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**Herbert W. Basser**. *The Mind behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1-14.* Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009. xvii + 377 pp. $69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-934843-33-8; $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-934843-34-5.

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**Early Rabbinic Rhetoric in Matthew?**

Many New Testament scholars deem traditions underlying the Gospel of Matthew too early to evince "rabbinic"-like forms and content. Herbert W. Basser argues otherwise. His creative volume (the first of a proposed two) spotlights apparent affinities between rhetorical motifs ensconced within the canonical Matthew and rabbinic rhetorical texts available to us only from later eras. Since both bodies emanate from the same (Jewish) religious tradition–even manifesting "arcane linguistic terms that overlap" or "fit hand-in-glove"–Basser finds it not only methodologically valid to posit here genetic relationships but also "foolhardy" not to (pp. 243-244).

For his comparative applications, Basser accords priority to the earliest post-70 CE rabbinic analogues he can find. Still, he has "no qualms" about drawing on literary formulations of a later date should they prove even more instructive. For he insists that the rhetorical core of Jewish tradition by its very nature holds firm over time–i.e., with similar forms (often the same words) carried over from one generation to the next. By the "mind" behind this Gospel, then, Basser means not Matthew's final writer/editor but the erudite imagination of a shared, collective "mind" of Jewish rhetorical teachings during (even antecedent to) the early first century and continuing through and far beyond Matthew's day. Early Jewish(-Christian) raconteurs were conversant with this mind-set which resonated throughout their storytelling about Jesus, likely in Aramaic, during and shortly after Jesus' lifetime.

That Matthew so emphasizes Jesus' involvement in legal argumentation signals to Basser its certain basis in early apostolic memory. But the Gospel writer/editor himself does not share let alone celebrate this early rabbinic-like cast. This is because the major split between Christianity and Judaism is final already shortly after 70 CE, and Matthew is positioned outside the Jewish(-Christian) community–writing from what appears the perspective of a Gentile, or a Jew-turned-Gentile. Accordingly, early legalistic exchanges between Christian and Jew appear, in Matthew, with their original luster dulled, even tarnished, at the least because they seemed pointless to Gentiles. Also, the shift of tradition from Aramaic to Greek allowed anti-Jewish bias to creep in, underscored further when this (presumably) Gentile editor superimposes his own anti-Pharisaic slant. We cannot gauge how accurately participation by the historical Jesus himself is here still preserved, but any contentiousness we find ascribed to him likely derives from the Gospel writer's personal rhetoric.

Consistent with these positions, Basser refuses to chalk up this Gospel's anti-Jewish sentiment to *intra muros* (in-house) sectarian squabbling between Jews of different outlooks. Rather, it reflects the editor's own outright supersessionism–his contention that God has replaced the Jews with another "nation" (21:43)–by definition non-Jews (i.e., Gentiles). Basser exposes the editorial function of the "lost sheep of … Israel" texts (10:5-6; cf. 15:24), which cast Jesus himself as restricting his disciples' mission to the Jews. Actually, these passages are but a Matthean ploy to set up and to blame Jewish recalcitrants for the eventual reversal of Jesus' instructions–from going "*nowhere* among the Gentiles" (10:5) instead to going *solely* to the Gentiles. Matthew accomplishes this transition through a gradually intensifying anti-Jewish progression culminating in the "Great Commission" (28:19) whose meaning must be not "make disciples of all *nations*" (i.e., including Jews) but "of all *Gentiles*" (i.e., excluding Jews).

Having myself argued for each point in the preceding paragraph, I find many of Basser's positions refreshing. But while thorough in advancing his primary concerns, he opts to shortchange related arenas that other New Testament scholars deem fundamental (pp. ix, xiii). This becomes problematic, because, when his primary

concerns intersect those secondary areas, Basser's judgments can come across as "intuitional" (even if correctly so) rather than thoroughly worked through. Since he is acutely aware (p. 115) that his positions arouse intense controversy, even hostility, from those who "sneer at using rabbinic materials to help interpret the Gospel" (p. xii), would he not have been better served to fill in all lacunae possible, thereby shoring up his argumentation and rendering at least some of his critics more receptive to his proposals?

