

THE MATTHEAN ANTITHESES IN RELATION TO THEIR OLD TESTAMENT THESES

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Abstract. A pervasive emphasis in the work of Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr has been the relation between ancient Judaism and the New Testament. In an early treatment of the Matthean Antitheses (Matt 5:21-43), Niebuhr emphasized the consonance between the teaching of the Antitheses and Second Temple Jewish thought: the Matthean Jesus is expanding the Torah rather than replacing it. This essay applauds the anti-Marcionite and ecumenical impulse behind Niebuhr's argument and notes a number of points of agreement with it, but presents a different interpretation of the third, fourth, and fifth Antitheses. Like many biblical writers and later Jewish exegetes, the Matthean Jesus sometimes radically revises the Torah while claiming to uphold it.

Keywords: Matthew, Second Temple Judaism, Torah, legal revisionism, Antitheses.

Personal Retrospective

I believe that I first met Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr when we both presented papers at a colloquium on “The Scriptures and the Gospels” held in Leuven in 1996. Mine concerned the relation between Mark 7:1-23 and Jewish interpretations of the Isaiah text discussed in this New Testament passage.¹ His was on the fascinating Qumran fragment, 4Q521, which depicts an anointed figure whom heaven and earth obey—a striking parallel to the resurrected Jesus's claim to cosmic authority at the climax of Matthew's Gospel (Matt 28:18). Later in the fragment, either this same figure or God himself is described as liberating captives, restoring sight to the blind, healing the wounded, raising the dead, and bringing good news to the poor—a conflation of Old Testament allusions amazingly similar to Jesus's answer to John the Baptist in Matt 11:4-5//Luke 7:22.² From early in our respective careers, then, both Karl-Wilhelm and I have been interested in the relation between early Christianity

¹ Joel MARCUS, “Scripture and Tradition in Mark 7,” in *The Scriptures in the Gospels*, ed. Christopher M. TUCKETT, BETL 131 (Leuven University Press, 1997), 177–95.

² Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, “Die Werke des eschatologischen Freudenboten. 4Q521 und die Jesusüberlieferung,” in *The Scriptures in the Gospels* (see n. 1), 637–46.