

Matthew 5:17: The Jew Jesus and the Christian Understanding of “Fulfillment”

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Introduction

As the title suggests, this essay focuses on the concept of fulfillment in the Christian tradition, particularly the meaning it holds in Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” It considers how this verse or the concept it expresses have been used in some works from antiquity and in official documents of the Catholic Church. The underlying question I attempt to answer is whether the Jewishness of Jesus is involved in this inquiry; that is, whether one can suppose that Jesus, as a Jew, intended fulfillment to mean the replacement of the Torah or something else. However, anticipating the results of the research, I would begin by posing this question, which aligns with the meta-question behind all the contributions gathered in this collection: how could one supersede the very foundation upon which fulfillment is based? As a colleague in this project, Jesper Svartvik, has written, “Even to consider that the message of the historical Jesus of Nazareth was to convince fellow Jews not to be loyal to their covenant with God, and to proclaim a theology of ‘Jewish exclusion,’ is, if not impossible, at least implausible.”¹

I will not proceed chronologically but will start with selected documents of the Catholic Church to highlight a certain paradox. Some of these documents use the section of Matthew’s gospel in which our verse is found to affirm the importance and validity of the Torah from the perspective of dialogue with Judaism. One notes an intensification of this point as the documents appear over time. Contrarily, Jesus’s assertion that he wanted to fulfill the Law allows a reader to conclude that the Law is something incomplete, a reading widely present in the history of reception of and scholarship on Matthew 5:17. This paradox posed difficulties in the composition of parts of these Catholic documents, which often concerned whether or not to discuss Matthew 5:17.

¹ Jesper Svartvik, “‘I Have Come Not to Abolish but to Fulfill’: Reflections on Understanding Christianity as Fulfillment without Presupposing Supersessionism,” *Religions* 13/149 (2022): 2-3. See also Didier Pollefeyt’s contribution in this collection.

In the second part of the essay, an attempt will be made, after a rhetorical analysis of the verse, to understand it in the Jewish context contemporary with Jesus and with Matthew's community, following the hypothesis that the fulfillment spoken of is perfectly compatible with that context, thus ruling out the possibility of an abrogative intent or affirmation of the Torah's merely temporary value. In terms of early reception of Matthew 5:17, some passages from Clement of Alexandria will be discussed, focusing on a network of cross-references with the *Didaché* and the Gospel of Matthew.

Although full responsibility remains my own, the present text has been enriched by the observations received when earlier versions were presented at meetings of the *Christ Jesus the Jew* project. It too takes as its starting point the relevance of Jesus's Jewishness to the theme of fulfillment.

Fulfillment and Matthew 5:17 in Some Catholic Church Documents

I begin my analysis with *Dei Verbum*, one of the four Dogmatic Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, issued in November 1965. Dedicated to divine revelation, it is a fundamental pillar of the Church's understanding and interpretation of Scripture.² Note this very relevant passage:

Now the books of the Old Testament, in accordance with the state of mankind before the time of salvation established by Christ, reveal to all men the knowledge of God and of man and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with men. These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary [*imperfecta et temporaria*], nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy.³

This passage, in recognizing the pedagogical role of the Hebrew Scripture, assigns it a function of great importance, one that by implication is necessary for all Christian formation. This can also be seen in the evolution from the second to the third redactions of the document: from "conserve the importance of a true divine pedagogy *even for Christians*" in the second (italics added), to the third version's, "show us true divine pedagogy."⁴ The phraseology employed contains an allusion to the function of the Torah as teacher, as stated by Paul (Gal 3:24-25): "So then,

² It should be noted that in *Dei Verbum* and in the process that led to this Constitution, an important theme is that of *plenitudo* and the way it was understood by Joseph Ratzinger, both during and after the Council. I thank Gregor Maria Hoff for having pointed out the significance of this aspect—in the correlation between Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium. See his *Widersprüchliche Hinterlassenschaft. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und seine ungelösten Probleme* (Freiburg – Basel – Vien: Herder, 2025), esp. 87-88 and 126-127.

³ Second Vatican Council, "Dei Verbum: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" (1965), par. 15.

