what argument may be embedded therein. So let us take a look at the argument.

III. THE HEART OF THE ARGUMENT

Gundry states correctly the central argument against his view and even admits it is valid. To repeat it: "(1) The ETS statement demands belief in the en-

tire Bible; (2) Gundry denies part of the Bible [*de facto*]; (3) therefore Gundry's view does not really conform to the ETS statement."

Gundry disagrees with the second premise, (1) insisting that we do not really provide any arguments for it and (2) implying that one must write a critical commentary on Matthew in order to argue this point properly.

Let me respond to the last point first. First of all, there are many others who have written critical commentaries on Matthew who do not agree with Gundry's conclusions. In fact, the vast majority of NT scholars disagrees with Gundry. Second, one does not have to write a commentary on Matthew in order to recognize that Matthew is reporting an historical event when he speaks of the Magi. In fact, Gundry is one of very few evangelical Bible scholars who cannot see history here. Perhaps the whole army is out of step with Gundry. On the other hand, maybe "much learning doth make thy method bad." Third, it is wrong to deny, as Gundry does, that "events reported in the gospel of Matthew actually occurred." An "event" is a happening, and all happenings have happened. And a report is "a statement of fact" (Webster). Thus if Matthew is reporting events, then they are factual happenings.

In order to defend his view Gundry must claim that Matthew is not reporting any events here, but is really creating myths. But if Matthew can create myths about Jesus' life that are not true, then he can also create sayings of Jesus that Jesus never said. If this were the case, then we would be left with no assurance as to the truth of what Jesus actually did or said.

As to Gundry's first point, a careful reading of my article will show that it contained many arguments against Gundry's "midrash" interpretations. Let me summarize them here.¹ Midrash is wrong:

1. Because Matthew presents these events as history in the same way he presents other events as history, with no literary clues that they should be taken non-historically.

2. Because these events are less likely to be midrash than are some other gospel stories with more characteristic Jewish features (like singing angels, Luke 2).

3. Because Gundry's method is just a modern (albeit limited) version of the allegorical method, which evangelicals reject for good reasons—not the least of which is that it threatens the historical underpinnings of Christian truths.

4. Because in practice Gundry's midrash view rejects a correspondence view of truth implied in an inerrancy commitment (a "report" of an "event" must be factually true, especially an inspired report).²

5. Because denials of the truth of inerrancy can be *de facto* as well as *de jure* (Gundry's view is the former).

¹Space does not permit elaborating these arguments here. Most of them have been discussed more fully by others many times.

²See N. L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *BSac* (October-December 1980) 327-339; "The Concept of Truth in the Contemporary Inerrancy Debate," *The Living and Active Word of God* (ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 225-236 for a defense of the correspondence view of truth. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy's "Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics" (1982) agrees: "We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts" (Article VI).

6. Because mere confession of inerrancy is not enough; conformity to reality is also necessary.

7. Because the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Theological Society implies that there is "evangelical" theological truth held by its members, which is undermined by Gundry's method.

8. Because unless one's method (and its resulting conclusions) is subject to orthodox criteria, then the ETS statement is vacuous and all-inclusive (of neo-orthodox, liberals and cultists).

Gundry only "responded" in part to some of these arguments. He refuted none of them and bypassed most of them.

IV. SOME MISREPRESENTATION

Gundry's response gains some plausibility (but loses credibility) by misrepresentation. Some of this is accomplished by stereotyping the opposing view as "exclusively historicizing" or "literalistic." He also assumes (wrongly) that I believe there must be explicit formal indicators of irony in the text. In fact, I believe there need only be implicit indicators in a text. Gundry also confuses what the Biblical writers thought with what they taught regarding the sun's rising. They may have personally believed in a geocentric universe, but what they affirmed in the text is that the sun is observed to rise and set.³ This is literally true.⁴ In fact, current meteorologists' reports still refer to "sunrise" and "sunset."

Gundry also misrepresents the "literal" hermeneutic by picturing it as what "takes all parts of the Bible literally."⁵ This is an old straw-man argument. Nor do we, as Gundry wrongly suggests, desire to "get around the literal meaning" in difficult passages. On the contrary, we want to discover the literal truth of the passage. Once we do this we believe the conflict with other passages will disappear, since God does not contradict himself.

