

# Matthew 5:17-19

## Has the Law Been Fulfilled?

by J.K. McKee posted 12 January, 2010 www.tnnonline.net

### MATTHEW 5:17-19 - ENGLISH

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (KJV).

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (RSV).

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (NASU).

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (NIV).

Don't think that I have come to abolish the *Torah* or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a *yud* or a stroke will pass from the *Torah*- not until everything that must happen has happened. So whoever disobeys the least of these *mitzvot* and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven (CJB).

MATTHEW 5:17-19 – GREEK<sup>1</sup>

*Mē nomisēte hoti ēlthon katalusai ton nomon ē tous prophētas ouk ēlthon katalusai alla plērōsai. Amēn gar legō humin heōs an parelthē ho ouranos kai hē gē, iōta hen ē mia keraia ou mē parelthē apo tou nomou, heōs an panta genētai. Hos ean oun lusē mian tōn entolōn toutōn tōn elachistōn kai didaxē houtōs tous anthrōpous, elachistos klēthēsetai en tē basileia tōn ouranōn hos d' an poiēsē kai didaxē, houtos megas klēthēsetai en tē basileia tōn ouranōn.*

Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι. ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν· ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἰῶτα ἐν ἡ μίᾳ κεραίᾳ οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται. ὃς ἐάν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν· ὃς δ' ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν.

Matthew 5:17-19, which preface the Sermon on the Mount which follows, are some of the most important verses of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) for today's Messianic movement. These verses speak of the Messiah's intent to fulfill, and not abolish, the Mosaic Law. But what does it mean that the Messiah was to come and fulfill the Law? Does it just pertain, as is commonly thought, to the prophetic agenda of accomplishment that is realized by the Messiah's arrival? Or, is there a multi-layered dynamic of the Messiah's coming to "fulfill" the Torah, which must be taken into consideration? Has the Law been "fulfilled and thus abolished," as many people today conclude? If this is in error, then what might need to be corrected in some Believers' view of the Torah?

Immediately prior to stating that His intention is to fulfill the Law, Yeshua has told His audience that they are the light of the world, responsible for spreading light to all in the world (Matthew 5:14-15). The Lord says, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16), and He proceeds to speak on how His ministry has come to fulfill the Torah. The Sermon on the Mount itself is deeply rooted within the instruction of the Torah and Tanach, the Old Testament; it either expands and deepens principles originally given by Moses and the Prophets, or clarifies some First

<sup>1</sup> In spite of claims made by some Messianic Believers who think that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, this paper is concerned principally with the text of Matthew 5:17-19 as it exists in its final, canonical form. Our attention will be primarily given to the Greek text that stands behind our modern English translations.

The statement most often provided to support an original Hebrew Gospel of Matthew comes from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, where quoting the early Christian leader Papias, he says, "Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect, and everyone translated it as he was able" (3.39.16; trans. C.F. Cruse [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], 106). There is no agreement among interpreters of Matthew today as to what is meant by Papias' actual statement *Hebraidi dialektō ta logia sunetaxato* (Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο). Donald A. Hagner describes, "Nearly every element in [the complete] sentence can be understood in more than one way" (*Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Vol 33a [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993], xlv).

The various proposals made about what Matthew composing Hebraic "oracles" or *logia* (λόγια) means, include: (1) a complete Gospel in Hebrew, now no longer extant; (2) incorporation of Hebrew or Aramaic sources (like Q) or secondhand notes of the Messiah's sayings into a finalized Greek text; or (3) composition of a complete Greek Gospel in a Jewish style of writing.

There is probably merit in the second and third options, with the third most often favored among Matthew commentators. S. McKnight summarizes, "In all likelihood our Gospel of Matthew was composed originally in Greek and in a Jewish style" ("Matthew, Gospel of," in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 528).

For a further summary, consult the discussions by Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp 44-53; D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 140-150; McKnight, "Matthew, Gospel of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp 526-527; Hagner, pp xliii-xlvi. For a Messianic perspective, consult Tim Hegg, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew: Chapters 1-7* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2007), pp 2-7; and the editor's entry on the Gospel of Matthew in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

Century misunderstandings of their teachings. Nowhere do we see in Matthew chs. 5-7 any kind of explicit denial of the relevance and supernatural inspiration of the Tanach Scriptures. On the contrary, now that the Messiah has arrived, their importance for guiding men and women of faith into greater holiness is only intensified.

Various evangelical Christians today, who read Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount, admittedly struggle when they encounter Matthew 5:17-19. The Messiah's explicit claim in coming to fulfill, and not abolish His Father's Instruction in the Torah, is something that they wrestle with. Much of today's contemporary Christian theology has asserted that at best, the Law of Moses was something for a previous era, and it is not something that has continued validity in the post-resurrection age. Is this a conclusion that aligns with the Messiah's own words on the matter? Thankfully, there are Christians today who do believe that the Mosaic Law has various decrees of validity for New Covenant Believers, and will recognize that the contemporary Church's widescale dismissal of the Torah has not at all aided it. Some kind of return and re-appreciation of the Torah needs to be enacted.

Yet even while many Christians will agree in principle that the smallest stroke of the Torah is to not lose importance—how are we to uphold its authority? Does it mean that Believers are to follow more than just the Ten Commandments, and other ethical and moral statutes? Does it mean that commandments typically classified as being “ceremonial” should be considered relevant too? What does it mean that those who teach from the Torah will be considered “great” in the Kingdom of God?

These three short verses have been responsible for convicting many of today's Believers that they need to **reconsider prior positions held about the Law of Moses**. The Holy Spirit has used Matthew 5:17-19 to convict many evangelical Christians to return to a foundational understanding of the Torah, leading them into the Messianic movement and setting them on a course of wider Torah obedience. Many Messianic Jews, especially if they were raised in a liberal Reform Judaism, have also been stimulated by the thrust of Matthew 5:17-19, to take the Torah and their Jewish heritage a bit more seriously (especially in lieu of their possible testimony to fellow Jewish family members, and the false belief that believing in Jesus means that one's Jewishness gets jettisoned).

Like many of today's Messianics, I believe that the Torah remains relevant instruction for God's people today. I believe that part of being salt and light to the world (Matthew 5:13-16) means being Torah obedient as the Messiah was Torah obedient—**foremost in how we love others**. Yet, our Messianic faith community probably throws Matthew 5:17-19 around a little too much, without really probing what it directs Messiah followers to understand. I think it is appropriate that we take a closer look at Yeshua's teaching on the validity of the Torah, not only recognizing how He emphasizes its ongoing importance, but that we engage with the array of opinions present in current Matthean scholarship. Is it possible that we have overlooked, overemphasized, or underemphasized any of the various dimensions in how our Savior “fulfills” the Torah?

### **Fulfillment of the Torah and the Prophets—Not Abolishment**

**Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.**

Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) is quite clear to assert that within His ministry and teachings, “Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets” (NLT). Why does the Messiah have to assert, before delivering His Sermon on the Mount, that He did not come to abolish or render inoperative the Torah and the Prophets? Was He really such a radical figure for His generation?

Do recall how earlier in Mark's Gospel it is said of Him, “What is this? A new teaching with authority!” (Mark 1:27). Yeshua the Messiah possessed unique supernatural power, and given a controversy that ensued regarding proper activities on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6), some might

have inappropriately thought that He was trying to overthrow Moses' Teaching and lead others astray. Various religious leaders, encountering this person from Nazareth, might have tried to discredit Him as He was a threat to their authority. **Yeshua makes His audience know that any thoughts about Him overthrowing the validity of the Torah are confounded.**

Yeshua's teaching that follows in the Sermon on the Mount might correct some misunderstandings of Moses and the Prophets held by many of the common people and religious leaders, but it will not stand in conflict to Moses and the Prophets themselves. John Nolland has added an appropriate explanatory sentence, in brackets, to his rendering of Matthew 5:17: "Do not make the judgment [when you find me critical of what you have heard it was said to the people of old] that I came to annul..."<sup>2</sup> Throwing away the Torah or Prophets is the last thing Yeshua came to do. W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison further explain how,

"5.17-20 is primarily *prokatalēpsis*, that is, an anticipation of objections. As the introduction or preamble to 5.21-48...it is intended to prevent the readers of the First Gospel from making two errors. First, it plainly states that the six subsequent paragraphs are not to be interpreted—as they have been so often by many—as 'antitheses', 'antitheses' that, in at least two or three instances, set aside the Torah. Instead Jesus upholds the law, so that between him and Moses there can be no real conflict."<sup>3</sup>

**But what does it mean to "abolish" the Torah, and what does it mean to "fulfill" the Torah?** *This is the main thrust of Yeshua's opening word to His Sermon on the Mount.* Much of our thinking about whether He came to uphold Moses' Teaching as a standard still to be followed today, will be affected by how we interpret the statements that follow. It should be quite obvious that "abolish" and "fulfill" are used in v. 17 to contrast each other and they are not synonyms, but what specific meaning(s) do they convey?

From a classical vantage point, the verb *kataluō* (καταλύω), rendered "abolish," has a variety of possible meanings we can take into consideration. They include: "to put down, destroy," "of governments, to dissolve, break up, put down," and "to end, bring to an end" (LS).<sup>4</sup> The more theologically-informed definitions seen in BDAG are quite poignant, as *kataluō* can mean "to cause the ruin of someth., destroy, demolish, dismantle" and "to end the effect or validity of someth."<sup>5</sup> These are precisely the actions that Yeshua the Messiah **came *not* to do.**

The other three instances where *kataluō* appears in Matthew pertain to demolishing the Temple (24:2; 26:61; 27:40). The verb *kataluō* is also employed in ancient Jewish literature to describe some kind of overthrowing or termination of either Torah commandments or related customs.<sup>6</sup> Abolishing or overthrowing the Torah might also be viewed in relation to misinterpreting the Torah, as seen in the Rabbinic dictum, "One who desecrates holy things...misinterprets the Torah—even if that person were to possess [great knowledge of] Torah and [were a great doer of] good deeds" (m.*Avot* 3:11).<sup>7</sup> Misinterpreting or misapplying the Torah could be something that Yeshua's critics could accuse Him of doing in His teaching that will follow, as what He said did run contrary to some of the norms of the day.