⁴ See Luis Sánchez-Navarro: "Christians and the Old Testament: The Teaching of Vatican II (DV §§15–16)," in Carlos Granados and Luis Sánchez-Navarro, *In the School of the Word: Biblical Interpretation from the New to the Old Testament*, trans. Kristin Towle (Minnesota: Saint Paul Seminary Press, 2021), 131–46 at 137.

the law was our disciplinarian [*paidagogos*, teacher] until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian.”⁵ However, the more immediate origin of the expression came from the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* by Pius XI (1937) in which the pope attempted to counteract the discredit cast on the Hebrew Scriptures in antisemitic circles of the time.⁶

The magisterial foundation was also found in *De fontibus revelationis*, the draft document that had been presented to the Council as early as November 1962. However, it employed the image of the teacher in emphasizing the incompleteness of the First Testament. In general, *De fontibus* highlighted the Old Testament’s dependence on the New and its incompleteness, especially concerning morality.⁷ The outline followed in that document was abandoned, and Chapter 4 of *Dei verbum* was completely revised by the third mixed sub-commission instituted by John XXIII. During the discussion in April 1964, the request by the Dominican Marie Rosaire Gagnebet to include an explicit statement on the imperfection of the Mosaic law was rejected. On one hand, this served to avoid contradicting the passages of the New Testament that reaffirm the validity and sanctity of the Torah, and on the other hand, reflected the desire to not exacerbate relations with the Jewish community, a desire that would culminate in the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*. Finally, it cannot be excluded that the ease with which some changes were made derived from the lack of central importance that the Conciliar Fathers attributed to the Old Testament. The refinement of the concept of incompleteness was laborious, and here too, the comparison between successive drafts helps us better understand the process. The second draft had: “though they [the books of the Old testament] contain many imperfect and provisional [*provisoria*] things [*plura*],” while in redaction 3 we read, “though they contain some things [*quaedam*] which are imperfect and temporal [*temporaria*].” The definitive text is as reported in the quote above. With this last redaction, those elements of imperfection were toned down.

Continuing with the final text, in par. 16 we read: “the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom 16:25-26; 2 Cor 14:16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it.” Sánchez-Navarro comments: “The Council avoids a possible misunderstanding that could arise from the conception of the New Testament according to the idea of substitution [...] A logic of substitution does not fit here, but rather a logic of fulfillment.”⁸

According to this view, the concept of fulfillment is a positive one and avoids the logic of substitution because, albeit in different ways and degrees, the two Testaments give meaning to each other. However, this kind of reading, in my opinion, does not sufficiently consider the context: in fact, as we have just seen, the books

⁵ All scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

⁶ Sánchez-Navarro, “Christians and the Old Testament,” 138.

⁷ See Luca Mazzinghi, Massimo Epis, and Vincenzo Di Pilato, *Commentario ai documenti del Vaticano II. 5. Dei Verbum* (Bologna: EDB, 2017), 247.

⁸ Sánchez-Navarro: 2021, 141.

of the Old Testament are said to contain also “some things which are incomplete and temporary.” One does not adequately understand the use of “fulfillment” in these texts without recognizing that even if they acknowledge the importance of the continuity and union of the Old Testament with the New Testament, they also assert the former’s incompleteness. The New Testament needs to complete at least some parts of the Old Testament.

Among the passages of *Dei verbum* cited to support this approach to the Old Testament, we will focus our attention on Matthew 5:17. The history of the drafts already reveals its problematic nature. In the first draft, there was no citation. In the second draft, appear Matthew 5:17 and Romans 8:2-3;⁹ the third omitted these two texts “because they do not demonstrate this doctrine,” and included 2 Corinthians 3:14.¹⁰ The definitive redaction adds, as requested by three conciliar Fathers, the references to Matthew 5:17, Luke 24:27, and Romans 16:25-26. The inclusion of Matthew 5:17 and Luke 24:27¹¹ thus orients the final document toward a Christological reading of the Old Testament within Jesus’s own self-awareness.¹²

It is interesting to examine the relationships between this chapter of *Dei verbum* and some statements present in a subsequent church document that revisited the issue of the relationships between the two Testaments, namely *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2001.¹³ In par. 21 we read, “Beginning from a continuous re-reading of events and texts, the Old Testament itself progressively opens up a perspective of fulfillment that is final and definitive.”

By using the terms fulfillment, final, and definitive, the sentence seems to allude to the passage of *Dei verbum* where it was said about the books of the Old Testament that “they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary.” In other words, the Old Testament continuously engages in a process of “re-

⁹ “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.”