Lacking substantial charges Gundry even manufactures one to refute. He assumes (wrongly) that we charge the midrash understanding as being "deceitful." We never made or implied such a claim. We simply believe midrash is false, as do most other scholars.

Gundry makes a good point when he distinguishes between a hermeneutical device and a decision one arrives at by using that method. However, this distinction is irrelevant to our case. For decisions are based on devices; one's theology is implied in his methodology. A bad hermeneutic will lead to bad interpretations.

³Placing the meaning in the author's mind, rather than in the text, seems to be a root problem in contemporary hermeneutics (see n. 5 below).

⁴"The ICBI statement (see n. 2 above) is clear on this point: "WE AFFIRM the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text. WE DENY the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support" (Article XV).

⁵The "literal" hermeneutic does not mean that all the Bible is to be taken literally. It means that the whole Bible is literally true, not that everything is true literally. However, lacking literary clues in the text to the contrary, when an event is reported as having occurred, the literal (historical-grammatical) method does entail that we take it as factual.

One's faulty conclusion flows logically from faulty presuppositions and procedures.

V. A CRUCIAL MISUNDERSTANDING

What precisely is the faulty basis that leads Gundry to allegorize away the literal truth of gospel events? He stoutly claims his method is the "grammatical-historical" hermeneutic. However, there is serious question as to whether this is so. Gundry tips his hand that he has departed from the traditional hermeneutic when he speaks of the evangelical use of "intention" as being "*increasingly extended* [in] its application as the results of modern historical-critical and scientific studies have come in." Then he frankly admits, "My interpretation of Matthew extends the principle of authorial intent *yet farther*."⁶ But does the traditional historical-grammatical method permit this kind of stretching of authorial intent to include the reporting of events that never occurred (that is, falsehoods)? It seems to me that the answer is clearly negative.

The heart of the problem is in an equivocation on the word "intention." Traditionally, this word was used by evangelicals to indicate meaning expressed in the text. However, more recently there has been a subtle shift of the meaning of the word "intention" to include the thought and purpose of the author behind the text, not simply the meaning expressed in the text. Gundry reflects this equivocal use of "intention" when he speaks of his method as helping him understand the "purpose" of the author. Purpose is "why"; meaning is "what." One can understand meaning (what the author said) apart from purpose (why the author said it). For example, the meaning (what) of Exod 23:19 is clear ("you are not to boil a kid in the milk of its mother"), even if we do not know the specific purpose (why) for which this command was given. Was it commanded to avoid an idolatrous practice? Because it was cruel? Because it was aimed at preserving the dignity of the parent-child relationship? Or because God wanted his people to avoid indigestion? All of these and more have been ventured as guesses as to why the command was given. But the children of Israel did not need to know why; all they needed to know was what it meant, and that is clear without knowing the purpose.

Now it seems to me that Gundry's hermeneutical error is in confusing "what" (meaning) and "why" (purpose). In order to do this the ambiguity in the word "intention" is utilized ("intention" can mean either what is expressed or why [purpose] it is expressed). But "purpose" (why) is not what the traditional historical-grammatical method meant by the "intention" of the author.⁷

This shift in the meaning of the word "intention" is seen even more clearly when Gundry speaks of the alleged "thought" in the author's mind regarding a

⁶Italics mine.

⁷St. Anselm stated the traditional understanding succinctly: "Teacher. For what purpose is an affirmation uttered? Student. In order to signify the existence of what exists." The purpose of a passage is to convey the truth (which corresponds to reality). In brief, purpose is found in the truth; the truth is not found in the purpose. That is, meaning determines purpose. Purpose does not determine meaning. Gundry has the cart before the horse. See St. Anselm, *Truth, Freedom and Evil: Three Philosophical Dialogues* (New York: Harper, 1967) 93-94.

geocentric world (in Joshua 10). Gundry fails to recognize that the locus of meaning (and truth) for an evangelical is in the text, not in the mind of the author behind the text. It is the *graphai* that are inspired, not the author's intentions behind them. All we know of the author's "intentions" is expressed in the inspired text.⁸ No method is legitimate for an evangelical if it goes behind or beyond the text to find the meaning. Evangelicals should seek God's truth in the inspired text. Just as beauty is not behind the painting (in the artist's intention) but is expressed in the painting, even so meaning is not found behind the text (in the author's intentions) but is found in the text (in the author's affirmations). It is not clear that Gundry sees this or, if he does, whether he acknowledges it is true.

