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THE CONCLUSION OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL:
SOME LITERARY-CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS.

David Hill.

For the last fifty years and more research on the final
paragraph of Matthew's Gospel has been dominated by the
investigative methods which have been foremost in those
decades, viz. Form-criticism and the closely-related
discipline of Gattungskritik (the search for a literary
genre or prototype). The results of the application of
these heuristic methods to Matt. 28.16-20 have been very
varied, and the range of possibilities offered for the
understanding of the paragraph seems to be due, in part,
to the inventive imaginations of the researchers and, in
part, to the inadequacy or inappropriateness of the
methods emp oyed.

A short history of the search for the form or Gattung of
Matt. 28.16-20 will reveal some odd and disquieting
features. We begin with the "fathers" of New Testament
form-critical study, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius.
Bultmann concentrates on the reference to baptism in
v.19b and finds the form or prototype of the paragraph
in the "cultic legend". "The last appearance of Jesus in
Matthew 28:16-20 is a sort of cult legend in virtue of
the appended instruction to baptize".[1]   This, however,
is to focus too narrowly on the single command to
baptize and also to do less than justice to the context
of the whole pericope. Dibelius is of the opinion that
Matt. 28.16-20 exemplifies a Hellenistic revelatory
figure,[2] but, not only does this view neglect the Old
Testament allusions (verbal and genre), it also leads to
the unacceptably weak conclusion that vs.19-20a form a
"commission to preach."

L. Brun,[3] C.H. Dodd,[4] and, more more recently, J.E.Alsup[5]
find in Matt.28.16-18a all but one of the elements which
go to make up a typical "resurrection appearance" and
vs.18b-20 are simply lumped together as a " commissioning."
But this approach surely reverses the Matthean emphasis:
he focuses on 18b-20 and uses vs. 16-19a to set the
scene (on the mountain-associated in Matthew with teaching
more than with revelation) and introduce the characters
(Jesus and the eleven disciples). Otto Michel in his

notable essay on "The Conclusion of Matthew's Gospel"[6]
discovers in the pericope a christological reshaping of
Dan. 7.13-14, an enthronement hymn with the elements of
exaltation, presentation (i.e. announcement of exaltation)
and enthronization (i.e. handing over of sovereignty),
but the first and third of these elements are not really
to be found in the passage: they may be implied but they
are not actually present. Johannes Munck offers as the
appropriate Gattung the farewell or departure speech, as
found in the Old Testament and in post biblical Jewish
literature:[7] but Jesus is not bidding his disciples
farewell: rather he is assuring them of his abiding pres-
ence! Wolfgang Trilling[8] believes that Matt. 28.16-20
exemplifies an Old Testament "speech of God", but unfortun-
ately he is not able to offer any one text that contains
all the elements of this proposed Gattung.

B.J. Malina[9] tries to explain Matthew's concluding
paragraph in terms of an "official decree" as found in
2 Chron.36.23:'Thus says Cyrus of Persia, "The Lord, the
God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth
and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem
which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people,
may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up"'.
Drawing some further support from Gen.45.9-11, Malina
argues that the literary form of the verse from 2 Chron.
(which closes the Jewish Scriptures) is similar to that
of the final section of Matthew and that the latter text
is patterned on the former one. This literary form
contains four elements: messenger-formula, narrative,
command and motivation. Three criticism of this suggest-
ion may be made: the Old Testament parallels do not give
anything of comparable significance with the Matthean
commissioning; the motivation element in 2 Chron.36.23
is not logically and structurally autonomous, as it
clearly is in Matthew; and, thirdly, to say that the
"messenger-formula" element is refashioned as narrative
introduction to Jesus' decree is to admit a serious lack
of correspondence at a critical point. Hubert
Frankemoelle[10] also seeks a prototype is 2 Chron.36.23
but he labels his Gattung as "covenant formula" with
five elements: preamble (Matt.28.16-17), previous history

(v.18), declaration of principle (v.19a), specification
of details (vs.19b-20a) and curse or blessing (v.20b).
This comparison is forced and unconvincing: for example,
v.18b, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been
given to me (='previous history') clearly concerns the
present. What is being stressed is the fact that Jesus
now possesses authority from God.