¹⁰ “But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, the same veil is still there; it is not unveiled since in Christ it is set aside.”

¹¹ “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

¹² Pier Luigi Ferrari, *La Dei Verbum*. (Brescia: Queriniana, 2005), 143; see also Mazzinghi, Epis and Di Pilato, *Commentario*, 257. The link between incompleteness and the necessity of fulfillment, applied to Matt 5:17, can also be found in the works of scholars from that time. For example, in the 1956 commentary by Josef Schmid, also published in Italian in 1965, in which, despite a certain attention to Jewish tradition in general and rabbinic tradition in particular, we read: “By nevertheless adhering to the law of the Old Testament, he recognizes at the same time its character as revelation. Due to its incompleteness, the law does not yet lose its sanctity. It is now replaced by the new messianic law of Jesus, because only now, with the advent of Jesus, has the time arrived in which the kingdom of God has become present. By surpassing the law with his demands in all those points where it does not fully express the will of God, Jesus at the same time ‘fulfills’ it.” Josef Schmid, *L’evangelo secondo Matteo* (3rd Italian ed., Giovanni Rinaldi, ed.; Brescia: Morcelliana, 1965), 126. This judgment exemplifies an attitude, both hermeneutic and theological, that, by playing on the opposition between incompleteness and fullness, arrives at the conclusion of substitution.

¹³ Also noteworthy are *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and *Verbum Domini* by Benedict XVI (2010).

reading” or self-fulfillment, for example, seeing the Exodus as the model of subsequent experiences of salvation, both historical, such as the return from Babylon, and projected into the eschatological dimension. According to this 2001 document, the Christian interpretation does the same but sees the fulfillment realized in Christ.

This solution, however, is in tension with other statements in the same paragraph. After observing that, “The notion of fulfillment is an extremely complex one,” it continues, “The basic theological presupposition is that God’s salvific plan which culminates in Christ (cf. Ep 1:3-14) is a unity, but that it is realized progressively over the course of time. Both the unity and the gradual realization are important; likewise, continuity in certain points and discontinuity in others.” The unity of God’s salvific plan is affirmed again, reflecting in the unity of the Scriptures, but its progressive aspect is emphasized along with the importance of continuity and discontinuity.

The text continues: “God reveals himself, calls, confers a mission, promises, liberates, makes a covenant. The first realizations, though provisional and imperfect, already give a glimpse of the final plenitude.” Although the relationship between the two Testaments is not directly discussed here, the language recalls the other passages we have seen, both from *Dei verbum* and this document. While at least a progressive fulfillment is admitted even for the Old Testament, the discontinuity and, above all, the “provisional and imperfect” nature are indirectly reaffirmed, according to which the plenitude is only a glimpse. The concept – which, it should not be forgotten, starts from a positive intent – is found again in par. 64:

Christian readers were convinced that their Old Testament hermeneutic, although significantly different from that of Judaism, corresponds nevertheless to a potentiality of meaning that is really present in the texts. Like a “revelation” during the process of photographic development, the person of Jesus and the events concerning him now appear in the Scriptures with a fullness of meaning that could not be hitherto perceived. Such a fullness of meaning establishes a threefold connection between the New Testament and the Old: continuity, discontinuity, and progression.¹⁴

The tensions that we can observe in this, as in other documents, also stem from the fact that these texts were not produced by a single author, but by groups within which different orientations coexist. For example, the same photographic metaphor was used in paragraph 21 to state that: “It would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events. All the texts, including those which later were read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers.”¹⁵

¹⁴ See *Verbum Domini*, 40–41.

¹⁵ I thank Philip Cunningham, participant in the project and in this volume, for pointing this out. He also notes how, in the same paragraph 21, one reads: “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith.

Matthew 5:17 also has its place in this document. The verse is first cited in a section where texts are reported according to which “the whole mystery of Christ is in conformity with the Jewish Scriptures” and a few lines later it is said (par. 7):

Some disputed points that need to be kept in mind may be mentioned here. In the Gospel of Matthew, a saying of Jesus claims perfect continuity between the faith of Christians and the Torah (Mt 5:17). This theological affirmation is characteristic of Matthew and his community. It is in tension with other sayings of the Lord which relativizes the Sabbath observance (Mt 12:8,12) and ritual purity (Mt 15:11).