In short, while Gundry claims his method is the orthodox historical-grammatical method, it actually seems to be more like the neo-orthodox method of looking for the religious or spiritual purpose of the author and making this "purpose" hermeneutically determinative of the meaning of a passage.⁹ Whatever the case, for Gundry the concept of intention or purpose is not being used in a way evangelicals have hitherto considered legitimate.¹⁰

VI. SOME REVEALING ADMISSIONS

When one reads carefully Gundry's response there are some revealing admissions. One such admission is found in his assumption that methodology is not a philosophical question. Methodology most certainly is a philosophical issue, and the failure to recognize this has caused many NT scholars to buy into a false philosophy (and theology) by way of a bad methodology.¹¹ There is no one so susceptible to a false philosophical presupposition as a person who does not believe he has philosophical presuppositions. Such presuppositions are often unwittingly adopted through linguistic studies.

Another revealing admission made by Gundry is that "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." This is sadly true. The problem is that "modern" so often entails naturalistic or unorthodox premises. And there is no reason an evangelical should accept either methods or results based on naturalistic or unorthodox premises. For in accepting these "modern" views evangelicals capitulate some of the truth of Scripture to the prevailing "scholarship" of our time. In so doing they may gain acade-

⁸For a discussion of the misuse of intention see Geisler, "Concept," and J. Feinberg, "Noncognitivism: Wittgenstein," *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots* (ed. N. L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 194-196.

⁹One of the main routes by which this neo-orthodox influence (of using purpose to determine meaning) entered evangelicalism is Jack Rogers, who got it from G. C. Berkouwer, who in turn changed his view after reading Karl Barth. See J. Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1979) 427.

¹⁰Anyone interested in further discussion on the point should write to me at Dallas Theological Seminary for a copy (\$1.00) of the paper given at the 1983 Southwest Regional meeting of ETS: "Meaning and Purpose: The Cart and the Horse."

¹¹For example see N. L. Geisler, "The Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy," *Inerrancy* (ed. N. L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 151-196.

mic acceptance, which many desire, but only at the high cost of evangelical beliefs. In effect they trade orthodoxy for academic respectability.

Perhaps the most relevant statement related to our Society is where Gundry admits that "the [ETS doctrinal] statement does not commit anyone to a particular interpretation of the Bible." If this is so, then anyone could believe that the Bible is teaching anything (except that the Bible is errant) and still belong to the "Evangelical" Theological Society. I doubt whether this is what the founding fathers envisioned. If it was, it is now obvious that a change is desperately needed.

VII. A DOGMATIC INTERPRETATION

Despite Gundry's apparent openness to criticism and to a wide range of viewpoints, he sometimes becomes dogmatic when one differs with his interpretation of Matthew. He speaks of his own "considered judgment" as based on "a mass of exegetical detail." Thus he believes that those who disagree with him must "earn the right" to criticize his conclusions. Does he mean that only another NT scholar has this right to critique his view? Or does he mean that only a NT scholar who has written a critical commentary on Matthew has the right to criticize his position? In either case, I would like to make two points. First, the issue is one of methodology (which leads to unorthodox conclusions), and methodology is philosophy. Hence Christian philosophers have a special right (even duty) to enter this discussion. Second, NT scholars have analyzed Gundry's view, and nearly all disagree with him. Third, conclusions come from methods the way meat flows from a meat grinder. No one denies Gundry's ability as a NT exegete. I for one readily admit his tremendous ability to grind out a refined hermeneutical product from the NT text by use of his highly sharpened method. However, we must remember that when one puts baloney into a meat grinder, he gets baloney out of it, no matter how well it is ground.

Let me give a case in point regarding Gundry's dogmatism. When I suggested that Matt 27:52-53 says the saints were not resurrected until after Jesus was resurrected, Gundry chided me for "misrepresenting the Bible to defend it." But Gundry knows full well that many other scholars hold the view I presented.¹² Yet so closely does Gundry identify his interpretation of the Bible with the Bible itself that when one disagrees with Gundry's view he is charged with misrepresenting the Bible.