Recently, in a long list of Old Testament passages, twenty-
seven in all, a literary form has been identified which
is defined as a divine delegation of power or a "divine
commissioning", composed of the following elements:
introduction, confrontation, reaction, commission, protest,
reassurance and conclusion. All these elements are found
in nearly all the twenty-seven Old Testament passages
investigated, except the reaction and the protest: both
are found in only five commissioning accounts. Applying
the results of his analysis to Matt.28.16-20 B.J. Hubbard[11]
finds the following elements of the commission-form:
introduction (v.16); confrontation (v.17a); reaction
(V.17b); confirmation (v.18); commission (vs.19-20a) and
reassurance (v.20b). Several points may be made in refer-
ence to this thesis. First, it could be argued that the
'commissioning' Gattung has not been demonstrated absol-
utely (i.e. in its seven elements) from the Old Testament
passages, but it should be noted that nine of the possible
thirty-seven instances of the commission-form in the New
Testament have all seven of the constitutive elements,[12]
although the "protest" and the "conclusion" are lacking
in the case of Matt.28.16-20. Secondly, if it is claimed
that the "conclusion" - in the form of a statement that
the disciples acted as they had been instructed - is
omitted (as in Isa.6 and 49.1-6; Jer.1.1-10) because the
affirmation of the permanent presence of Jesus is a more
appropriate conclusion to the Gospel as a whole, from
both the dramatic and the theological points of view, we
are nevertheless forced to admit that one element (or two,
if we count the "conclusion") is missing from the
"commissioning" Gattung, of which there are nine complete
examples in the New Testament. In the third place, we
would be inclined to ask, with J.P. Meier,[13] whether
there is any special commission-form over against the
general form of an angelophany or theophany: it may well

be that the best description one could give of the
overall genre of Matthew's concluding pericope lies
in the direction of Old Testament theophany traditions,
traditions which have been carefully redacted by the
evangelist himself.

This short review of the Gattungskritik of Matt.28.16-20
suggests that this method of seeking to understand the
passage distracts from analysis of the pericope itself:
it has succeeded only in forcing the text into artific-
ial and preconceived moulds. It may be that a quite
different approach - based on the literary structure
of the text itself - will produce more profitable
interpretive possibilities. To that we now turn.

A Fresh Approach

In his book Die literarische Kunst im Matthaus-Evangelium [14]
Paul Gaechter observed that concentric structuring seems
to be a Matthean stylistic device. A powerfully
convincing example is Matt. 6:25-34 where four concentric
rings cluster around v.29:

A.v.25: 'do not be anxious' (mē merimnate)
B.v.26: 'your heavenly Father cares (trephei)
C.v.27: 'which of you by being anxious' (merimnōn)
D.v.28 'lilies of the field (agrou) grow; Why are you
anxious' (ti merimnate)
Centre v.29: Legitimation of A/A^1 - i.e. in view of
God's activity 'to be anxious' (merimnan) is unnecessary.
D^1 v.30: 'God clothes the grass of the field (agrou)
will he not clothe (amphiennumai) you, men of little
faith (oligopistoi)
C^1 v.31-2a: 'do not be anxious' (mē merimnēsete)
B^1 v.32b-33: 'your heavenly Father knows' your needs
A^1 v.34 'do not be anxious' (mē merimnēsete).

Another example is to be found in Matt.19.16-22 where
v.18b is framed by three concentric rings:
A.v.16: a person comes to (proselthōn) Jesus with a
question as to how he might have (echō) eternal life
B.v.17a: if you want (theleis) to enter into life
C.v.17b: keep the commandments (tērēson tas entolas)

Centre v.18 Statement of commandments.

C^1 v.20 All these things (commands) I have kept (phulassō)

B$^1_1$ v.21 If you want (<u>theleis</u>) to be perfect (<u>teleios</u>)
A$^1_1$ v.22: the young man <u>went away</u> (<u>apelthen</u>) grieving,
for he had (<u>en echon</u>) many possessions.

Such evidence of concentric structuring in Matthew's
Gospel makes it appropriate to ask if there is
evidence of this stylistic device in all or part of
the concluding paragraph, and, if there is, does it
assist in any way our understanding of the passage.

Let us begin by analysing the "outer" or literary
structure of the pericope and then its "inner" or
thought-structure.
(a) <u>Outer Structure</u> Vs.16-18a are characterized by a
brief and terse narrative style, whereas vs.18b-20
are structurally more complex. Vs. 19a, 19b and 20a
each begin with a participle and thus display a
rhythmic unity: vs.19a and 20a are both quite short
clauses containing a participle followed by a verb+
object. But between these two clauses we have v.19b
which is noticeably longer, contains a predominance
of nominal forms and has no particple/verb construct-
ion.
Thus we appear to have a triplet: the outer verses (19a,
20a) frame the centre (19b). Moreover, the triplet is
itself framed by vs.18b and 20b, which serves as an
<u>inclusio</u>: these two clauses are independent indicative
statements which are bound grammatically to the centre
by "therefore" (<u>oun</u>) and by "and lo" (<u>kai idou</u>) and
are tied to each other by the use of the adjective
"all" (<u>pas</u>): <u>pasa</u> in 18b, <u>panta</u> in 19a and 20a and
<u>pasas</u> in 20b.
(b) <u>Inner Structure</u>. Vs. 16-18a do not function
autonomously: they serve rather as an introduction to
Jesus' speech in 18b-20. The brevity of the narrative
setting underlines the fact that Matthew wishes to
focus his conclusion not on an appearance of Jesus but
on what he says to the disciples.