Here, the text recognizes that Matthew 5:17 establishes a perfect continuity between the Torah and the Christian faith, but it highlights the tension with other passages in the Gospel. The implicit solution that seems to be suggested is the distinction between the saying of Jesus and the redaction attributed to Matthew and his community, a complex issue that I will only briefly touch upon in this study.

The second quote (par. 44) gives an interpretation of the fulfillment, saying, “Jesus ‘fulfills’ the Law (Mt 5:17) by radicalizing it: at times by abolishing the letter of the Law (divorce, law of the talion), at other times, by giving a more demanding interpretation (murder, adultery, oaths), or a more flexible one (Sabbath).” Fulfilling would therefore be radicalizing, even if the direction of radicalization can be different, and if Jesus himself, after having reaffirmed that he does not want to abolish but to fulfill, reiterates that not even one letter of the Torah can be modified. We will return later to the concept of radicalizing the Law.

This brief overview shows how Matthew 5:17 is a paradox in Jewish-Christian relations and in the history of studies on the relationships between the two Testaments. On the one hand, the verse itself and the context in which it is placed clearly state that Jesus excludes any form of replacement of the Torah and its total inviolability. In this sense, it is a perfect text for church documents aimed at reaffirming the continuity of Christianity with its Jewish roots. On the other hand, however, Jesus’s declaration that his mission is to fulfill the Torah has given rise to difficulties, especially when some form of incompleteness or temporariness of the Law and Prophets is seen behind the fulfillment. I will attempt below to verify if a reading of the idea of fulfillment is possible that is in harmony with the Jewishness of Jesus. Given the purposes of this essay, I will not go into the details of the redactional history of the text of Matthew 5-7, except when necessary.

A Hypothetical Reconstruction of Jesus’s Saying and Its Meaning

Before exploring the content of Matthew 5:17, I begin with some stylistic-rhetorical observations. Given the structure of the verse, it seems to me that there

Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come...” highlighting the phrasing “one with the *traits*” of Jesus and not simply “will be Jesus.”

is a good chance that it contained a pun to reinforce the antithesis, “not to/but to.” In the Greek version this was retained in the construction of the sentence, but I believe that in a possible Semitic original it could also be present and expressed through a repetition of the same word.¹⁶ The hypothesis of a pun is supported not only by the syntactic structure, but also by a stylistic usage well attested in Semitic rhetoric. In an article written some time ago, I had proposed that Matthew 5:17 rested on a Semitic original in which the base and intensive conjugations of the verb *gamar*, which have, respectively, the meanings of “to complete” and “to put an end to,” were placed side by side.¹⁷ This would be a case of the rhetorical figure of antanaclasis, well attested already in the Bible and also present in rabbinic literature: the repetition of the same word, or root, with contrasting meanings.¹⁸ More precisely, antanaclasis is a rhetorical pun that is formed by the repetition of identical or very similar elements, which are nonetheless assigned different, if not opposite, meanings.

I think that the most interesting aspect, should we accept the hypothesis of a rhetorically sophisticated structure in an original Semitic text, is that it obviously also affected the choice of both the Aramaic and the Greek words in Matthew 5:17, a fact to consider when analyzing its contents. For an example that can be related to our text, one can look at some sayings attributed to Hillel in the rabbinic text *Avot* 1.14, which, moreover, have the particularity of being in Aramaic and not in

¹⁶ It is not necessary in this essay to delve into the details of a possible Semitic original underlying the Greek version of Matthew, though see, for example Craig A. Evans, “Jewish Versions of the Gospel of Matthew: Observations on Three Recent Publications,” *Mishkan* 38 (2003): 70-79. In any case, we are dealing with a multilingual context—the one in which both Jesus and the evangelists operated. The Greek text of Matthew more than once explicitly exhibits “code-shifting,” that is, the shift from one linguistic system to another; see Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “Matthieu, disciple (Maththaios, mathētēs) d’une langue à l’autre,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 143 (2021): 530-546. The multilingual individual is naturally inclined, when engaging in wordplay or similar linguistic practices, not to confine themselves to a single language, but rather to move freely among those they master—thereby significantly increasing the range of expressive possibilities. See Jonathan M. Watt, “Some Implications of Bilingualism for New Testament Exegesis,” in *The Language of the New Testament: Context, History, and Development*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew Pitts (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 9-27.