Foremost among such missed opportunities may be consideration of Matthew's possible provenance. Since so many scholars focus here on the Antiochene church, Basser could have ridden this wave to his advantage. This church's demographic shifts from the 30s through Matthew's own day could well fortify Basser's conjecture that originally Jewish(-Christian) material became readjusted by adding pro-Gentile and anti-Jewish sentiments–so as to suit growing numbers of Gentile adherents. Josephus reports the spiking of anti-Jewish riots in Syrian cities at the time of the Great Revolt *(Jewish War* II.xx.2; 559-561 / VII.iii.2-4; 46-62 / VII.v.2; 100-111)–upheavals whose immediate and abiding impact could well have engendered a reconfiguration of the Antiochene church's ranks.[1] By the mid-80s, then, a church so reeling from such destabilizing *external* turbulence may have come to depend on a mostly Gentile influx for its sustaining membership. More to the point, plausibly there had persisted from this Antiochene church's earliest decades an amassed Jewish *sediment* of textual tradition preserved precisely because it was still naturally or simply habitually cherished. If so, this would fully comport with a major Basser contention: that Matthew has two layers "brilliantly enmeshed in it"–with "the Jewish material … thoroughly the Jewish mind of the early missionaries; the anti-Jewish … thoroughly the mind of preachers who needed to drive a wedge between the two communities" (p. 4).

Analogously, while not avoiding Mark, Basser nonetheless forgoes a *systematic* examination of how Matthew alters Mark (verse by verse) in texts pertinent to Basser's main arguments. Some readers will find this exercise indispensable since Matthew draws on the substance of 92 percent of the Greek Mark (606 of 661 verses), even reproducing 51 percent of Mark's very words.[2] Are valuable clues pertinent to Basser's argumentation lying on the very surface of Mark for ready gleaning?- To illustrate, that Matthew's editor writes from outside the Jewish(-Christian) community seems borne out by his otherwise inexplicable alterations of Mark 3:1 (cf. Matt 12:9); 6:2 (cf. Matt 13:54); and 13:9 (cf. Matt. 10:17). Further, and more broadly, the Marcan Jesus could be construed a law-*breaker* (2:7ff., 16ff., 18ff., 24ff.; 3:1ff.; 7:5ff., 14ff.; etc.). Was it a disaffection with Mark on this score that catalyzed Matthew's counter-casting of Jesus as a law-*giver*, consistent with Matthew's co-option of the very legalistic motifery so central to Basser's thesis? Basser weakens his own position by downplaying Matthew's Mosaic typology for Jesus. Would not Matthew's preservation of an earlier stratum of legalistic texts substantially square with a conceptualization of Jesus as the Second Moses (why else, as but one example, does Matthew alone have Jesus deliver a *five*-part sermon from a *mountain*?)?

Basser rejects as nonhistorical Jesus' *initial* prohibition of his disciples from going to Gentiles. But because the "lost sheep of … Israel" passages are widely accepted as genuine (especially by Jewish readers), we need sufficient reason as to why we should accept instead Basser's alternative judgment. He could have argued, for example, along with Frank W. Beare, that since a mission to Gentiles apparently began in earnest only with Paul "a more unnecessary prohibition [than going to the Gentiles] can hardly be imagined" on the part of Jesus himself;[3] or that at so primitive a stage in the story line (Matt. 10, and also 15), Jesus' unsophisticated disciples would have been incapable of intelligibly articulating a message of a coming Kingdom to *Gentiles* in terms comprehensible and appealing. Accordingly, the lost sheep texts must be a belated introduction (likely by Matthew's editor himself).

These among other similar kinds of supportive arguments would have solidified Basser's provocative *core* thesis, which, by contrast, he propounds with encyclopedic thoroughness–and without heaping up unnecessary examples (p. 94n31). Here, he has indeed proffered a strikingly sobering case for our consideration: that some features that we call "rabbinic" must be earlier than many scholars (rabbinic and New Testament) care to admit, thereby rendering recourse to these features legitimate in explaining patterns or nuances of early Matthean traditions. Indeed, on the spectrum of probability–at least for those who define the "Pharisees" in proto-rabbinic terms–rabbinic formulations simply must have had some pre-70 CE antecedents, including in Diaspora regions. Especially, then, the legal passages in Matthew that Basser isolates *do* cry out for serious explanation as to how and why they are there, particularly when the final editor seems so reticent about them that he has to alter them anti-Pharisaically.

Inevitably, in assessments of this, Basser's core con-

cern, some *individual* rabbinic analogues that he brings to bear will be attacked as not germane, or incorrectly interpreted or processed, or not sufficiently proximate chronologically to be genuinely applicable. But it is quite another matter to dismiss en masse Basser's huge host of texts, the majority of which should indeed compel our thoughtful contemplation. Especially to readers who grant Basser's personal plea to go through his work *slowly* and *carefully*, this book can be genuinely, even startlingly, transformative. Certainly, it is one of the most seminal volumes I have read in recent years–as one brilliant "mind" from antiquity is here explicated by another from modernity, admirably providing "new and strong oars for navigating the Gospel material afloat in the sea of the Jewish literary tradition" (p. 18).

Notes

[1]. See my *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-being in a Christian Environment* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), chap. 16.

[2]. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 1:xviii.

[3]. F. W. Beare, "The Mission of the Disciples and the Mission Charge: Matthew 10 and Parallels," *JBL* 89 (1970): 9.

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