The last thing that Yeshua has come to do is "abolish" or "destroy" (KJV) the Torah; instead He states that He has come to "fulfill." But what does "fulfill" really mean? Suffice it to say, there is no small debate over what the verb *plēroō* (πληρώω), which appears in our source text, relates to. From a lexical standpoint, we have an array of definitions available: "to bring to

<sup>2</sup> John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 215.

<sup>3</sup> W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *International Critical Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (London: T&T Clark, 1988), pp 481-482.

<sup>4</sup> H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 410.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp 521, 522.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Maccabees 2:19-22; 4 Maccabees 5:33; Philo *On Dreams* 2.123; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 16.35; 20.81.

Cf. Nolland, pp 217-218.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press, 1993), 43.

completion that which was already begun, *complete, finish*" (BDAG),<sup>8</sup> "to bring to a designed end, *fulfill*" (BDAG),<sup>9</sup> or "to make complete in every particular; to render perfect" (Thayer).<sup>10</sup> BDAG properly indicates, regarding Matthew 5:17, "depending on how one prefers to interpret the context, πληρώω is understood here either as *fulfill*=do, carry out, or as *bring to full expression*=show it forth in its true mng., or as *fill up*=complete."<sup>11</sup>

Yeshua's fulfillment of the Torah stands in contrast to any thought that it should be cast aside as irrelevant. The lexical definitions of *plēroō* that are available do give us some important options as to how it can be applied. But, these definitions by themselves do not at all answer all the questions or criticisms that may arise.

From a textual standpoint, Matthew's Gospel employs the verb *plēroō*, but this is probably not what the Messiah Himself orally spoke in His Sermon on the Mount. While attempts have been made to associate *plēroō* as being Matthew's Greek equivalent of the Aramaic verb *qum* (קִּיּוּ), "to stand up, rise; to stand, exist" (Jastrow),<sup>12</sup> D.A. Carson is correct to conclude, "The LXX [Septuagint] never uses *plēroō* ('fulfill') to render *qūm* or cognates...The verb *plēroō* renders *mālē'* [מָלֵא] and means 'to fulfill.'"<sup>13</sup> Speculating on what was actually spoken by Yeshua in either Hebrew or Aramaic may not be as significant as some might think, as what is said in the wider context of Matthew 5:17-19 is actually more determinative than the meanings of the actual vocabulary. Hagner offers a good summary paragraph of how we need to approach this:

"The precise meaning of πληρῶσαι, 'to fulfill,' is a difficult question that has produced much debate. The verb means literally 'to fill to the full' (from Aramaic מָלֵא, *mēlā'*, 'fulfill,' rather than קִּיּוּ, *qūm*, 'establish,' which is never translated by πληροῦν in the LXX). From this basic meaning comes such derivative meanings as 'accomplish,' 'complete,' 'bring to its end,' 'finish.' 'Fulfill' here hardly means 'to do,' although Jesus in his conduct is faithful to the true meaning of the Torah. 'Complete' is congruent with the stress on fulfillment in and through Jesus but wrongly connotes that Jesus has come simply to add something to the law. **The meaning in this instance cannot be determined by word study alone but must be established from the context and in particular must be consonant with the statement of v 18**"<sup>14</sup> (emphasis mine).

While lexical definitions of the Greek verb *plēroō* can be helpful in interpreting Matthew 5:17, it is insufficient for us to consider what *plēroō* means alone. Nolland makes the point, "Fulfill' must be taken in a manner that allows it to be an appropriate counterpart to 'annul.'"<sup>15</sup> As such, we have to consider what the ministry and mission of the Messiah actually involve. Surely, in fulfilling the Torah and the Prophets, Yeshua somehow demonstrates something quite positive about them. But does His fulfilling of the Torah and Prophets actually regard any kind of proper interpretation, or for that matter any kind of obedience? Controversy among interpreters undoubtedly ensues when these questions are asked. Carson protests, "Others understand the verb *plēroō* to mean that Jesus 'fills up' the law by providing its full, intended meaning...This, however, requires an extraordinary meaning for *plēroō*..."<sup>16</sup> Yet there are many who would notably disagree with this assessment by Carson.

A popular view of Yeshua's fulfilling the Torah, frequently heard in today's Messianic community, is that "fulfill" and "abolish" were ancient Rabbinic terms used to describe the proper

<sup>8</sup> BDAG, 828.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 518.

<sup>11</sup> BDAG, 829.

<sup>12</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 1330.

<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 142; cf. Thayer, 517.

For further discussion, consult Hegg, pp 173-174.

<sup>14</sup> Hagner, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Nolland, 218.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, in *EXP*, 8:143.

and improper application of the Torah's commandments.<sup>17</sup> Yeshua's proper application of the Torah and Prophets surely does follow in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the thrust of v. 17 is mainly Yeshua's upholding the authority of the Torah's commandments by His fulfillment. This is because He anticipates that there would be people either in His generation, or in subsequent generations, who would probably claim that He really did come to overthrow the Law. Messianic commentator Tim Hegg confirms, "He did not come to render the Torah and the Prophets as useless for His talmidim [disciples], but to make the words of the inspired texts all the more applicable and real in their lives."<sup>18</sup> By no means is Yeshua's fulfillment of the Torah tantamount to some kind of total reversal of Deuteronomy 27:26.<sup>19</sup> First and foremost, though, is Yeshua's concern with the ongoing validity of the Torah, which is to be maintained as a result of His fulfilling it. Hagner describes,

"The ethical teaching of Jesus that follows in this sermon...has such a radical character and goes so much against what was the commonly accepted understanding of the commands of the Torah that it is necessary at the outset to indicate Jesus' full and unswerving loyalty to the law."<sup>20</sup>

When we weigh the available meanings of *plēroō*, and really consider the mission of Yeshua's life and ministry, we actually see a very profound picture take shape. It is too little to say that in fulfilling the Torah, Yeshua kept its instructions perfectly to be our blameless sacrifice for sins. It is equally too little to say that in fulfilling the Torah, Yeshua came to interpret it properly for the people of His day and those who would follow after. And it goes too far to say that in "completing" the Torah, the Messiah has now rendered it irrelevant as spiritual instruction in the post-resurrection era. Leon Morris aptly summarizes the three main views of how Yeshua has fulfilled the Torah, which need to be considered:

1. It may mean that he would do the things laid down in Scripture.
2. It may mean that he would bring out the full meaning of Scripture.
3. It may mean that in his life and teaching he would bring Scripture to its completion.<sup>21</sup>

Morris goes on to state, "Each points to an aspect of the truth, and Jesus may well have meant that he would fulfil Scripture in more ways than one."<sup>22</sup> And he is right: **each view has to be weighed into our understanding of "fulfillment."**

Among today's interpreters of Matthew 5:17-19, Yeshua's claim to fulfill the Law is primarily divided into two sub-categories: (1) those who believe that Yeshua fulfills the Law by His unique Messianic teachings on and interpretations of the Torah *and* accomplishing its predicative prophecies; versus (2) those who believe that Yeshua only fulfills the Law by accomplishing its Messianic prophecies. Considering the importance of Matthew 5:17-19 to the validity of the Torah for Believers today, the chart below has been compiled to give you a good idea about where various theologians and commentators stand:

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. David Bivin and Roy Blizzard, Jr., *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus: New Insights From a Hebraic Perspective* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1994), pp 114-115.

<sup>18</sup> Hegg, 171.

<sup>19</sup> "'Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'"

<sup>20</sup> Hagner, 103.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Morris, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 108.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Matthew 5:17-19 HOW DOES THE MESSIAH "FULFILL" THE LAW?	
CONCERNS YESHUA'S TEACHINGS ON THE TORAH, and HIS PROPHETIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS	LARGELY CONCERNS ESCHATOLOGICAL PROPHECIES
<p>"[T]he Old Testament does indeed instruct us about God and man and salvation, <i>etc.</i> All of the great biblical doctrines are there. Yet it was only a partial revelation. Jesus 'fulfilled' it all in the sense of bringing it to completion by his person, his teaching and his work....Second, the Old Testament contains <i>predictive prophecy</i>. Much of it looks forward to the days of the Messiah, and either foretells him in word or foreshadows him by time...Jesus 'fulfilled' it all in the sense that what was predicted came to pass in him."<sup>23</sup> John R.W. Stott</p>	<p>"Therefore we give <i>plēroō</i> ('fulfill') exactly the same meaning as in the formula quotations, which in the prologue (Matt 1-2) have already laid stress on the prophetic nature of the OT and the way it points to Jesus."<sup>24</sup> D.A. Carson</p>
<p>"Jesus came not to denigrate or displace either the law (in its narrower sense) or the Old Testament (its wider sense); he came to fulfill the law and so to establish it. That law would stand 'until heaven and earth disappear' or 'until everything is accomplished' (Matt. 5:18)...So serious a matter is the law that Jesus warns that if we ignore that law (not Jesus' teachings replacing the law), or teach others to ignore parts of the law, except for those parts which have been accomplished such as the ceremonial parts of the law, we will meet with disapproval in the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:19)!"<sup>25</sup> Walter C. Kaiser</p>	<p>"Jesus 'fulfils' or 'completes' the law by bringing a new law which transcends the old...The 'fulfillment' is eschatological: the <i>telos</i> which the Torah anticipated, namely, the Messiah, has come and revealed the law's definitive meaning. Prophecy has been realized...Matthew uses <i>πληρώω</i> most frequently to express the fulfillment of an OT prophecy by Jesus."<sup>26</sup> W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison</p>
<p>"Jesus fulfilled the Law in the sense that he gave it its full meaning. He emphasized its deep, underlying principles and total commitment to it rather than mere external acknowledgment and obedience."<sup>27</sup> <i>NIV Study Bible</i></p>	<p>"[T]he eschatological will of God—is the best interpretation of Matthew 5:17...[Jesus'] teaching does not abolish the Law, but brings it to its eschatological climax....The relationship of the Law to Jesus in Matthew is, then, only one segment of his salvation-historical, promise-fulfillment scheme. Through it Matthew integrates his stress on the continuity of the Law—for the Law looks ahead to, and is incorporated into, the teaching of Jesus—and on its discontinuity—for Jesus, not the Law, is now the locus of God's word to his people."<sup>28</sup> Douglas J. Moo</p>

<sup>23</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 71. Do note that Stott, holding to the traditional Reformed distinction between the so-called ceremonial law and moral law, further argues that at the cross, the Levitical priesthood and various outward ordinances of the Torah ended.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, in *EXP*, 8:144.

<sup>25</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 311.

<sup>26</sup> Davies and Allison, 486.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1475.

<sup>28</sup> D.J. Moo, "Law," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp 457, 459.

<p>"[I]t is best for us to understand πληρῶσαι here as 'fulfill' in the sense of 'bring to its intended meaning'—that is, to present a definitive interpretation of the law, something now possible because of the presence of the Messiah and his kingdom. Far from destroying the law, Jesus' teachings—despite their occasionally strange sound—penetrate to the divinely intended (i.e., the teleological) meaning of the law. Because the law and the prophets pointed to him and he is their goal, he is able now to reveal their true meaning and so to bring them to 'fulfillment.'<sup>29</sup> Donald A. Hagner</p>	<p>"In light of Matthew's use of this verb [<i>plēroō</i>] elsewhere, and the evident importance it has for his understanding of the relation between the authoritative words of the OT and their contemporary outworking, the sense here is not likely to be concerned either with Jesus' actions in relation to the law or even his teaching about it, but rather the way in which he 'fulfills' the pattern laid down in the law and the prophets...The Torah, then, is not God's last word to his people, but is in a sense provisional, looking forward to a time of fulfillment through the Messiah."<sup>30</sup> R.T. France</p>
<p>"In Matthew's view Jesus has come to 'fulfill' the law and the prophets (5:17) by his actions and teachings...Both here and at the end of the teaching section of the Sermon on the Mount (7:12), as well as in the commandments to love God and neighbor (22:40), Matthew treats Jesus' teaching as coextensive with the law and the prophets."<sup>31</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini</p>	
<p>"[Jesus]...goes on to relate his mission to the Scriptures, which he 'did not come to annul but to fill' (Mt 5:17). He fills out the meaning of their promises and warnings and is himself the confirmation of these. He fills out the meaning of their expectations and looks for an even deeper commitment to Torah than the scholars and Pharisees prescribed or exemplified (Mt 5:18-20). If his hearers want to be people who have a natural place in a world where God reigns, they need to be whole, like God (Mt 5:48)."<sup>32</sup> John Goldingay</p>	
<p>"Since he does not 'abolish' the Law and the Prophets but fulfills them (5:17), his disciples likewise must not 'abolish' or 'break' the commandments but must instead practice and teach them (5:19)...The entire Old Testament is the expression of God's will, but it is to be obeyed and taught from the perspective of how Jesus 'fulfills' it through his interpretation of its intent and meaning. A disciple's status in the kingdom of heaven accords with whether one trifles with the revealed will of God or obeys and teaches it truly as the Word of God."<sup>33</sup> Michael J. Wilkins</p>	

<sup>29</sup> Hagner, 106.

<sup>30</sup> R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp 182-183.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini, "Matthew," in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1015.

<sup>32</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 801.

<sup>33</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 230.

“[T]he language of 5:17 is likely to constitute a bridge between the fulfillment of Scripture language of the formula quotations and the fulfilling of all righteousness which Jesus expresses at his baptism...[T]he interest at 5:17 is clearly with the practical implementation of the directives of the Law (and the Prophets). The fulfillment language represents a claim that Jesus’ programmatic commitment, far from undercutting the role of the Law and the Prophets, is to enable God’s people to live out the Law more effectively.”<sup>34</sup>  
John Nolland

In our Messianic faith community, it is quite popular to hear rhetoric along the lines of, “You think that in Yeshua fulfilling the Law it means prophecy; it doesn’t! It means that He came to fill the Torah up full of meaning.” These statements are too often charged with negative emotions. It is incorrectly thought that if a person thinks that Yeshua’s fulfillment of the Torah regards any kind of prophecy, that he or she is probably in error. And, Messianic Jewish commentator David H. Stern, in making some observations on Matthew 5:17, actually does miss something. He states, “It is true that Yeshua kept the *Torah* perfectly and fulfilled predictions of the Prophets, but that is not the point here. Yeshua did not come to abolish but ‘to make full’ (*plērōsai*) the meaning of what the *Torah* and the ethical demands of the Prophets require.”<sup>35</sup>

It is absolutely appropriate to recognize that Yeshua’s fulfilling the Torah does involve more than just His accomplishing predictive prophecies. But equally so, it is inappropriate to limit the meaning of *plēroō* to just some kind of “perfection of Torah” associated with His teachings and interpretations of Moses, and His obedience to the commandments. The text itself of Matthew 5:17 does not just say Yeshua came to fulfill the Law, but *ton nomon ē tous prophētas* (τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφήτας), “the law and the prophets” (RSV). Because of the inclusion of “the Prophets” in the fulfillment schema, various interpreters think that they have a legitimate reason to conclude that Messianic prophetic accomplishment is exclusively what is intended.

The verb *plēroō*, as noted above, can regard some kind of perfection of something or bringing something into perfection, but its usage throughout the Gospel of Matthew—which by no means can be casually disregarded—does serve to describe prophetic fulfillment. The verb *plēroō* is used twelve different instances in Matthew to describe prophetic accomplishment.<sup>36</sup> It is pointless to deny, especially with the inclusion of the Torah and the Prophets together in v. 17, **how Messianic prophetic fulfillment is a major part of what Yeshua is affirming He came to do.**

Putting the Torah and the Prophets together is something that is very important for any Bible reader to see. In the estimation of Davies and Allison, “Matthew cannot simply let it be said that Jesus fulfilled the law or that Jesus fulfilled the prophets: he must tell us that he fulfilled both.”<sup>37</sup> There is definitely something to the inclusion of the Prophets, along with the Torah, because in Jewish theology the Pentateuch usually gets more attention than the rest of the Tanach canon. Hagner describes, “This elevation of the prophets to the eternal worth of the law was not a view held by the Jews of Jesus’ day...The messianic age has dawned in history, and with it comes the fulfillment of the prophetic expectation.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Yeshua’s fulfillment of the Torah by His ministry is definitely connected with the themes of the Prophets—not only the themes of Moses.

<sup>34</sup> Nolland, pp 218-219.

<sup>35</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 25.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9.

<sup>37</sup> Davies and Allison, 484.

<sup>38</sup> Hagner, 105.

Among Messianic interpreters, Hegg does take a slight issue with the prophetic-exclusive theme adopted by interpreters like Carson. He points out, “the verb ‘fulfill’ is always in the passive mood: ‘that the words of prophet X *might be fulfilled.*’ Yeshua, however, does not say that the Torah and Prophets are ‘fulfilled’ (passive) in Him, but rather that He came ‘to fulfill’ (active) them.”<sup>39</sup> Yeshua the Messiah, being the Son of God, obviously does possess the power to do more than just accomplish the prophetic expectations of the Torah by fulfilling it. Hegg goes on to describe how, “He admonishes His talmidim both ‘to do’ and ‘to teach’ the Torah, meaning that His having come to ‘fulfill’ the Torah is seen in the way the Torah would be active in their lives and the lives of those they would teach.”<sup>40</sup> This is not just the Messiah’s followers teaching only from the Messiah’s own teachings and interpretations of the Torah, but how the Messiah’s followers would teach from the Torah with His example in mind.

The intention of interpreters who hold to Yeshua’s fulfillment of the Torah only regarding prophecy, is obviously so that once prophecies are accomplished, then the Torah’s instructions themselves get nullified or can be put aside in some way. But even if you choose to look at *plēroō* in v. 17 as exclusively pertaining to prophecy, to claim that the Torah’s instructions get abolished in the process is not at all a tenable position. The Apostolic Scriptures, for example, affirm that Yeshua’s sacrificial work has inaugurated the era of the New Covenant (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:8-12), yet the prophesied New Covenant involves a supernatural transcription of the Torah’s commands onto the hearts of God’s people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). Likewise, at the proclamation of the Word of God, which can be viewed as the gospel, the nations will come to Zion to be taught the Law, resulting in peace (Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2). So, even if you argue from Matthew 5:17 that Yeshua came to only accomplish the prophetic predictions of the Torah and Prophets—the Torah is by no means to be considered relevant only for the pre-resurrection era. From this perspective, Davies and Allison conclude,

“[I]f the law is fulfilled, it cannot on that account be set aside. Fulfillment can only confirm the Torah’s truth, not cast doubt upon it. And while Jesus’ new demands may surpass the demands of the OT, the two are not contradictory...Rather do the words of the Torah remain the words of God (cf. 15:4), their imperatival force undiminished (cf. 5:18; 23:23).”<sup>41</sup>

Yeshua’s fulfilling the Torah and Prophets certainly does involve His accomplishment of various Messianic prophecies, which ultimately concern His sacrifice for sins. The words of Isaiah 40:3, as declared by John the Immerser, surely do strike a chord: “A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God’” (cf. Matthew 3:3). But Yeshua also, in His ministry service, fills out the substance of what Moses and the Prophets anticipate. He redeems people from the slavery of sin, like the Ancient Israelites were delivered from Egypt (Exodus 20:2). He leads people into greater holiness, just as the Torah requires (Leviticus 19:2). Yeshua surely demonstrates the imperative of Micah 6:8, “...what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, [and] to love kindness...?” In His ministry and teachings, Yeshua’s focus on how to live is in continuity with the requirements of Moses and the Prophets. Kaiser specifically describes how “the prophets never wearied of rebuking their listeners for a religious sterility presented as a substitute for the moral norms God wished to see,”<sup>42</sup> and the same tenor is surely witnessed in our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount.

One of the most important usages of the verb *plēroō* is seen earlier in Matthew 3:15. At His immersion in the Jordan River, Yeshua tells John, “in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Here, as in Matthew 5:17, the aorist active infinitive verb *plērōsai* (πληρώσαι) is employed. This immersion formally began the Messiah’s ministry, which would surely involve the accomplishment of predictions seen in the Torah and Prophets, but would *also* involve significant

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<sup>39</sup> Hegg, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Davies and Allison, 487.

<sup>42</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “The Law as God’s Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 198.

Cf. Isaiah 1:11-18; Jeremiah 7:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; 7:21-23; Micah 6:6-8.

healings, exorcisms, *salvation*, and expository preaching on and interpretation of the Torah and Prophets.

Yeshua's fulfilling the Torah most certainly involves His prophetic accomplishments, but it involves, much more. The will of the Torah and Prophets is seen in Yeshua's life and ministry, providing a legacy of proper holiness and upstanding obedience that is to be emulated in all of His disciples. Yeshua's life and teachings of fulfillment exist in symbiosis with the Torah and Prophets—as understanding the Tanach enables us to understand more about the Messiah, and vice versa. Yet, within such a symbiotic relationship, Yeshua's fulfilling of the Torah and Prophets does require that we let Him as the Divine Messiah have the ultimate and final authority for our *halachah* and orthopraxy. The “sound words” that born again Believers must first appeal to in their lives—**by the very virtue of Him saving us from our sins**—are “those of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah” (1 Timothy 6:3). As M. Eugene Boring properly describes,

“Jesus' declaration that his own life and teaching are the definitive revelation of the will of God (cf. 11:25-27; 28:18-20) does indeed mean that neither the written Torah nor its interpretation in the oral tradition...is the final authority.”<sup>43</sup>

These sentiments run contrary to some teaching that we might hear in today's Messianic community (as especially can be found within the self-labeled “Torah movement”), where it is the Pentateuch, and not the words of Messiah Yeshua, that is believed to have the final say in all that we do. **Yeshua's teaching is very clear that the Torah and Prophets have authority.** Yet, Yeshua also says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35), and the Torah and Prophets will in some way pass away with the old creation at a future point in time (discussed further). The permanence of Yeshua's words into the new, eternal creation that is coming, requires that we hold them at a higher level than Moses. So, how we learn as Messianic Believers to have a high regard for the Torah, the Prophets, and their ultimate realization in Yeshua the Messiah, can be a challenge—but not at all an impossible one if we are guided by the Holy Spirit and thrust of the New Covenant. France's thoughts are well taken:

“[T]he authority of the law and the prophets is not abolished. They remain the authoritative word of God. But their role will no longer be the same, now that what they pointed forward to has come, and it will be for Jesus' followers to discern in the light of his teaching and practice what is now the right way to apply those texts in the new situation which his coming has created.”<sup>44</sup>

In the First Century C.E., Yeshua did have to come and challenge some of the status quo, as practiced by various Pharisaical leaders and scribal authorities, who seem to have overlooked the Tanach's emphasis on acts of justice and human wholeness (Matthew 23:23, 27-28). Understanding the Messiah's mission, He requires us as His followers to consider His example of fulfilling the will of Moses and the Prophets. Our proper obedience to the Scriptures begins with love for God and neighbor,<sup>45</sup> and in making sure that our heart attitude is oriented properly so that even the thought of sin is something that sickens us. Our obedience to the Torah and Prophets, as born again Believers, is necessarily tempered by our knowing that Yeshua had to die because we violated its commandments, and permanently absorbed its capital punishment in His sacrifice (Colossians 2:14).

Matthew 5:17 communicates how (1) Yeshua did indeed come to fulfill the prophetic expectations of the Torah and Tanach. In so doing (2) the Lord has fulfilled all righteousness (Matthew 3:15) and brought the Torah and Prophets to their dénouement or climax via His ministry and atoning work. (3) As Messiah followers, while His words stand as our final authority, the authority of Moses and the Prophets is upheld by the Savior we are to emulate. **He surely**

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<sup>43</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 8:186-187.

<sup>44</sup> France, 183.

<sup>45</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

expects us to follow them and heed their messages, which will in turn only confirm His own message.

### The Smallest Letter and Stroke

For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Matthew 5:18 builds on the theme of what the Messiah has just stated in His mission of coming to “fulfill” the Torah and the Prophets. The Lord strongly asserts, “For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (RSV). This also concurs with what is seen in Luke 16:17, “But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.” Obviously, Yeshua speaks about a high degree of permanence for the Mosaic Law, which can only reach some kind of termination “until all things are accomplished” (HCSB).

Nowhere in Matthew 5:17-19—quite contrary to the thoughts of some of today’s Christians—do we ever get the impression that Yeshua the Messiah “fulfilled and thus abolished” the Law of Moses by His ministry activities. Quite the opposite is true: Yeshua directs His listeners to pay attention to the smallest features of the Torah. This does not mean that some people have not tried to ignore or even circumvent the words of the Lord—they have! Stott’s thoughts, commenting on the previous verse, are important to consider:

“In every generation of the Christian era there have been those who could not accommodate themselves to Christ’s attitude to the law. The famous second-century heretic Marcion, who rewrote the New Testament by eliminating its references to the Old, naturally erased this passage. Some of his followers went further. They dared to reverse its meaning by exchanging the verbs so that the sentence would read: ‘I have come not to fulfil the law and the prophets, but to abolish them!’”<sup>46</sup>

V. 18 does not just begin with “For truly I say to you...” but actually *Amēn gar legō humin* (ἀμήν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν), “For, amen, I say to you...” (NIGTC).<sup>47</sup> Yeshua’s usage of “amen” is quite significant, especially given the many usages of the root *a-m-n* (אמן) throughout the Tanach,<sup>48</sup> and how “Amen” as a carryover liturgical term is not simply translated. Yeshua strongly “Amens,” as it were, how the Torah will remain in effect for God’s people *heōs an parelthē ho ouranos kai hē gē* (ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ), “until heaven and earth disappear” (NIV). This by necessity implies that the Torah will stay with us for a very, very long time.

Have Heaven and Earth passed away? No. Yet, there are interpreters who see Yeshua’s remark as just being a colloquialism, and consider the cosmos “passing away” as regarding until the time of the new post-resurrection era inaugurated by the work of the Messiah. Carson is one who thinks that “all is accomplished,” for example, “is best understood to refer to everything in the law, considered under the law’s prophetic function—viz., until all these things have taken place as prophesied.”<sup>49</sup> While Carson recognizes that within his view “not one jot or tittle will fail of its fulfillment,”<sup>50</sup> he nevertheless is counted among those who think that via such prophetic fulfillment, the Torah is now a thing of past salvation history.

We should be consciously aware of how the clause *heōs an panta genētai* (ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται) has been improperly rendered in both the KJV and NKJV as “till all be/is fulfilled.” This is obviously a problem, because Yeshua’s intent to fulfill the Torah and Prophets in v. 17 is indicated by the verb *plēroō*, and here in v. 18 *ginomai* (γίνομαι) is instead what is used. *Ginomai* is basically a to be verb, which in v. 18 would obviously mean “to occur as process or result,

<sup>46</sup> Stott, 72.

<sup>47</sup> Nolland, 215.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:63-64.

<sup>49</sup> Carson, in *EXP*, 8:145.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

*happen, turn out, take place*” (BDAG).<sup>51</sup> Within the Gospel of Matthew *ginomai* has prophetic uses (1:22; 21:4; 24:6; 26:54, 56), so it is correct to conclude that the Torah remains effectual until the point of when “all is accomplished” (NASU) as foretold in the eschatological plan.

Is the point of “until everything is accomplished” (NIV) the period until right after the death and resurrection of Yeshua? While various interpreters of Matthew 5:17-19 draw this conclusion, it is notably **not** a conclusion made by all. The endurance of the Torah as the Word of God, possessing relevance and significant instruction for God’s people until Heaven and Earth pass, as seen in v. 18, is built upon sentiments such as Psalm 148:3-6:

“Praise Him, sun and moon; praise Him, all stars of light! Praise Him, highest heavens, and the waters that are above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created. He has also established them forever and ever; He has made a decree which will not pass away.”

The cosmic Creation will endure *l’ad l’olam* (לְעַד לְעוֹלָם), a very, very long time—to the point where John says “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away” (Revelation 21:1). Similarly, we see Baruch 4:1 in the Apocrypha explaining how “the law...endures for ever.” 4 Ezra 9:37 also expresses, “the law...does not perish but remains in its glory.” If the Torah does, in fact, have a limited span of viability—then that span did not end with the death and resurrection of Yeshua. Such a span of viability for instructing God’s people is in fact intended **to be just as long as the endurance of the present universe**. The smallest features of the Torah remain relevant until we actually arrive at the future point in salvation history when the eternal state will be upon us, and we enter into the new Creation. Davies and Allison confirm how v. 18 “most naturally suggests that there is still a long period of time to elapse before the law passes away.”<sup>52</sup>

Stott’s observation is that the Torah and the Prophets will only “pass away in a mighty rebirth of the universe.”<sup>53</sup> So, the only kind of event that would be significant enough to render the Tanach Scriptures inoperable would be a Second Big Bang! Yeshua’s words “until heaven and earth pass away” should not at all be taken as a contrast between the pre- and post-resurrection eras, but actually between the current age and the future eternal state. Nolland comments how v. 18 “seems most likely to be concerned to guarantee a permanence of the Law until such time as every item on the Law’s agenda has been achieved, until all that it lays out as God’s will for humankind has been accomplished.”<sup>54</sup> While none of us should ever downplay the significance of Yeshua’s death and resurrection, atoning for our sins, **there is still much more** on God’s agenda for humanity, foretold in the Tanach, which we are still waiting for the accomplishment of. It is quite obvious, for example, that we have yet to see that thousand-year Messianic Kingdom of total *shalom* envelop Planet Earth:

“And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Even though an essential peace has been restored to individuals, by the salvation available in Yeshua, there are still eschatological dimensions that have yet to be realized. While it is correct to claim that the Tanach Scriptures remain viable only until that point that their prophecies are all accomplished, **we have not at all reached such a point in history**.

And the need to heed the instructions of the Torah is upheld by Yeshua to its finest details. The Lord is clear to explain how “till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law” (NKJV). Rendered as “not an iota, not a dot” in the RSV, *iōta hen*

<sup>51</sup> BDAG, 197.

<sup>52</sup> Davies and Allison, 494.

<sup>53</sup> Stott, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Nolland, 221.

*ē mia keraia* (ἴωτα ἐν ἡ μία κεραία), would immediately direct a First Century audience to consider the formation of Hebrew letters in scribal dictation. Anyone who has studied Biblical Hebrew should be aware of how if attention to how letters are written is not maintained, it can change the meaning of an entire word or sentence. Stern, rendering v. 18 with “not so much as a *yud* or a stroke will pass from the *Torah*” in his CJB, aptly describes,

“*Yud* is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet and is used...to render Greek *iōta*, the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet. Only a small **stroke** distinguishes one Hebrew letter from another—for example *dalet* (ד) from *resh* (ר) or *beit* (ב) from *kaf* (כ).”<sup>55</sup>

Another example surely to be considered would be the difference between a *hey* (ה) and a *chet* (ח).

There is, in fact, a well-known Rabbinic story that describes the changing of Sarai’s name (סָרַי) to Sarah (סָרָה; Genesis 17:15), which was accomplished by the removing of the *yod* (י). It concludes that the letter *yod* actually cried out from generation to generation, until Moses changed Hoshea’s (הוֹשֵׁעַ) name to Joshua (*Yehoshua*, יְהוֹשֻׁעַ; Numbers 13:16):

“Now if the Y that I took away from the name of Sarah [changing it from Sarai to Sarah] stood crying for so many years until Joshua came and I added the Y [removed from Sarah’s name] to his name, as it is said, ‘And Moses called Oshea, the son of Nun, Jehoshua’ (Num. 13:16), how much the more will a complete passage of Scripture [cry out if I remove that passage from its rightful place]!” (b.*Sandedrin* 107a).<sup>56</sup>

Considering this Rabbinic view, Craig S. Keener properly remarks, “Jesus makes the same point from this tradition that later rabbis did: even the smallest details of God’s law are essential.”<sup>57</sup>

We should not at all think that Yeshua’s reference to “jots and tittles,” which can change the appearance of various Hebrew letters—and thus how specific words read—is an indication that Divine revelation can only be communicated in Hebrew. V. 18’s reference to a *keraia* (κεραία) or “*any thing projecting like a horn*” (*LS*),<sup>58</sup> is noted by Nolland in the Greek language to relate to “projections on letters, to breathings, and to accents”<sup>59</sup> which can also change the meanings of words. Paying attention to the slight differences in vowel sounds, like how *ēta* (η) and *epsilon-iota* (ει), are almost the same but slightly different, could alter the meaning of an important word. Even in the English language, sometimes we have to be aware of the differences between a capital P and R,<sup>60</sup> or a lowercase b and k.<sup>61</sup>

Hagner considers Yeshua’s reference to “the smallest letter or stroke” not passing away to be “a deliberate hyperbole—an overstatement that is designed to drive home the main point that the law be fully preserved.”<sup>62</sup> Certainly if Yeshua fulfills both prophecy and the spiritual will of God contained in the Tanach, then in seeing how it is realized in His life and ministry, we do need to be textually conscious of it. The words of the Psalmist communicate the spiritual imperative, “Your hands made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments” (Psalm 119:73), and we are to see this realized in the life of Yeshua. Still, a place in the Torah where a single stroke can change the meaning of a passage would be the different Hebrew witnesses of Psalm 22:16.<sup>63</sup> The details of Scripture *do matter*.

<sup>55</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 27.

<sup>56</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

<sup>57</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 111.

<sup>58</sup> *LS*, 428.

<sup>59</sup> Nolland, 220.

<sup>60</sup> Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., “Matthew,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 30.

<sup>61</sup> Boring, in *NIB*, 8:187.

<sup>62</sup> Hagner, 106.

<sup>63</sup> Simply compare how this is rendered in Christian and Jewish Bible versions, with one confirming the sacrifice of Yeshua, and another denying it:

“For dogs have surrounded me; A band of evildoers has encompassed me; They pierced my hands and my feet” (NASU).

Not at all to be overlooked, similar to what is seen in v. 17 previously, is that it is quite significant that Yeshua uses “Law” as a reference to the entire Tanach, and not to the Pentateuch exclusively. This is because the Tanach: Law, Prophets, and Writings, all compose *torah* (תּוֹרָה) or instruction from God that must be taken seriously. The usage of “Law” in reference to parts of the Tanach other than just the Pentateuch is something that the Apostle Paul also employs, as in 1 Corinthians 14:12 he says, “In the Law it is written...,” and then quotes from Isaiah 28:11.

### The Greatest and Least in the Kingdom

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

It is not enough for Yeshua to simply require His followers to pay attention to the smallest details of the Tanach Scriptures, until we arrive at the future New Creation sometime long into the future (v. 18). The Lord actually assigns eschatological penalties to those who would annul or relax the Torah’s commandments: “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). At the same time, rewards are promised to those who will uphold the Torah’s commandments: “whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (NIV).

The status of “least” will be given to the one who annuls the “least” of the Torah’s commandments. Being *elachistos* (ἐλάχιστος) likely “**pert. to being considered of very little importance, insignificant, trivial**” (BDAG)<sup>64</sup> within the Kingdom of God. But being “least” in God’s Kingdom does not mean being removed from it. Wilkins properly remarks, “The rank of ‘least’ should not be taken to indicate exclusion from the kingdom... ‘Least’ and ‘great’ are ways to acknowledge in this present life those who have been faithful in word and deed to the revealed will of God as it is taught by Jesus.”<sup>65</sup> Being “least” and being “great” in God’s Kingdom concerns the rewards that will be given to Messiah’s followers when He returns to establish His reign (Isaiah 62:11; Revelation 22:12). Those who are “least” actually make it into the Kingdom, but will apparently not be given very much.

Yeshua’s reference to “the least of these commandments” is likely rooted within contemporary Jewish teaching of His time, which did classify various Torah commandments along the lines of some being “light” and others being “heavy.”<sup>66</sup> It was said, “Be meticulous in a small religious duty as in a large one, for you do not know what sort of reward is coming for any of the various religious duties” (m.*Avot* 2:1).<sup>67</sup> Some of the thoughts regarding what would be considered the “least” and “greatest” commandments of the Torah for one to follow, include:

- least commandments such as those to tithe on produce (Leviticus 27:30; Deuteronomy 14:22), and great commandments such as profaning God’s name, misusing the Sabbath, or refusing to enact social justice (Exodus 20:2-8; Micah 6:8)<sup>68</sup>

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“Dogs surround me; a pack of evil ones closes in on me, like lions *they maul* my hands and feet” (NJPS).

These differences are noted by David H. Stern, trans., *Complete Jewish Bible* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1998), 809, and then explained *Ibid.*, xxx. Also consult the editor’s statements on Psalm 22:17 in his article “Answering the ‘Frequently Avoided Questions’ About the Messiahship of Yeshua.”

<sup>64</sup> BDAG, 314.

<sup>65</sup> Wilkins, 230.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*; Keener, pp 111-112; Nolland, 222.

<sup>67</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 675.

<sup>68</sup> Wilkins, 230.

- least commandments about remembering a bird's nest (Deuteronomy 22:6-7), and great commandments about honoring parents (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16)<sup>69</sup>

Yeshua does warn that those who break what are considered “lesser” commandments in the Torah will be penalized. The verb *luō* (λύω), rendered as “annuls” (NASU) or “relaxes” (RSV/ESV), while meaning “to loosen, i.e. weaken, relax” (LS), can also most certainly regard “to resolve a whole into its parts, to dissolve, break up” (LS).<sup>70</sup> Teaching that is delivered by Messiah's followers, with the explicit intent to demean, downgrade, or communicate a less-than-favorable view of the Torah's commandments, will not merit one great reward in God's Kingdom.

Of course, it should not be surprising that some interpreters of Matthew 5:17-19 wish to associate *tōn entolōn* (τῶν ἐντολῶν) or “these commandments,” as being something other than the commandments of God in the Torah. Some conclude that the commandments which Yeshua teaches on in His Sermon on the Mount are those which Christians will be *exclusively* held accountable for either upholding, or denying, as relevant instruction. Carson is reflective of this position:

“The entire Law and Prophets are not scrapped by Jesus' coming but fulfilled. Therefore the commandments of these Scriptures—even the least of them...—must be practiced. But the nature of the practicing has already been affected by vv.17-18. The law pointed forward to Jesus and his teaching; so it is properly obeyed by conforming to his word.”<sup>71</sup>

The thought here is that by keeping or paying attention *to only* the Messiah's specific teachings, His followers will then be considered as having obeyed God's previous Law.

I do not think any mature Believer in his or her right mind will disagree with the fact that **we certainly need to adhere to the Messiah's teachings.** And indeed, if we choose to disregard or underplay any of the specific areas that He expounds upon in His Sermon on the Mount—(extreme) penalties should be issued! What Yeshua has said from His mouth are words that will endure beyond this universe (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). But the conclusion that Messiah followers keep the Torah by only following Yeshua's explicit commandments is very poor logic. It is almost like saying:

*Ignore the Law of Moses, keep Christ's teaching, and by keeping Christ's teaching you will be keeping the Law of Moses which you are to pay little attention to.*

While some might think this extrapolation is a bit overblown, consider how many evangelical Christians today are really acquainted with the Torah and Tanach. How many of today's Believers are really keen on studying the Old Testament, if for any other reason than just seeing how the Messiah's fulfills its predicative prophecies? *Not enough.* It is heartbreaking to consider how many modern Christian people, quite sadly and lamentably, may very well be considered least in the Kingdom. They have no clue what Moses' Teaching really is, and not enough would be able to point out some major Messianic prophecies from the Tanach, and how Yeshua accomplished them in the Gospels. Too few have the ability to understand the Disciples' claim, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote—Yeshua of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45). Too many of today's Believers have widely chosen to relegate the Law and the Prophets to the dustbin of Biblical history, **and there can be no doubting that today's Church is suffering from it.**

In much of historic Protestant Christian thought, particularly that of Reformed theology, and to a lesser extent Wesleyan theology, it has been held that the only parts of the Torah which have been invalidated as a part of the Messiah's arrival are those of the “ceremonial law.” This “ceremonial law” included things like the Levitical priesthood, circumcision, and the kosher dietary laws. All of the prescriptions of what are believed to compose the “moral law” of the Old Testament, were never nullified, and are statutes to which God will hold His people to high account. Even though this view does hold to an artificial subdivision of God's commandments

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<sup>69</sup> Keener, pp 111-112.

<sup>70</sup> LS, 482.

<sup>71</sup> Carson, in *EXP*, 8:146.

between so-called “moral” and “ceremonial” statutes, it still upholds the principle that most of the Law of Moses—which does instruct people on ethics and morality—is to be followed. While needing to be informed more from First Century Judaism, **this is a view definitely to be preferred** over that which says Believers need to *only* be concerned with the Messiah’s teachings, which have now basically replaced Moses’ Teaching.

I myself was raised in a denominational tradition which taught that the moral law of the Old Testament was still to be followed by Christians. Commenting on Matthew 5:17, John Wesley stated how Jesus Christ came “*not...to destroy—the moral law, but to fulfil—To establish, illustrate, and explain its highest meaning, both by [His] life and doctrine.*”<sup>72</sup> I also have Reformed and Calvinist strands in my family as well, both of which also held the “moral law” of the Old Testament to remain valid, and concurrent with this that Christian people are to be very hard working, responsible, and productive citizens. I have never had to be convinced, in general principle, that the Mosaic Law is relevant instruction for born again Believers. My Christian family would be among those who would declare, along with King David, “The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver *pieces*” (Psalm 119:72). In the generations of my family, you will even find those who insisted on the keeping of a rather rigid Sunday Sabbath.

Millions of Christians the world over, for many centuries, have looked to the Mosaic Law for teaching and instruction. It has surely informed their understanding of Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount, and the ethical code that the Savior insists His followers to adhere to. While their numbers are waning, there are many evangelical Christians today who look to the Torah’s commandments on human morality, as necessary things to be followed as a matter of piety and holiness.<sup>73</sup> These are people who do not look at the Old Testament as a piece of the Bible to be relegated to past history, but they allow it to inform their view of the world today. They understand how, in the words of Nolland, “Clearly nothing less than commitment to the complete will of God as expressed in the entire Law will do,”<sup>74</sup> as their obedience to God is motivated by love for Him (Deuteronomy 6:5). If anything, today’s Christians who already adhere to what they consider the “moral law” to be, simply need to add a few more things to what they are already doing.

Those Christians over the centuries, who have highly valued the Mosaic Law and principles of the Old Testament, looking to its instruction as a matter of proper obedience to God and emulation of the ministry of Jesus Christ—however incomplete their view of the Torah might seem to today’s Messianics—**will surely be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven.** These are Believers who have truly lived forth the imperative, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16), and “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). They have lived forth the imperatives of service to one’s fellow human beings as required by Moses, the Prophets, and Messiah Yeshua:

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me’” (Matthew 25:34-40).

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<sup>72</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>73</sup> For a summary of this position, consult especially Walter C. Kaiser, “The Law as God’s Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, pp 177-199.

<sup>74</sup> Nolland, 223.

Keener describes in his commentary, “While various groups of Christians today may differ concerning exactly how Jesus intended his disciples to interpret the law, one point is clear: Jesus was not an antinomian. He expected his followers to understand and apply the moral principles already revealed in the Scriptures.”<sup>75</sup> Once you already believe that the Torah, in general ethical practice, is to be followed—then any other areas one might consider to be a bit more “ceremonial” only need to be studied out with time and research (discussed further). If we consider the Torah’s regulations of one’s business or farming practices to be useful in guiding our actions today, why should we not think that God had our well being today *also* in mind in commanding that His people keep the seventh-day holy, or abstain from eating certain kinds of meats? Is He not concerned with our physical health every bit as much as with our mental and societal health?

In Stott’s thought, “To disregard a ‘least’ commandment in the law...is to demote oneself into a ‘least’ subject in the kingdom; greatness in the kingdom belongs to those who are faithful in doing and teaching the whole moral law.”<sup>76</sup> Because ethical and moral commandments compose the majority of the Torah’s instruction—even down to what some think are “least” principles—many faithful Christians of today and yesteryear will merit the status of “great” in the Kingdom. Unfortunately, due to the still-maturing spirituality of much of today’s Messianic movement, many people in our faith community do not acknowledge this. Rather than striving to focus on what they have in common, *first*, with our Christian brothers and sisters (cf. Ephesians 4:1-7), they instead prefer to (harshly and) unnecessarily judge them. While there are Christian theological traditions that have absolutely considered the Torah to be a thing of the past, and of no relevance to Messiah followers (such as dispensationalism), **this does not include everyone**. Furthermore, consider how it is only the Lord, and Him alone, who gets to determine the status of “least” for anyone who enters into His Kingdom—just as He is the only One who determines who will not enter into His Kingdom at all (Matthew 13:41).

*I do not think that it is wise when some of today’s Messianic Believers haphazardly consider various Christians “least” in the Kingdom.* The status of being “least” can actually apply to anyone who claims faith in Yeshua. There have been plenty of Messianics who have overlooked important parts of the Torah’s instruction, including some of the specific areas highlighted in the Sermon on the Mount. Some consider Torah observance to exclusively compose things like the seventh-day Sabbath, appointed times of Leviticus 23, or kosher dietary laws. One’s heart attitude toward others, morality in functioning in the world, sexual ethics, business practices, etc., are things that are viewed as just not being that important. Could Messianics who overlook these things be considered “least”? Mature Believers have the ability to properly balance outward actions, which possess great value and blessings when followed, **along with** moral instruction that is to regulate how we relate to and interact with other people. The value of moral commandments that are largely “great,” and outward commandments that are often considered “least,” both have to be properly maintained in the orthopraxy of a redeemed saint.

How we learn to do this is not always easy, because it not only requires us to possess a heart and mind that have been changed by the Holy Spirit, but we might have to even do some work and study in trying to discern how we should properly live. We will have to acknowledge in our studies how the subject of the Law has been approached by various Christians throughout history. Wilkins explains, “Some contend that none of [the Law] applies to Jesus unless it is explicitly reaffirmed in the New Testament, while others say that all of the Old Testament applies unless it is explicitly revoked in the New Testament. Both of these extremes should be avoided in the light of Jesus’ statements in 5:17-20.”<sup>77</sup> Yeshua’s intention was not to come to the Earth to abolish and render inoperative Moses’ Teaching. Still, it would be hard to argue that His sacrifice for us at Golgotha (Calvary) has not inaugurated some changes, in least in terms of how we look at the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices of the Torah (cf. Hebrews 7:12), which were incapable of providing final atonement for human sin (cf. Hebrews 10:2-3).

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<sup>75</sup> Keener, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Stott, 74.

<sup>77</sup> Wilkins, 235.

Even with the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices of the Torah largely put aside (Hebrews 7:19), at least until the Millennial Kingdom (cf. Ezekiel chs. 40-44), there is still a great deal of the Torah that can be followed *practically* in today's world. Taking the Sabbath day as a day of rest and refreshment, remembering the appointed times as memorials throughout the year, not eating certain things even if entirely for health reasons, and being conscious of instructions that regulate sexuality—are all things that we can follow and benefit from. They will not only help our bodies, but they will teach us important things about God's holiness and His plan of salvation history (cf. Colossians 2:17). They help us learn more, *not less*, about how Yeshua lived. And, they allow us to express continuity with the Jewish community, and can be used as ways to communicate, when appropriate, the gospel message.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, there are still instructions in the Torah, which for some reason or another, have naturally reached their end and cannot be followed. *This is different than abolishing the Torah.* Some of the Torah's commandments were not followed by the Jewish people of Yeshua's time, because they regulated Ancient Israel's economy within the Ancient Near East (ANE). Obviously, commandments that have a termination point "until the Xth generation" cannot be followed by virtue of possessing a timestamp. Instructions regulating Ancient Israel's slave code cannot be followed today, and no Biblical scholar—even in the most rigid branch of Orthodox Judaism—would argue that slavery should be practiced in the modern era. We read instruction in the Torah that concerns a rather agrarian level of technology, and not the machine or computer ages.

If we completely ignored commandments in the Pentateuch that could only be followed by Ancient Israel several millennia ago, then we might be considered "abolishing" the Torah. But if we are able students of God's Word, even if we might not be able to follow some of those commandments, we can still learn very important things about God's character, His interactions with ANE society, and His general concern for the world. While a surface reading of some commandments might make us think that the Torah is archaic by our modern standards, for the Thirteenth Century B.C.E., Israel's Law might have been very subversive and radical when compared to the law codes of Mesopotamia, Egypt, or Canaan.

While Yeshua stated quite clearly that He did not come to abolish the Torah, His fulfillment of the Torah can include some post-resurrection changes and/or expansions in its application. Ancient Judaism, by the very virtue of the debates over *halachah* (הלכה), recognized that there was flexibility in Torah application long before Yeshua arrived—and today's Messianic Believers should likewise be flexible over various issues. This is an area where consulting the Jewish theological tradition can definitely be helpful.

France validly states, "To speak of a change in application of the law is not to regard it now as discarded."<sup>79</sup> Colossians 2:14 does not at all say that the Law was nailed to the cross as God's standard of holiness; it says that the record of human sin and its prescribed penalties were nailed to the cross. If capital punishment is largely a thing of the past—now absorbed in Yeshua's sacrifice—the standard that required the Messiah's death is still very much to be considered sin, albeit with a death penalty **that has now been remitted by His shed blood!** Changes to the Torah beyond this are like recognizing the gender equality that Yeshua's work has restored (Galatians 3:28; contra Genesis 3:16), might see the position of women significantly elevated and some previous authority structures reworked, but the basic instructions of childrearing and of men also leading the family remain intact. General precepts like the Ten Commandments still demand our attention. Murder is still murder, homosexuality is still unacceptable, and pork is still unclean. However, instruction that largely had a specific ANE context for Ancient Israel in mind, should inform us when we make life decisions, but might not always be enough for modern people.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Consult the editor's book *Torah In the Balance, Volume II* (forthcoming) for a discussion of these, and other areas.

<sup>79</sup> France, 186 fn#25.

<sup>80</sup> For a further discussion, consult the editor's article "Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues that Messianics Encounter in the Torah."

In order to be considered “great” in God’s Kingdom, we have to always consider the witness of His commandments in the Torah. If we consider them as completely irrelevant and disregard or entirely ignore them in our theological deliberations, we may somehow end up becoming “least.”

## The Law of Christ versus the Torah of Moses?

Believers in Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus) have to affirm that He did not come to overthrow or render inoperative the Torah (Matthew 5:17), but because of His atoning sacrifice, there have been some changes inaugurated as a natural result of it. The Torah by no means has been abrogated as valid instruction, but its application is surely to be understood in light of the new, post-resurrection realities resulting via His fulfilling of it. How wide a degree have we seen some shifts take place?

It is sometimes thought in New Testament studies that Yeshua and His half-brother James both held a rather conservative, rather standard Jewish view of the Mosaic Law. Paul, on the other hand, is thought to hold to a rather liberal view of the Mosaic Law, and frowned from time to time on Believers thinking about “works.” This is, of course, not the view of everyone—**and should not be the view of any Messianic.** Paul viewed people as being saved by God’s grace and not human works (Ephesians 2:8-9), but that good works were to be evidence of such salvation (Ephesians 2:10). The good Apostle wrote Timothy, “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited *and* understands nothing” (1 Timothy 6:3-4a). Any kind of proper doctrine or theology must confirm to the message of Yeshua’s words: principally that of His Sermon on the Mount, which itself is prefaced with the remark that He did not come to abolish the Torah.

Paul’s own words need to be held to the standard that he himself set. It is really not that difficult to see how what are commonly thought to be anti-Torah statements in his letters, actually do align with the tenor of Matthew 5:17-19, *when* a little more investigation is conducted. Romans 10:4, “Christ is the end of the law” (NASU), is easily explained when one looks at the different meanings of *telos* (τέλος)—a quite notable one being “**the goal toward which a movement is being directed, end, goal, outcome**” (BDAG)<sup>81</sup>—with the Torah pointing to the goal of Messiah. No termination of the Torah’s relevance for the saints need be implied. Romans 10:4 is an excellent example of where people might try to pit Yeshua against Paul, with the two in contradiction, but this is completely unnecessary. It is to be realized, though, that the Apostle Peter warned that there are some difficult things stated in Paul’s letters, which people will twist around (2 Peter 3:15-16). Just consider how many people today make the severe mistake of thinking that the Apostle Paul is writing *directly to them*, when in fact he is writing to a specific First Century audience that a letter is labeled by?

Even with a few basic guidelines in place—like making a conscious effort to consider the ancient circumstances of Paul’s letters—many of today’s scholastic interpreters think that the Torah of Moses has now been replaced by an independent Law of Christ. One verse that receives a great deal of attention, in support of this concept, is Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” None of us should ever think that bearing one another’s burdens, serving one another as fellow brothers and sisters, is wrong! But is this *ton nomon tou Christou* (τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ) some kind of instruction that is different from the Torah of Moses? Ben Witherington III mistakenly claims, “...by ‘the Law of Christ’, Paul does not mean Christ’s interpretation of the still binding Mosaic Law, nor even the Torah of the Messiah in some general sense not based in the actual experience of Jesus, including his death on the cross. The Apostle...is...perfectly capable of speaking of two different Laws.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> BDAG, 998.

<sup>82</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 424.

The challenge with trying to pit the Torah of Moses against an independent, and completely separate Law of Christ, is not that the Apostle Paul is concerned that Believers emulate Yeshua's self-sacrificial example. *He is*. The challenge is where interpreters who hold the "law of Christ" as something independent from the Torah have to look to for its principles: **the Sermon on the Mount**. The so-called independent Law of Christ is viewed to basically be the Sermon on the Mount, something to be followed by all of His disciples. But in order to understand the Sermon on the Mount, one has to understand Yeshua's imperative that His followers possess good works (Matthew 5:16), and that His mission was by no means one of abolishing Moses' Teaching (Matthew 5:17). Yeshua's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is predicated, in fact, *by one understanding* Moses' Teaching. Far from the Law of Christ being an independent series of instruction; it is rather "the *Torah's* true meaning, which the Messiah upholds" (Galatians 6:2, CJB). In following the Torah by the example the Lord has left us—"the Torah of Messiah" as it were—we will most definitely, as Paul affirms, be concerned with the requirement to love one another (Romans 13:10).

Upholding the Mosaic Torah via the example of Messiah Yeshua will mean that born again Believers are going to be tempered by a great deal of love and mercy for others. When today's Messianics see other people not performing some of its outward commandments, it is their responsibility to lead by a good and positive life example, and demonstrate how following such commandments are beneficial to one's well being. They have a responsibility of knowing why they believe what they believe—because they will be asked questions—and any questions, comments, or criticisms should not be responded to in a mean-spirited rebuke or simplistic sound bite, but instead with fair-minded answers (cf. 1 Peter 3:15-16). In our generation, especially as today's evangelical Christians desire a return to more of the instruction of the Old Testament, the Messianic movement will be experiencing significant growth, **and we have to be ready**. Even a relatively liberal commentator like Boring recognizes that when some Christians read Matthew 5:17-19, various questions can be asked:

"Modern Christians sometimes read New Testament commands that their church does not practice...and are perplexed by their own question (not merely the criticism of outsiders), 'What does it mean that the Bible says "do this" but our church, which claims to "believe the Bible," does not do it?' The prefatory declaration of 5:17 is a preemptive strike at one some Christian readers might think when they read 5:21-48, and as they reflect on the fact that their church simply no longer practices some of the clear commands of the Bible: circumcision, the food laws, animal sacrifice, (the Sabbath?)"<sup>83</sup>

France's words are a little more to the point, as he thinks that Yeshua's upholding of the Torah is nuanced, lest today's Christians think that the more "ceremonial" aspects of the Torah—should still considered as valid or relevant. He offers the summary paragraph,

"If that is what Matthew intended, the interpreter must face the fact that this teaching is out of step with the overall thrust of NT Christianity and with the almost universal consensus of Christians ever since, at least with regard to the more ceremonial aspects of the OT law, particularly its sacrificial provisions. The Letter to the Hebrews is clear that these can have no further place after the one perfect sacrifice has been offered by Christ. Paul, while his attitude to the law provides a scope for a rich variety of interpretations and doctoral dissertations, uses language about freedom from the law (Gal 5:1-6) or being dead to the law (Rom 7:1-6; Gal 2:19) and about Christ as the end of the law (Rom 10:4; cf. Gal 3:24-25) which sits very uncomfortably with a view that Torah observance is unchanged since the coming of the Messiah. Under his and Peter's guidance the NT church found it necessary to abandon the OT food laws as binding on all Christians (Acts 11:2-10; Rom 14:14)." <sup>84</sup>

France's opening words about the "universal consensus" are probably a bit overblown, but he is very right about the Pauline Epistles being a place "for a rich variety of interpretations and doctoral dissertations." What this means is that anyone interpreting or addressing Yeshua's view of

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<sup>83</sup> Boring, in *NIB*, 8:196.

<sup>84</sup> France, pp 179-180.

the Torah, has to remain informed about Paul's writing about the Torah—and no Messianic can afford to teach on the Gospels, and remain ignorant of Paul, *or vice versa*. In fact, the areas of the Apostolic Scriptures that France refers to above should not at all be taken as complete and total abolitions of the Torah, as they were all delivered in specific contexts. They may reflect a moving forward in God's plan of salvation history, or a moderation of an audience's attitude that focused on one part of the Torah, over and against a more important part. To briefly summarize:

- The **Epistle to the Hebrews** does discuss the animal sacrifices of the Torah, and how Yeshua's sacrifice and Melchizedekian priesthood are superior to the Levitical sacrifices and priesthood, providing final atonement. But Hebrews 7:18 says that there has been a "setting aside" of the Levitical sacrifices and priesthood, and no dishonor to the Levitical sacrifices and priesthood is issued by the author of Hebrews. Those who hold to a pre-millennial eschatology realize that at some future point in history, the Levitical sacrifices and priesthood will be reestablished, if for any other reason simply to accomplish prophecy (Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:15).<sup>85</sup>
- **Galatians 5:1-6** does not speak about non-Jewish Believers possessing a "freedom" from the Torah, as though they do not have to follow any of it. Paul's words are targeted at the message of the Judaizers/Influencers, who were requiring the Galatians to become formal proselytes to Judaism, in order to truly be considered members of God's people. For some reason or another, what their message advocated would lead the Galatians back into the same kind of spiritual bondage and activities that they should have left behind in paganism. It would surely get them focused off the need to love others.<sup>86</sup>
- Both **Galatians 2:19** and **Romans 7:1-6** describe a pre-salvation state of a person who is aware of the Torah's instruction. Because of the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah, those who place their trust in Him are now to be considered dead to the Torah's ability to condemn unrepentant sinners. Only a specific part of the Torah's instruction is rendered invalid: its capital punishment.<sup>87</sup>
- The term *telos* in **Romans 10:4** should not be translated as "end," which to the uncritical eye is considered "termination." The TNIV is a modern version which presents a better understanding: "Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."<sup>88</sup>
- While there is instruction in the Torah of a much higher importance than the kosher dietary laws, there is no explicit claim in the Apostolic Scriptures that they were abolished. Peter states to Cornelius the interpretation of his vision of the sheet as God cleansing all human beings (**Acts 10:1-17; 11:2-10**; cf. 10:28), not meats. Paul's writing in **Romans 14:14** concerns what was being served during Roman fellowship meals, as some of the meat was *koinos* (κοινός) or "common" (**Romans 14:14**, LITV) to certain man-made standards, a different term than what God considers *akathartos* (ἀκάθαρτος) or *tamei* (טָמֵא), meaning "unclean" (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14).<sup>89</sup>

The Torah's instructions as upheld by Yeshua the Messiah do have a different emphasis than many people who label themselves as "Torah observant" often do. A proper Torah observance, as seen in the ministry of Yeshua, is more concerned about bearing another's burdens and in serving one another (Philippians 2:3-4). It is quite focused upon one's heart attitude, and

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<sup>85</sup> Consult the editor's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>86</sup> Consult the editor's article "The Message of Galatians," and his commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>87</sup> Consult the editor's article "Have We Been 'Made Dead' to the Truths of God's Word?"

<sup>88</sup> Consult the editor's article "Is Messiah the Termination of the Torah?"

<sup>89</sup> Consult the editor's articles "To Eat or Not to Eat?" and "How Are We to Properly Keep Kosher?"

with what it means to love others by the imperative: “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). The writings of the Apostolic Scriptures are thoroughly based on this foundational principle. While keeping outward commandments is most certainly a part of emulating Yeshua’s life, it has to be coupled with implementing Yeshua’s ethical teachings on Moses. And if one might think that only the Biblical command to love is *all* that is important, certainly much historic Protestant teaching has rightly stood against this. Stott astutely points out how “the so-called ‘new morality’” that advocates “no law any longer binds Christian people except the law of love”<sup>90</sup> is one that is totally wrong. Following God’s command to love others is, in fact, what is to guide His people into further obedience *as they strive to be a good witness* to a world that needs His salvation.

## **Maturing Toward Greatness in God’s Kingdom**

How do mature Believers learn to balance Moses’ Teaching, the Prophets, and Yeshua’s instruction all together? Clearly, those who are able to teach and exposit upon the Torah and Prophets, and highly maintain the directives of Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount—are those who will be considered very great in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:19)!

Yeshua’s fulfilling of the Torah and Prophets is something that possesses several important aspects. Yeshua (1) came to accomplish critical predicative prophecies as the Messiah, which involved not only His sacrifice for sins, but (2) a proper interpretation of Moses’ Teaching and the admonitions of the Prophets, which should lead to (3) His teaching’s expected implementation by His followers. Yeshua’s fulfilling of the Torah and Prophets by no means can abolish them—but makes them quite important to understand as we seek to understand His own teachings, ministry, and mission. As Messiah followers today, we are called by Him to teach and uphold the continued authority of the Torah, and we are to be empowered to surely understand the aspects of the Sermon on the Mount that He specifically chose to highlight from the Tanach: murder (Matthew 5:21-26), adultery (Matthew 5:27-30), divorce (Matthew 5:31-32), oaths (Matthew 5:33-37), an eye-for-an-eye (Matthew 5:38-42), and love and hatred (Matthew 5:43-47). The Sermon on the Mount is appropriately summarized with the word, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). **Each Believer is to strive toward this high standard of maturity throughout his or her life.**

Within Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount is also the admonition, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). This can be taken a number of ways: (1) entry into the Kingdom by human means must exceed the most rigid outward standards of these First Century Jewish sects, or (2) going beyond the (mere) outward standard of the scribes and Pharisees, maturing in one’s heart reasonings and thought processes, also is required. One could also simply think that Matthew 5:20 presents such a high standard for Messiah followers to reach toward, that it is impossible to fully reach, **requiring people to eventually fall on the mercy of God for entry into His Kingdom.** This should not be an allowance for disobedience, but a recognition of how human works will frequently fail. It is safe to say that Yeshua really did want His audience, and us today, to understand what is communicated by Psalm 51:16-17:

“For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

*All of us are to be brought to our knees when we contemplate the perfection and sinlessness of our Creator, and our limitations as mortals.*

Today’s Messianic movement is quite strong in recognizing that the mission and ministry of Yeshua are in alignment with the expectations of Moses and the Prophets. The Messiah did not come to overthrow the validity and relevance of the Tanach or Old Testament. Yet, today’s Messianic movement does need to improve in its comprehension of the ethics and morality of

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<sup>90</sup> Stott, 72.

Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount. Much of what today's contemporary Messianic movement classifies as Torah observance is only concerned with *Shabbat*, the appointed times, or dietary laws—and while surely important—not enough on how the Torah's commandments are to mold our character so that we can be more like the Lord, in our deeds *and* thoughts. We are also not as strong as we should be in understanding how Yeshua not only fulfills the Law, but also the Prophets—and how the Prophets themselves frequently had to call people back to the righteous requirements of God's Torah. The Prophets were very concerned with care for the destitute and needy, and with the lack of social justice they witnessed in Ancient Israel.

It will be a very, very long time before the Tanach Scriptures have completely “passed away.” In the meantime, as we wait for the eschaton and new Creation, we need to make sure that we have not just a high view of the Torah's commandments—but **those which are especially highlighted by the Lord Himself** in His Sermon on the Mount. Yeshua did not come to “fulfill and thus abolish” the Law. His fulfillment of the Law actually goes *well beyond* His accomplishing various Messianic prophecies, and includes how the Torah's standard of holiness and righteousness is to be seen in the good works of redeemed Believers. How such Believers choose to implement, or not implement, the Torah's instructions, will have some lasting effects in the rewards He gives them. I think that we should be naturally motivated to want more of a reward than just “being” in His Kingdom.

Many more things await us as the Body of Messiah in regard to the fulfillment of the Torah. The Pentateuch includes prophetic words about the future that we have yet to see take place (i.e., Genesis chs. 48-49; Deuteronomy 4:23-40; 30:1-14). The question “Has the Law been fulfilled?” from the prophetic angle would be a clear “No.” The Torah remains relevant as long as the current Creation remains. More critically to be answered, though, is the question: “Is the Law being fulfilled?” Are we seeking to emulate the example left by our Messiah, Savior, and Teacher in our own lives? Are we following the Tanach's significant principles of piety and holiness?

Yeshua's mission was one where all righteousness would be fulfilled (Matthew 3:15). This does not only involve Him coming into this world as the Son of God sacrificed for our sins, but how those who would believe in Him would impact others with the legacy He entrusted. Does this involve understanding the expectations of Moses and the Prophets, and obedience to them? *The Apostles surely thought so.* They considered the Scriptures as they knew them to be important (2 Timothy 3:16). Let us strive to be mature men and women in the Lord who likewise have value for all of the Scriptures! May we really learn to appreciate what He has done for us by being taught from what He came to uphold, and practicing good works by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, when we do finally see our Lord face to face in glory, He can indeed call us “great”!

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