¹⁷ Massimo Gargiulo, “Matthew 5,17: What did Jesus say in dialogue with Rabbis?” *Studia Nauk Teologicznych* 11 (2016): 33-48. I thank Ruth Langer, also participating in the project and in this volume, for some observations she shared with me regarding my hypothesis, pointing out some possible weaknesses. In particular: she would read *gmr hqz* in *Pesher Habakkuk* 7.1, on which I based an important part of my study, to mean something like “the completion of the end-time,” rather than “fulfillment.” Consulting *The Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, one finds that for the root *gmr* in Hebrew it does not list a *piel* form at all when one searches it only for 300 BCE-300 CE. She also expressed caution about comparing with the New Testament texts that express a genuinely rabbinic view. On the *Pesher Habakkuk* see Timothy H. Lim, *The Earliest Commentary on the Prophecy of Habakkuk* (1st ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ On this rhetorical figure see Geoffrey Khan, ed., *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 3, 179; Anthony Ceresko, “The Function of Antanaclasis (Mš’ ‘to Find’ // Mš’ ‘to Reach, Overtake, Grasp’) in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qohelet,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44/4 (1982): 551-69; for examples of use in *Avot*, Amram Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024): 69. On paronomasia and puns and a definition of them, though mainly referring to biblical language, see Valérie Kabergs and Hans Ausloos, “Paronomasia or Wordplay? A Babel-Like Confusion towards a Definition of Hebrew Wordplay,” *Biblica* 93/1 (2012): 1-20.

Hebrew. These are short phrases that play on rhetorical devices such as antithesis, assonance, and antanaclasis or paronomasia, such as “A name made great is a name destroyed.” Here, in the original language, one can notice the assonance between the two verbs *nagad* and *'avad*.¹⁹

Immediately after, it is said: “He who does not add, decreases.” The expression is usually expanded in translations with phrases like: “He who adds not to his knowledge, decreases it,” or “causes it to cease.”²⁰ The rhetorical analysis of the phrase is relevant for our discussion, though there are some textual variants, especially in the second part.²¹ That challenge notwithstanding, it is clear that the text employs a wordplay based on the repetition of the roots *yasaf* and *ysf / ysyf / yswf* forming an antanaclasis. In this case, moreover, the idea is also comparable to Matthew 5:17 since Hillel equates those who are content with what they know and do not increase their knowledge—a knowledge that obviously coincides with the Torah—with those who decree their own end.²² It is worth noting how the verb translated “to add” is the same as the one found in the famous passage of *Shabbat* 116b, “I haven’t come to destroy the Torah of Moses or to add to the Torah of Moses,”²³ where one can recognize echoes of Matthew 5:17.²⁴

I’m inclined to think that the sentence found in Matthew 5:17 in the putative original Aramaic or Hebrew followed a rhetorical model similar to that which is well attested in Semitic rhetoric as shown by these examples. Thus, the Matthean Jesus’s words lie well within the discourse of late Second Temple Judaism.

¹⁹ I follow the text according to the edition of Philip Blackman, *Mishnayoth: Pointed Hebrew Text, English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Supplement, Appendix, Indexes, Addenda, Corrigenda*. Vol. IV. *Nezikin* (rev 2nd ed.; New York: Judaica Press, 1963).

²⁰ These statements can be compared with Matt 23:12; 13:12; and 25:29.

²¹ See the discussion in Charles Taylor, *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers, Comprising Pirke Aboth in Hebrew and English with Notes and Excursuses: With additional notes and a Cairo fragment of Aquila’s version of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; New York: KTAV; reprint 1969, originally 1897), 138.

²² In the chapter added to *Avot*, in 6:6 too, among the forty-eight Torah requirements is included, after the pair “ask and answer,” to “hear and add,” with the same root employed in the passage under discussion.

²³ Translation from Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005).

