

“I Came Not to Abolish”: Contextualizing the Christian Relationship to the Law through Jewish Understanding of *Torah*

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Abstract

In the context of spirituality, the Christian view of law is usually a negative one seen in relation to grace. Law is rigid and stifling; grace is free and liberating. Only a surface level reading of the Bible, however, reveals a positive view of law that pervades the language and identity of Scripture in spite of this common perception. In order to show that the attitude of Christian spirituality towards law should not be one of rejection but one of incorporation, I will begin with an examination of the Jewish understanding of torah as a way of life based on the imitation of God’s love. This concept of torah as primarily describing a way of life rather than a series of rules will then be applied to Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17 that he “has come not to abolish [the law] but to fulfill”. This will be done in order to explore further how Christians are called to integrate the contemplative and practical aspects of their faith through interpretation of the written word. In summary, an understanding of torah as describing a life of interpreting the relationship between contemplation and practice both more closely adheres to the understanding of torah as used by Jesus himself and is more useful when determining a practical approach to Christian spirituality regarding the law. This will be accomplished by looking primarily at Jewish scholars of the Hebrew Bible, as well as both Jewish and Christian interpretations of the New Testament. This examination is not an appropriation of Jewish identity or practice, but a recognition that any understanding of the message of Scripture for any audience (Christian, Jewish, or other) should begin by referring to the context in

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

which it was written; in this case, the Jewish context of the gospel authors.

Introduction

The Christian relationship to law is often characterized as a negative one: law is seen as something that is no longer necessary or, in some extreme cases, seen as a human creation. Christians base this view on texts like Romans 6:14, which tells Christians that they are “not under law but under grace”. This “grace vs. law” distinction can even turn into a “Christian vs. Jewish” distinction that can ultimately prevent the Christian from engaging with any Jewish interpretation of the Bible. However, because the Bible was written and composed in a Jewish context, an interpretation of the Christian Bible that fails to account for this context will lack a full account of the textual meaning. We find this Jewish context especially pertinent when considering a topic so multifaceted as *torah*, or instruction. What, then, should the Christian’s relationship with *torah* be? Must it necessarily be a negative, or at least subverted, relationship? At a cursory glance, the answer seems to be yes, given the amount of times law is portrayed in a negative light in the New Testament. However, there are a few places in Scripture which problematize this easy answer. One such place is the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. When Jesus declares that he has come to fulfill the “*torah* and the prophets”, he means something more than an updating of the rules; he means that he has ultimately come to demonstrate to what end a person should live.

Law in Matthew 5

Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, constitutes one of the longest passages in the gospels that is focused primarily on the giving of moral commands. The passage appears near the beginning of Jesus’ teaching ministry, and the command-focused approach is something that characterizes Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus tells his followers something strange:

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill”. Here, Jesus makes an explicit connection between his teaching and the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures, both in the historical and pedagogical registers of the texts. Furthermore, the word for “law” in this passage is the Greek *nomos*, which in turn is the direct translation of the Hebrew *torah* that we find in the Septuagint.¹ *Torah* has a much richer meaning than simply “commands”, some of which will be explored later in this essay.

Jesus takes his declaration that he has not come to “abolish the law” even further by claiming that, “until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law (*nomos*) until all is accomplished” (Mt 5:18). This again asserts a continuity between the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the *torah*. Furthermore, it seems to imply that Jesus is indeed talking about *Torah* as the written text itself, given the literal language of a single stroke.² This continuity would be an ideal picture of the Sermon on the Mount, with no further need of exploring the question. That is, except for the fact that Jesus does go on to alter the *Torah*, appearing to change much more than one stroke. Whatever Jesus means by Mt 5:17-18 cannot be an explicit reference to the Written *Torah* as a final, unchanging set of instructions.

The historical context of Matthew can give us some hints into what is being suggested here by Jesus. Matthew writes during a period in which the Jewish connection to Christianity was under question. At the same time, the oral tradition that surrounded the *Torah* was growing increasingly fixed.³ Whether or not the Christians in the context Matthew was writing in were seen as an in group or out group of Judaism, they were associated with Judaism in some way. To

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. Ed. Marc Zvi Brettler, Second edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

² Ibid.

³ J. Daryl Charles, “Garnishing with the ‘Greater Righteousness’: The Disciple’s Relationship to the Law (Matthew 5:17-20),” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12, no. 1 (2002): 8.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

this end, Matthew presents Jesus, and by extension the followers of Jesus, as law abiding Jews.⁴ Matthew wants his readers to understand that what is different about the followers of Jesus is not what commands they follow but what interpretation of these commands the teacher, Jesus, puts forth. The Christianity presented here is one that has its roots distinctly in Judaism.