Traditionally vs. 18b-20 have been divided into three
parts: v.18b, declaration of authority possessed; vs.
19-20a, missionary command; v.20b, word of assurance.
The thrust of vs.18b-20 varies as one or other of
these parts is emphasised. But can we determine the
intended emphasis? Again we examine the text itself.

v.18b: the content of this clause is independent of the
following verses: Jesus declares that his absolute
authority is from the Father: the words recall the "son
of man" image in Dan 7.14 (LXX) which provides the idea
of an everlasting authority over the nations of the earth.
v.19a: Jesus gives the command to "make disciples"
(matheteuein, cf. 13.52 and 27.57) and in v.20a a disciple
is defined as one who keeps all Jesus' injunctions or
instructions (cf. 7.24 and 26). The third clause, v.19b,
departs from the theme of disciple-making. The concern
is not with the disciples' activity so much as its
theological foundation - baptism in the name of the Father
the Son and the Holy Spirit. Accepting the Father as
Lord of over all, the Son as the chosen recipient of this
authority and the Spirit who mediates the presence and
the power of both is requisite to becoming a disciple:
circumcision, as the sign of belonging to a people or
community, is replaced by baptism. It would seem that
the baptismal command is the structural centre and the
theological base for the missionary commands in vs.19a
and 20a.
v.20b: Jesus assures his disciples of his abiding presence
(word of assurance). However, that Jesus' presence is
already a reality is evident in v.18b, the declaration
of authority. Thus v.20b in a sense reaffirms v.18b,
both treating of Jesus' absolute authority. "The abiding
rule of the Son of Man is expressed in Jesus' permanent
presence with his disciples"[15]

The structure then of Matt.26.18b-20 illustrates
concentric design:
A edothe moi pasa exousia en ourano kai epi tes ges(18b)
B poreuthentes oun matheteusate panta ta ethne (19a)
Centre baptizontes autous eis to onoma tou patros kai
      touhuiou kai tou hagiou pneumatos (19b)
B[1] didaskontes autous terein panta hosa eneteilamen humin
                                      (20a)
A[1] kai idou ego meth humon eimi pasas tas hemeras
    heos tes sunteleias tou aionos (20b)

Now the various parts of this traditional literary form
(A + B + Centre + B[1] + A[1]) are tied to each other by
common structure or content. The centre can be isolated
from what surrounds it and often contains the core
statement. Also, the centre is usually tied most closely

to the outermost parts (A and A^1). Matt.6.25-34 (as
set out above, with v.29 as Centre) exemplifies most
cogently this structuring, and the conclusion of the
Gospel fits well into this same literary form: v.19b
is the Centre around which A (v.18b), A^1 (v.20b),
B. (v.19a) and B^1 (v.20a) are arranged concentrically.

A and A^1 are related in the following respects:
(a)   they are simple declarative sentences,
(b)   they use substantives frequently,
(c)   the second half of each contains a prepositional
      phrase,
(d)   the words pas ("all") and ego ("I") are common to
      both,
(e)   both stress Jesus' possession or execution of
      authority.

      Similarly, B and B^1 are related:
(a)   they being with a participle followed by a verb,
(b)   they use verbs frequently,
(c)   pas ("all") is common to both,
(d)   both contain the missionary mandate.

      V.19b is tied to A and A^1 (the outermost parts
of the structure) by the frequent use of substantives
and, most importantly, by its internal structure:
huiou (Son) refers both to 18b and 20b; patros (Father)
to 18b (Jesus' authority is from the Father);
baptizontes (baptising) to 18b and 20b (baptism implies
acceptance of the Father, Son and Spirit). One might
even argue that the Holy Spirit is related to meth'
humōn (with you) in 20b. At any rate, it seems clear
that v.19b is the centre of our concentric structure.