²⁴ On this, see, among others, Thierry Murcia, “Rabban Gamaliel, Imma Shalom et le philosophe: une citation des évangiles dans le Talmud? – Date et enjeux de *B. Shabbat* 116b,” *Revue des études juives* 169/3–4 (2010): 313–348; Matteo Munari, *Il compimento della Torah: Gesù e la scrittura in Mt 5,17-48* (Milano: Terra Santa, 2013), 13 and n. 28; Gargiulo, “Matthew 5,17,” 38-39. In the textual tradition of this sentence, there is a variant that produces two opposing meanings. One, following the reading *l’* “but,” is: “I haven’t come to destroy the Torah of Moses, but to add to the Torah of Moses,” which is similar to that in Matthew. The other meaning, that follows the reading, *wl’* “and not,” is the one reported in Neusner’s translation, according to which the text would assert the will not to remove or add to the Torah, which is perfectly in line with the teaching of the inviolability of the Law. If this reading were the original form of the saying also found in Matthew, in the Gospel we would have a mistaken interpretation (or an interpretation that follows the variant “but”): Jesus would not be speaking at all about his mission to fulfill the Law and the prophets, but he would mean something like: “Do not think that I came to cancel or to add to the Torah” (thus, for example, already in Moritz Güdemann: *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien*, [Leipzig: O. Leiner, 1876], 69-70).

As far as the content of Matthew 5:17 is concerned, it is useful to recall here only some of the possible interpretations of the verse as proposed by scholars. The first aligns with a characteristic of the Gospel of Matthew, already apparent in its infancy narrative: that of reading its events against the backdrop of the Old Testament, finding in Jesus's story the fulfillment of the prophecies contained therein, or the duplication, with new meaning, of characters and events such as Moses and the Exodus.²⁵ According to Jeannine Brown, Jesus interprets the Torah through the lens of the prophets (the Law and the Prophets at 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; cf. 11:13).²⁶ The typical verb to indicate the fulfillment of those prophecies in Jesus is precisely *plēroō* (fulfill), as in Matthew 5:17. Matthew's choice of this verb, instead of others that could express the same idea, is consistent with his constant use when he wants to emphasize how Jesus fulfilled biblical prophecies, confirming his Christological interest.²⁷ The proposal I made in my 2016 article was partly in line with this, although I emphasized the eschatological aspect of completion / fulfillment by referring to the comparison with the *Pesher Habakkuk* at Qumran.²⁸

A second interpretation sees Jesus as referring to fulfilling the Torah in the sense of an intensification or radicalization of its precepts.²⁹ This recalls what we saw in *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, par. 44. Such a reading is possible if one does not see a contrast with the so-called "antitheses" found later in Matthew 5: 21-48, but rather as in continuity with them.³⁰ The antitheses have often been considered, and still are by some, as an abandonment of the Torah. To resolve the apparent contradiction with vv. 17-19, the main approach in these cases is to attribute the two groups of verses, and even parts of them, to different redactional layers.

However, there are also scholars who move from a different assumption, well summarized by Sandt and Flusser: "If closer investigation shows that none of the antitheses revokes, abrogates, or annuls the commands of the Law, then these verses do not contradict the statements in 5:17-19."³¹ Rather, as they and others

²⁵ Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (reprint; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013, originally 1993), 137-270.

²⁶ Jeannine K Brown, "Exodus in Matthew's Gospel," in *Exodus in the New Testament*, ed. Seth M. Ehorn (London / New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 31-47 at 43. She points out that Jesus's prophetic interpretation of the Torah is discernible in such passages as Matt 9:13; 12:17 (Hos 6:6); and 23:23 (Mic 6:8). In the process, Jesus prioritizes the Torah's central or weightier matters (23:23, cf. *Avot* 2.19).

²⁷ See Hubertus Waltherus Maria van de Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2002), 218.

²⁸ An eschatological framework is also suggested by Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2007), 76, but he points out that Jesus's teaching concerns behavior in the present.

²⁹ I would also recall some polemical passages such as Mark 7:8 and Matt 15:3 where Jesus contrasts the tradition followed by the Pharisees with the commandment of God, using an expression that even goes beyond the Law. I thank Amy-Jill Levine, who participates in the project and in the volume, for signaling this.

³⁰ A not insignificant number of scholars see the two sections, vv. 17-19 and 21-48, as irreconcilable, to the point that vv. 17-19 are considered originally independent and assigned to a Jewish Christian layer of tradition.