With the obvious reading of the text called into question, we can turn to the many interpretations which seek to understand how Jesus can “fulfill” the law. One common interpretation is to understand that the “law and the prophets” indicates a prophetic sense of Scripture, and that the expectations of the prophets and the law are fulfilled in the mission and teaching of Jesus.⁵ While Matthew is certainly portraying Jesus as a Messianic figure, the role of teacher is not necessarily communicated by this portrayal. An interpretation that understands Jesus as teacher is one which places Jesus in a rabbinic role, as an interpreter who will explain (“fulfill”) the *torah*.⁶ This interpretation relies on understanding the commands of the Sermon on the Mount as antitheses, as commands which may negate the obvious reading of the command yet reveal the deeper meaning behind it. In this way, Jesus’ insistence that one letter of the law will not be altered is a claim that the meaning behind the *torah* and the meaning behind Jesus’ teaching are unchanged, i.e., there is a continuity between the two. This maps well onto Matthew’s historical context and his wanting to establish Jesus as a figure who can authoritatively interpret *torah*. Importantly, this portrayal of Jesus as interpreter also conveys a prophetic character. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets are frequently portrayed “as ‘freeing’ the *Torah* from cultic manipulation by upholding a correct interpretation of it”.⁷ It is this latter

⁴ Vien V. Nguyen. “Matthew and the Torah: An Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20.” *Journal of Biblical Theology* 3, no. 3 (2020): 24.

⁵ Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew 1-14: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 86.

⁶ Bradley M. Trout, “The Nature of the Law’s Fulfillment in Matthew 5:17: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” *Die Skriflig* 49, no. 1 (2015): 4.

⁷ Charles, “Disciple’s Relationship to the Law,” 6.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

interpretation of Jesus as an authoritative teacher that allows us to look into what it means for Jesus—or anyone—to be an interpreter of *torah* and what *torah* might mean for the Christian.

Torah in the Hebrew Bible

A Jewish understanding of *torah* can be characterized in a few different ways. First, the *torah* is understood primarily in both its written and its oral capacities: the Written *Torah* refers to the Hebrew Bible (specifically the Pentateuch), and the Oral *Torah* refers to a continued tradition of how to interpret and understand the Written *Torah*. This Oral *Torah* has been codified at various points in the Jewish tradition, allowing for the ability to hand down the interpretive tradition of the Jewish faith through the centuries.⁸ Another view of *torah* understands the commands which compose the law as “a way of life”, rather than as a series of commands (*mitzvot*). It is not just that “the details [of *torah*] are important” but that the details reflect a deeper reality.⁹ While it is true that the Jewish way of life is based on the *mitzvot*, it is not reducible to such. The word *torah* itself is derived from a root meaning “shoot at a target”, and this sense of “aiming” has been carried throughout the Jewish tradition.¹⁰ This sense of *torah* implies that there is something which both unifies and grounds the law. The commands of the *torah* carry a kind of logic that is based on the historical and theological experience of God in the Israelite tradition. This unifying logic leads to a “spirituality” of *torah* which invokes the community’s experience of God and calls on the Jew to recognize the individual experience of God in the practice of these commands.

⁸ Jonathan Magonet, “Spirituality and Scripture: A Jewish View.” *The Way. Supplement* 72 (1991): 92.

⁹ Paul W. Walaskay, “Matthew 5:17-20,” *Interpretation* 56, no. 4 (2002): 419.

¹⁰ Magonet, “Spirituality and Scripture,” 93.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

This “spiritual” approach to *torah* also reflects a view of the human person as a unified body and soul as opposed to a dualistic view of the human being. This Jewish anthropology is necessary for a proper understanding of how living out the commands of the *torah* affects one’s relationship with God. Or, alternatively, following *torah* allows one to recognize that body and soul are already intrinsically involved with one another. If one’s soul is intimately connected to one’s bodily actions, then the way to draw deeper into relationship with God by way of one’s soul is through action. As Jonathan Magonet argues, “Jewish ‘spirituality’ is expressed through the ‘actions’ of the *mitzvot* and the practice of a committed study of the texts of Jewish tradition”.¹¹ These two aspects of *torah* come together in the life of the Jew. The two ways of engaging with *torah* as law, then, can be categorized as the “study” of *torah* and the “action” of *torah*. The “study” of *torah* involves the reading and contemplation of the commands, while the “action” of *torah* refers to how the commands of the law are lived out in one’s life. The goal of the Jew in following *torah* is to find a way to integrate these two aspects so that the individual’s “way of life” reflects a Jewish understanding of *torah* that involves the “study” aspect of *torah* as much as it takes into account the “action” aspect of *torah*. In other words, to live according to *torah* is to make one’s life an interpretation of the law of God, both in soul and in body. This way of viewing one’s relationship to *torah*—as an interpretative relationship—forms the basis for seeing how a Christian can understand what *torah* might mean for her own life.

Contextualizing Through *Torah*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew presents Jesus as an interpretative figure. He has not come to lay down a new law but to transfigure the old, to reveal the meaning behind the

¹¹ Ibid, 95.

PASSINAUT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

commandments of the *torah*. It is not that Jesus is a good Jew in spite of the way that he interprets the *torah*; he is a good Jew precisely *because* he interprets the *torah*. Jesus’ remark that he has come “not to abolish the law or the prophets” is a reminder that he knows how to interpret the *torah*; it is not a comment that the commandments of the *torah* are worthless or, worse, harmful. What is potentially harmful are the other interpretations that come from a misreading of the *torah*. These various interpretations that seek to understand the *torah* fail to fully account for the meaning of the *torah* in a way that Jesus, as the authoritative interpreter, will not fail to do.¹² Jesus presents himself as the one who will interpret *torah* in such a way that best exemplifies the Jewish commitment to *torah* as both “study” and “action”. The commands that follow Jesus’ declaration that he has come to fulfill the *torah* support this idea. For example, Jesus explains that the command to not murder is not only about an action but is also about an interior disposition towards not hating another person. It is not just about what a person does with his actions that matter but what one does with his soul as well.

How, then, does Jesus interpret the *torah*? It should not surprise us that he does so on the basis of love. What the Christian may not realize, however, is that Jesus bases his love commandment on the *torah* itself. The idea of love as the guiding principle for interpretation is not unique to the New Testament but is found intimately in the Hebrew Bible as well. Although the word that is often translated as “love” in the Hebrew Bible (*hesed*) has a different register than the use of love in the New Testament, Jesus’ use of the direct commands in which *hesed* is found means that Jesus’ concept of love builds upon the notion of *hesed* as a steadfast, kind love. What is important to the Christian is both an understanding of what the original command says and how Jesus interprets the command. When Jesus discusses what the greatest commandment

¹² Robert Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 2 (1974): 232.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

in *torah* is, he quotes the *Shema* (Deut 6:5) and Leviticus 19:18, “love your neighbor as yourself”. Jesus’ interpretive move is to claim that this commandment is the commandment by which the rest of the *torah* should be interpreted. Thus, the *torah* should be both studied and acted out with a hermeneutic of love. When studying the *torah*, one should contemplate how one is called to love God and neighbor. When acting on the *torah*, one should perform acts of love which reflect the love of God who gives the command. In other words, “through the commandments of the *Torah*, God loves us, fulfilling our need as creatures for love; and through these very commandments we love God, fulfilling, as it were, His need as Creator that love increases in his creation”.¹³

Spirituality of *Torah* in the Christian Life

When we look at the Sermon on the Mount, we are shown examples of what love looks like according to Jesus: we are called to forgive those who have wronged us (Mt 5:25); not look at others in a lustful way (5:28); not divorce under most circumstances (5:32); not swear oaths (5:34); turn the other cheek (5:39) and love our enemies (5:44). Some (if not all) of these are hard sayings to follow; yet Jesus calls his disciples to contemplate how all these commandments stem from love. At the same time, we still are called to actually perform these commands. We are called to truly forgive our enemies and to truly turn the other cheek when others have harmed us, not just as theoretical imaginings but as lived-out practices. The Sermon on the Mount must be read in the context of Jesus’ full ministry and not just these commands given. What this entails, then, is an imitation of the entire life of Jesus, a kind of imitation that is best understood

¹³ Warren Zev Harvey. “Love: The Beginning and the End of Torah.” *Tradition* 15, no. 4 (1976): 17.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

in light of the command to imitate God in the *torah*.¹⁴ The spiritual life for the Christian, in light of this view, is to recognize the life of Jesus as the model way of life. A Jewish understanding of *torah* allows the Christian to recognize the commands of Jesus as pointing towards a greater reality. A spiritual understanding of the law fights the temptations of self-righteousness or superiority that can come from following the commands of God. Instead, engaging with this spirituality reminds us that these commands are to be followed primarily for the sake of love of God and neighbor.

The Christian understanding of commandments and the Jewish understanding of *torah* are not the same. Christians are not called to follow every aspect of *torah*, like those commands which concern ritual purity. What Christians are called to do, however, is to consider how Jesus, as a Jew, understands his own way of life as laid out by the *mitzvot*. We can again turn to the Jewish understanding of the *torah* to see how to integrate an understanding of *torah* into our own spirituality. Christians are also called to both action and study. However, the object of study and the actions of the commandments are different. For the Christian, the life and teachings of Jesus, as expressed in the Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) and the Christian tradition, are those which must be studied. Similarly, the commandments that are given in the gospel texts are not only for study and argument but are for action itself. Without both aspects of understanding the commands of Jesus, one risks either an empty faith (by not acting on that which is read) or empty action (by not understanding how or why one should act).

Through an analysis of what *torah* means and what it requires of a Jewish person, we can gain a better understanding of what living by the law might mean for the Christian. We can understand that Jesus has come to fulfill *torah* in both its “action” and “study” aspects. What

¹⁴ Ibid, 5.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

Jesus has come to abolish is not the *torah* itself, but the interpretations of the *torah* that do not live up to the standard of the God who gave the *torah*.¹⁵ Understanding *torah* as a “way of life” allows one to better understand how the life and teachings of Jesus stem from a commitment to *torah*. This way of life stems directly from Jesus’ interpretative relationship to the *torah*, a relationship that we are called to imitate. Scholars must take seriously the Jewish roots and connotations of the language and phrases used in the Bible in order to have a better understanding of what the text is trying to communicate. Thus, the commands given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount should be seen as serving a Christian way of life that embraces the law.

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¹⁵ Charles, “Disciple’s Relationship to the Law,” 10.

PASSINAULT: “I CAME NOT TO ABOLISH”

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