The question now is: What conclusions can be formed on
the basis of Matthew's use of concentric structure in
the concluding pericope of his Gospel, a pericope which
is widely regarded as the most significant one in the
entire Gospel and considered by some to be the clue to
the meaning and message of the whole. For instance,
Otto Michel writes thus:
      It is sufficient to say that the whole Gospel
      as written under this theological premise of
      Matt.28.18-20....In a way the conclusion goes
      back to the start and teaches us to understand

the whole Gospel, the story of Jesus, "from
behind". Matt. 28:18-20 is the key to the
understanding of the whole book.[16]

And very recently Hermann Hendrickx has put the matter
in this way:

.....our study confirms the opinion of those
scholars who hold that Mt 28:16-20 is a summary
of the entire gospel. Indeed, Matthew's final
paragraph recapitulates the following themes or
ideas: the mountain as a place of Jesus' powerful
teaching and revelation (verse 16); emphasis on
the need for faith (verse 17); the extent of Jesus'
authority (verse 18); the importance of disciple-
ship, and its universal character (verse 19a); the
need to 'regulate' the community (Gemeindeordnung;
verse 19b), in this instance by means of baptism
verse 19b) and teaching (verse 20a); Jesus'
permanent presence (verse 20b).[17]

If our structural analysis of the passage is correct,
then Matt. 28.19b represents a statement that is
absolutely central to this important final pericope.
In that case, we are confirmed in our view that the
concluding paragraph of the Gospel was probably
entirely composed by Matthew himself, and there is no
room at all for doubting the authenticity of the
reference to baptism in the three-fold name: any appeal
to Eusebius for the genuine text ("teaching them in
my name", with no mention of baptism or of the Father,
Son and Spirit) is out of the question.

Secondly, do Matt.28.18b-20a form a concise statement
of Matthean theology which binds together the imperative
and indicative? Is the indicative central precisely
because it is the foundation of discipleship? If our
thesis is correct, the answer to these two questions
must be in the affirmative and, in consequence,
Matthew must no longer be labelled as primarily an
evangelist of the imperative. Admittedly there is a
high incidence of imperatives (in, for example,
chapters 5-7 and 18), but even there phrases like
Matt.5.48b, "as your heavenly Father is perfect" and
6.25, "do not be anxious", show that the indicative

presumes the imperative. Moreover, Matt.28.18b-20
demonstrates how masterfully the writer can intertwine
the indicative and the imperative. In 28. 18b and 20b
for example, Matthew formulates - but does not exhaust -
his christology. In 19a and 20a he expands his
christology through use of imperatives. The disciples
and the church are bound inseparably to Jesus who is
both example and commissioner. The Matthean Christ
cannot be separated from the earthly Jesus. It is this
Jesus, says Matthew, who with the Father and in the
Spirit is always present.

NOTES:

1. R. Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition
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4. C.H. Dodd, "The Appearance of the Risen Christ: An
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5. J.E. Alsup, The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories
    of the Gospel Tradition; A History of Tradition
    Analysis (SPCK, London: 1975), pp.239-65.

6. Originally published in German in Evan.Theol. 10
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    of Matthew, ed. G.N. Stanton (SPCK, London: 1983)
    pp.30-41.

7. J. Munck, "Discours d'adieu dans le Nouveau Testament
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8. W. Trilling, Das wahre Israel (Munich, 1964^3), ad.loc.

9. B.J. Malina, "The Literary Structure and Form of
    Matt. xxviii. 16-20", NTS 17(1970-71),pp.87-103.

10. H. Frankemoelle, Jahwebund und Kirche Christi
    (Munster: 1974), pp.42-72 and 321-5.

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12. Cf. T.Y. Mullins, "New Testament Commission Forms,
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13. J.P. Meier, <u>Matthew</u> (New Testament Message 3:
    M. Glazier, <u>Wilmington</u>, Del., 1980), pp.416-24,
    and cf. "Two Disputed questions in Matt.28.16-20",
    <u>JBL</u> 96 (1977) pp. 407-24.

14. Stuttgart, KBW: 1968^2.

15. Pheme Perkins, <u>Resurrection</u>: <u>New Testament Witness</u>
    <u>and Contemporary Reflection,</u> (G. Chapman, London:
    1985) p.135.

16. O. Michel, <u>op.cit</u>, p.35.

17. H.Hendrickx, <u>The Resurrection Narratives of the</u>
    <u>Gospels</u> (rev.ed., G. Chapman, London: 1984) p.63.
    Cf. also Oscar Brooks, "Matt.xxviii. 16-20 and the
    Design of the First Gospel", <u>JSNT</u> 10 (1981)
    pp.2-18.