³¹ Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache*, 206. I also recommend their book for an in-depth discussion of the relationship between the two sections and the redactional hypotheses about the entirety of chapter 5.

assert, one can see in those verses a further affirmation of the precepts contained in the Torah. The scholarly characterization of these passages as “antitheses” has contributed to spreading an oppositional and substitutionary reading that contrasts with the rest of the Gospel and, more generally in the Synoptics, with Jesus’s own attitude towards the Torah. This is also seen in translations that reinforce an adversarial understanding of the second proposition of each “antithesis” without any definitive linguistic justification.³² Clearly, at least for the first, second, and fourth “antitheses” (5:21-26; 27-30; 33-37), what Jesus himself does can be described as radicalizing, intensifying, and transcending the opening proposition.³³ At most, “antithesis” can concern the reception (*akouō*) of the precepts, not the precepts themselves. Brown, examining quotations from Exodus (LXX) that can be found in the Sermon on the Mount (5:21// Exod 20:13; 5:27 // Exod 20:14; 5:38 // Exod 21:24), states that Matthew’s Jesus draws a comparison between a Torah prohibition or command and his own corresponding teaching as an intensification of it.³⁴ Wesley Allen describes this intensification as “next step hermeneutic,” pointing out that the relationship between the Old Testament and Jesus’s teaching is not of antithesis, but of extension.³⁵

The peculiarity is that Matthew’s Jesus does not engage in a debate between possible interpretations by resorting to other verses, as is usual in rabbinic discussions, but rather traces the entire authority of his reading back to himself. Thus understood, the so-called antitheses can be read in a non-contradictory relationship with the verses that introduce the pericope, namely 17-19 (20): “the fulfillment of the Law appears to be determined by one’s interpretation of the Law.”³⁶ Verses 17-19, after all, reflect concepts well present in early Judaism, such as the importance of the observance of even the smallest precepts lest one violate more important ones. They offer a key to understanding that Jesus’s pronouncements are not contradictory or antithetical to the principle of Torah observance that he himself just declared.

A third scholarly interpretation³⁷ that I think is not confirmed by the text, but which is also present in the Catholic documents about relations with Judaism that we examined, is the notion that verse 18 does indeed affirm the validity of the Torah while supposedly also giving it only temporary value. Rather, the expression “until heaven and earth pass away” means, at least from within ordinary human

³² The particle *de* does not necessarily have the oppositional value expressed by “but.” It can serve to connect the two parts of the proposition, emphasizing how the second provides further development to the first, with a meaning similar to “indeed.”

³³ Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache*, 206.

³⁴ Brown, “Exodus in Matthew’s Gospel,” 40. Ian Boxall considers the comparisons to be “hypertheses.” See his *Discovering Matthew: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 129.

³⁵ Wesley O. Allen, *Matthew* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 60.

³⁶ Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache*, 217.

³⁷ E.g. William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* Vol.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 494-495.

history, “never.” In other words, Jesus rejects any expiration of the Torah’s validity for as long as creation endures.

So it is possible to exclude the idea of a Christian replacement of Judaism from Jesus’s words in Matthew 5. At this point, I will briefly illustrate some texts from the Jewish tradition that, in my view, show how the idea of fulfillment with respect to the Torah was possible and present within that tradition. In my earlier article that I have referred to, I mostly focused on texts where fulfillment was expressed through the root *gmr*. Now I would broaden the perspective. As mentioned at the outset, I will then focus on a writing from Clement of Alexandria, which seems to have been largely overlooked by scholars, and which could provide tools to help overcome the tensions observed above in Catholic documents.

Fulfillment as a Jewish Concept?

In the following section, I will provide some examples that could demonstrate how the idea of fulfillment expressed by Jesus or by the Matthean tradition in 5:17 is similar to some relatively contemporary Jewish perspectives and *unrelated* to the notion of replacement. I will concentrate on a passage from Clement of Alexandria that refers to the *Didaché*, but also provide a few examples drawn from rabbinic literature, as I did in the rhetorical analysis of Matthew 5:17 above.³⁸

These examples revolve around Deuteronomy 32:47: “For it is not an empty [vain] word for you.” Neither this text nor the rabbinic passages we will examine are directly related to Matthew 5:17, but the presence of the word that literally means “empty” and the rabbinic exegeses of it provide interesting insights for our discussion. It is important to keep in mind that the literal meaning of the verb *plēroō* (fulfill) in Matthew 5:17 is “to fill.” *Sifre Devarim* 336 comments on Deuteronomy 32:47: “There is nothing empty in the Torah, nothing that, when interpreted, will not earn you a reward in this world, with the principal remaining intact for the world to come.”³⁹ In this text, the impossibility of any “empty” or meaningless words in the Torah is connected with the act of interpretation, expressed through the root *drš*. Interpretation not only implicitly completes the text but also guarantees a reward in this world and in the world to come for those who practice it.