On the contrary, many scholars hold the view I presented. Lange wrote, "Christ's death opened their tombs. His resurrection raised them to life again, that He might be the *first-born* from the dead (. . . Col. 1:18) and the *first-fruits* of them that slept (. . . I Cor. 15:20, 23)."¹³ Calvin declared that "the resurrection of the saints which is shortly after added followed in my opinion the actual resurrection of Christ. It is absurd for some interpreters to imagine that they spent three

¹²As a matter of fact there are many scholars who take the view (against Gundry) that the saints (of Matt 27:51-53) were not resurrected until after Jesus' resurrection; cf. A. Willoughby, ICC (3d ed., 1972); J. Wenham, *JTS* 32 (April 1981) 150-152.

¹³See J. P. Lange, *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan reprint, n.d.) 528.

days alive and breathing, hidden in tombs." Thus "it seems likely to me that at Christ's death the tombs at once opened: at His resurrection some of the godly men received breath and came out and were seen in the city."¹⁴ So what Calvin calls "absurd" Gundry apparently takes to be virtually self-evident. It just goes to show how easy it is for one to become so enamored with his own view that he treats other views as nonviews.¹⁵

VIII. SOME FALSE COMPARISONS

Gundry claims his view is no more unorthodox than Archer's day-age view or Lindsell's six denials of Peter. But this comparison is invalid. Neither Archer nor Lindsell denies that events reported in the Bible actually occurred. Archer does not deny that there were literal time-periods in which God literally created all living things. He does not claim that Genesis 1 is myth. He only raises the legitimate exegetical question as to how long these literal time-periods were. Likewise, Lindsell does not deny the literal truth of the report of Peter's denials. He does not say the story is midrash or allegorical. He only raises the appropriate harmonizational question of how many of these denials there were. Gundry, on the other hand, denies that some events reported in the Bible actually happened. He believes Matthew created them in order to teach some spiritual truth. This is worlds apart from what Archer and Lindsell do.

Another comparison made by Gundry confuses the issue. He speaks of the "grand army of Christian allegorists" as though his view was no different than that of Augustine or Aquinas. But neither of these men denied the literal truth of any event reported in the gospels or anywhere else in Scripture. They built their allegory within or on top of, not instead of, the literal interpretation. Augustine wrote *A Literal Commentary on Genesis*,¹⁶ and Aquinas said that "all meanings are based on one, namely the literal sense." Thus "nothing false can underlie the literal sense of Scripture."¹⁷ In short, neither Augustine nor Aquinas used the allegorical sense to deny the literal sense, as Gundry does. Rather, they used allegory to build on the literal sense. By contrast, Gundry's allegorical view denies the literal truth of the passages. Thus Gundry's comparison is a false one.

IX. SOME CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

There are many other interesting points raised by Gundry, but space does not permit discussing them. There are, however, some crucial questions that Gundry did not clearly answer. I will repeat them here and ask Gundry to respond to them.

¹⁴See J. Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke* (ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3. 211-212.

¹⁵In fact there is reason to believe that Gundry's midrash understanding prejudices his mind to favor the interpretation he takes because it appears to some to be inconsistent with Mark who supposedly wrote first. See the comment in Willoughby, ICC.

¹⁶See St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman, 1982), esp. pp. 41, 45, 60.

¹⁷See T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 1. 39.

1. Granted that all the following were able and willing to sincerely sign the ETS doctrinal statement, how would you vote on their membership:
 - a. Averroes. Yes or No?
 - b. Origen. Yes or No?
 - c. Jack Rogers. Yes or No?
 - d. Paul Jewett. Yes or No?
 - e. Mary Baker Eddy. Yes or No?
 - f. Karl Barth. Yes or No?
2. Is there any method of interpreting Scripture (with its resultant conclusion) that would be grounds for eliminating someone from membership in ETS? If so, what? If not, why not?
3. Could you conscientiously sign all the articles of the "Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics" (1982) from the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy?¹⁸ If not, specify which one(s) and why.
4. Where is the "intention" of the Biblical authors located: behind their words, or in their words? If it is in the words of Scripture, is our knowledge of it limited to the words of Scripture?

X. A PERSONAL PLEA

In conclusion let me express a personal word. Bob, we all love you and respect your scholarship. But scarcely anyone agrees with your position. We urge you to reconsider your view. If you cannot conscientiously change your view to conform with your evangelical brethren, then being the gentleman that you are, we would ask you to resign from ETS and spare the organization from the difficult choices that will otherwise be necessary.

¹⁸It is especially important that Gundry indicate whether he could conscientiously sign Article XIV, which reads: "WE AFFIRM that the Biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact. WE DENY that any such event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the Biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated."