JESUS AND THE TORAH

Matthew 5:17-20
Matthew 5:17-20

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
Connections

- Matthew 5:17-20 is clearly an introduction to Matthew 5:21-48 – the so-called Great Antitheses
- The Antitheses describe how the righteousness of Jesus followers can exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees
- The Antitheses also describe how the Law is fulfilled in Jesus
- They also describe how Jesus’ followers can be salt and light in the world (cf. Matt 5:13-16)
Matthew 5:17-48

- Jesus’ approach to the Jewish Scriptures was an important issue in both his own life and ministry and for the gospel of Matthew
- The Jesus Movement is now generally recognized as distinct Jewish sect alongside the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes
- Each of these groups was distinguished by their hermeneutic (interpretation of Scripture)
Matthew 5:17

- The fact that verse 17 begins with a denial that Jesus came to abolish the law or the prophets suggests that, in fact, he was accused of doing just that.
- This is easiest to understand in the historical context of Matthew’s gospel (which accounts for its appearance only here in the gospels), but can also be understood in the historical context of Jesus himself.
Matthew 5:17

- The Greek word translated “abolish” (καταλύω) could also be translated “dismantle, tear down, annul, make invalid, do away with, end the validity of”
- The concern – most likely expressed by the Pharisees – was that Jesus was undermining the Law by his teachings
- The phrase “law and prophets” likely refers to as much of the Old Testament canon as was recognized within Judaism
Matthew 5:17

- There is a play on words in the Greek text – the verb “think” is νομίζω and the noun “law” is νόμος.
- In contrast to the accusation that Jesus undermines, nullifies, or in some way ends the validity of the law and the prophets, properly understood Jesus brings fulfillment to Scripture.
- The Greek word for “fulfill” πληρόω means to fill, make full, complete, bring to a designed end.
Matthew 5:17

- This suggests that “fulfill” with reference to Scripture is not about prediction and happening, but rather about meaning and fullness or completion of meaning.
- It should be noted that Jesus claims to fulfill both law and prophets. The common predict-happen interpretation of “fulfill” fits with a (mis-) understanding of the prophets, but is quite difficult to conceptualize with reference to the Law.
Matthew 5:17

- To see what Jesus really meant by “fulfilling” the law and the prophets, one must study the Antitheses of Matt. 5:21-48
- There fulfillment suggests the recovery of God’s original purposes in the law and the prophets
- The new covenant text of Jeremiah 31:31-34 that speaks of the law being written on the hearts also sheds light on Jesus’ meaning here
Matthew 5:18

- The common translation “truly” at the beginning of verse 18 translates the Greek word ἀμὴν, a transliteration of the Hebrew אָמֵן, meaning “it is reliable, faithful, true”
- It was a common Hebrew liturgical response to the word of God and followed the divine word
- It appears frequently in the Synoptics to introduce a word from Jesus (John uses the double ἀμὴν rendered “verily, verily” in the KJV
Matthew 5:18

- Presumably, the ἀμήν identifies the reliability (and thus truthfulness) of Jesus’ words and, by implication, identifies Jesus’ words as divine words.

- The point of “until heaven and earth pass away” is that the Torah is valid as long as this world exists (in contrast to Jesus’ words which abide forever).
Matthew 5:18

- The description of the Torah’s details has led to interesting translations: the “jot and tittle” of the KJV and the “iota and dot” of the RSV and ESV strive for literalness but obscure
- The NIV and similar versions that have “the smallest letter and least stroke of a pen” are most accurate
- The Greek text speaks of an ἰῶτα which is the Greek equivalent of yodh in Aramaic and Hebrew, the smallest letter in those alphabets (י)
Matthew 5:18

- The least stroke of a letter translates κεραία which means horn, or projection or hook and referred to a serif, the small mark on some Hebrew letters.
- The “hook” distinguished between (ב and כ, between ד and ר, and between ת, ח, and ה).
- Jesus’ point is that nothing of the Torah would pass aside until all things [that must happen] happen.
Matthew 5:18

- The NRSV translates “until all is accomplished” for ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται which can be literally translated “until all things happen”
- This requires the question, until “what things” happen?
- Some interpreters believe this limits the promise of the inviolability of the Torah by some “thing” – Jesus’ obedience, his death, or the destruction of the Temple – after which the Torah will pass away
Matthew 5:18

- A more general interpretation is preferable
- The “all things” should include the promises of God made in the law and the prophets
- The “all things” should include the eschatological prophecies of the Old Testament
- The general interpretation makes clear that the law and prophets are not eternal
Matthew 5:19

- Therefore, whoever 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

- The “least of these commandments” refers to commandments of the Torah rather than to the teachings of Jesus that follow.

- The phrase seems to depend on the rabbinic distinction between light and heavy commandments.
Matthew 5:19

- The point of “the least of these commandments” seems to be similar to verse 18’s iota and serif – nothing of the Law will be set aside as long as heaven and earth stand
- The NRSV’s “breaks” translates λύω which the root of καταλύω in verse 17
- Jesus’ concern is for a person who “loosens” or “relaxes” or “undoes” a commandment (no matter how apparently insignificant) and teaches others the same
Matthew 5:19

- It is likely the larger concern is the teaching of others (Note the Deuteronomistic concern to “purge evil from your midst”)
- The punishment is that such a person “will be called least in the kingdom” – “The punishment fits the crime” – ‘As we treat the word of God, so does God treat us’ (Bengel, cited by ICC vol. 1)
- This does not suggest exclusion from the kingdom, but rather degrees of reward
Matthew 5:19

- Though degrees of reward are often rejected in Christian thought, Judaism (and Matthew) teach various rankings in heaven and degrees of reward.
- Some have thought this was a backhanded attack on Paul by Matthew (Paul in Latin means “small” and Paul has been caricatured as anti-Law), but this is quite unlikely.
Matthew 5:19

- In contrast the person who practices (ποίεω in Greek) and teaches the practice of the least of the commandment will be called “great” in the kingdom.
- The passive voice in both instances of “will be called” suggests a divine passive – “God will call them” either least or great.
- Jesus’ point is to affirm the practice and teaching of all the Law – though verses 21-48 show how the Law is to be interpreted.
Matthew 5:20

- For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- “For I tell you” lacks the ἀμὴν of verse 18, but the identical character of the rest of the phrase calls that solemnity to mind
- This is the only text in Matthew to refer to the righteousness of Jesus’ followers
Matthew 5:20

- The root idea of righteousness in Judaism was right response to God and neighbor
- In a real sense the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount describes righteousness for this verse – “Christian character and conduct in accordance with the demands of Jesus – right intention, right word, right deed.” (ICC, vol. 1)
- We should not import Pauline concepts of justification/righteousness to this text
Matthew 5:20

- Though not stated it is clearly implied that the scribes and Pharisees also possess a righteousness – this argues against a Pauline interpretation.

- The issue is that Jesus followers must demonstrate a righteousness that exceeds (is abundant beyond) that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew 5:20

- Jesus emphatically affirms the importance of that “greater righteousness” – the NRSV’s “never” obscures the “certainly not” (NIV) that should translate the Greek double negative (οὐ μὴ).
- The greater righteousness is required for entrance into the kingdom – that is to say – entrance into a kingdom defined by obedience requires obedience to the spirit, not just the letter of the Torah.
Matthew 5:20

- The greater righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees
- The Pharisees were noted for their rigorous interpretation and application of the Torah
- Josephus described them as the “athletes of Judaism” indicating the rigor of their training
- Both scribes and Pharisees were “lay persons” (not priests) in the Jewish religious orders
Matthew 5:20

- John Wesley, in his Sermon 15, Discourse 5 on the Sermon on the Mount – dealing with Matthew 5:17-20, devotes considerable attention to describing the righteousness of the Pharisees.
- He questioned whether many Christians even equaled the righteousness of the Pharisees, let alone exceeded that righteousness.
- Jesus sets a high standard with these words but we must guard against a Pharisaic interpretation of them.
Preaching Matthew 5:17-20

- As a general rule Matthew 5:17-20 ought to be preached in conjunction with one or more of the Great Antitheses of Matthew 5:21-48 since they illustrate the fulfilling of the Law and Prophets and the greater righteousness.

- Whether as an introduction to a series on Matthew 5:17-6:18 or in conjunction with an Antithesis or as a stand alone sermon, Matt. 5:17-20 offer an opportunity for instruction on Jesus’ view of the Old Testament.
Preaching Matthew 5:17-20

- The seriousness with which Jesus commits to the Law and the Prophets in these verses stands in stark contrast to a common, Christian dismissal of the Old Testament.

- Can a Jesus follower take Matt 5:17-20 seriously and treat the Old Testament lightly?

- Marcionite tendencies are far too common in Christian thought today by both clergy and laity.
Preaching Matthew 5:17-20

- Most Christians, however, struggle with the Old Testament for a lack of understanding of how to interpret it
- The Antitheses demonstrate the way Jesus interpreted the Torah and surely they must provide us a model for interpretation of the Old Testament
- Preaching this text must point the way beyond a legalistic understanding of the Torah
Preaching Matthew 5:17-20

- Jesus’ understanding of the Torah includes unfolding the original purposes of God in revealing Torah
- Jesus’ understanding of the Torah participates in a Spirit as opposed to Letter hermeneutic
- Jesus’ understanding of the Torah seems to assume Jeremiah’s New Covenant concept of the Law being written on the heart
Preaching Matthew 5:17-20

- A simple deductive outline:
  - Jesus’ Teaching on the Old Testament - The Old Testament Is To Be Fulfilled Not Abolished
  - I. The Old Testament Is Valid All Our Lives
  - II. The Old Testament Is to Be Taught Correctly
  - III. The Old Testament Points Us Toward a Greater Righteousness
Preaching Matthew 5:17-20

- An Inductive – Not this, nor this, nor this, but this sermon
- The Old Testament has been abolished for Christians – not!
- Part of the Old Testament is no longer valid – not!
- Part of the Old Testament may be disobeyed – not!
- But the Old Testament calls us to greater righteousness – of the Spirit not of the letter