CHAPTER ONE

ANTITHESES IN MATTHEW 5:
MIDRASHIC ASPECTS OF EXEGETICAL TECHNIQUES

This opening chapter addresses the exegetical techniques applied in a number of antithetic sayings from the Sermon on the Mount as well as in a passage from Matthew 19. The discussion relates mainly to the structure of the text as it stands now, its redactional history being beyond the scope of this investigation. A number of parallels in Jewish sources are reviewed, and the question is raised of their relevance to the study of the Sermon. It is suggested that even when the conclusions drawn and the regulations derived from Torah exegesis in different traditions vary radically, the exegetical techniques applied seem to constitute a shared element of religious discourse, its basic syntax inherited from earlier generations. Finally, a typology of the antitheses’ polemical stance is suggested.

Antitheses in Matthew 5

While instances of Jesus’ separate treatment of some of the issues involved in Matthew 5 are attested elsewhere in the Gospels,1 their thematic combination within a unifying exegetical framework stands out as the trademark of the compiler (editor) of the Sermon on the Mount. The thematic combination includes a discussion of three prohibitions from the Decalogue (Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5) and their parallels, the “eye for an eye” issue (from Exodus 21) and the “love your neighbor” precept from the Holiness Code (Leviticus 19). This strategy of grouping Torah precepts resurfaces—with reference to Jeremiah—in the tannaitic Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, which provides an example of a different thematic combination with all components belonging to the Decalogue:

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1 See, for example, Matt 19:3–9 (cf. Mark 10:2–12) for the divorce issue or Matt 22:34–40 (cf. Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–37) for the discussion on the love-your-neighbor precept. See also discussion in Chapters 2, 3 and 5.
In Matthew 5, the discussion is presented as an uninterrupted sermon initiated by Jesus himself, as opposed to instances where a discussion of various religious topics is reported in the same Gospel and Jesus is portrayed as responding to a question addressed to him as a rabbi (i.e., Matt 22:16–22 and par., Matt 22:23–33 and par., Matt 22:34–40 and par.).³ Whereas this latter mode of discourse in that period seems mainly to have characterized actual oral interaction between the general populace and those considered the embodiment of the (legal) tradition—Jewish sages or, in the wider context, Roman jurists—the thematic arrangement of material in Matthew 5 may reflect the later editorial process.⁴

Matthew 5:21–26

The first antithesis is introduced in Matthew 5:21 with the formula: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old (τοῖς ἀρχαίοις)”. Whereas the first part of the saying that follows (“You shall not kill”) is obviously taken from Exodus 20:13 (= Deut 5:17), the rest cannot be found in any Old Testament text.⁵ M. McNamara was the first to point to the targumic paraphrase of Genesis 9:6 as a clear parallel to

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⁴ See C. Hezser, ‘The Codification of Legal Knowledge in Late Antiquity: The Talmud Yerushalmi and Roman Law Codes’, in: P. Schäfer (ed.), The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture, Tübingen 1998, 583–584, 619–624. Hezser deals mainly with a later period, but some of her suggestions may turn out to be at least partly relevant for the first century CE.