³⁸ I am aware of the methodological issues associated with comparing texts that are distant in terms of date and context, issues which cannot be fully addressed here and are expressed, e.g., in these terms by Burton Visotzky (“Luke 24:45—“Then He Opened Their Minds to Understand the Scriptures” (διανοίγων in Luke 24 and the Rabbinic Use of פתח ,” in Notley, R.S. – Garcia, J.P., eds, *The Gospels in First Century Judaea* [Leiden: Brill, 2016, 145-153]): “Because the earliest rabbinic literature we have was redacted in the early third century, it is much more reliable to use the NT to illuminate rabbinics than the other way around.” However, with the caution that comes just from this awareness, I believe that such a comparison, without necessarily positing direct dependencies, still provides useful contextual references. See the “methodological considerations” in Yair Furstenberg, “Jesus against the Laws of the Pharisees: The Legal Woe Sayings and Second Temple Intersectarian Discourse.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139/4: 769-788 at 771-774.

³⁹ Translation from Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), changing “vain” to “empty.”

This text finds an echo in *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:14, which recounts a dispute between Akiva and Yishmael regarding the significance of the particle 'et in Genesis 1:1.⁴⁰ According to Yishmael, his colleague's interpretation does not fully explain the real function of the particle. This is not our focus here, but rather Yishmael's invocation of Deuteronomy 32:47: "Thereupon he [Yishmael] cited to him, 'For it is no empty thing for you,' and if it is empty, it is so on your account because you are unable to interpret it [rightly]."⁴¹ This text emphasizes that misinterpretations are due to human limitations.

A similar comment is found in *TJ Peah* 1:1 during a discussion about recovering precepts once established but later forgotten. It says: "And this accords with that which R. Mana said, 'For this is not an empty thing for you' [Deut 32:47 again]. And if it is empty, that is your [own fault]! Why? Because you do not devoutly labor in it."⁴² Note how R. Mana's comment focuses on the expression *mikkem* ("for you") to emphasize the theme of human responsibility to interpret Torah. Just as precepts, if forgotten—even when due to historical accidents like the catastrophes of 70 and 135—must be recovered, so too is the Torah empty only if people do not labor over it.

As in the passage from *Avot* mentioned above, these texts, despite their differences, reflect a widespread idea in Judaism: that the perfect completeness of the Torah does not exclude, but rather *requires* human action upon it. This needed action is also expressed by the metaphor of the "empty word" and thus involves "filling" a text that, in itself, is in any case already "full" of meaning.

Our discussion of Matthew 5:17 thus far has hypothesized a possible stylistic configuration of the original text, as well as its wording, and related it to rabbinic texts that seem pertinent to the concept of fulfillment in the Matthean text.

We now come to a passage from the *Protrepticus* by Clement of Alexandria (10.108.5), which, as I mentioned earlier, sheds further light on our topic, despite being somewhat overlooked in studies, as far as I could ascertain. He states that while the Athenians had Solon as their legislator, the Spartans had Lycurgus, and so on, those who enroll in the lists of the people of God have heaven as their homeland and God Himself as their legislator. When asked what His laws are, Clement responds, "Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not corrupt a boy; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not bear false witness; thou shalt love the Lord thy God."⁴³

⁴⁰ The Hebrew particle 'et indicates that a direct object follows. "God created 'et the heavens and 'et the earth."

⁴¹ Translation from Harry Freedman, Isidore Epstein, and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino, 1961).

⁴² Translation from Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), changing "trifling" to "empty."

⁴³ Translation, as well as the immediately following quotations, from Clement and George William Butterworth, *The Exhortation to the Greeks: The Rich Man's Salvation, and the Fragment of an Address Entitled, to the Newly Baptized* (London/New York/Cambridge, MA: W. Heinemann; G.P. Putnam's Sons; Harvard University Press, 1919).

Although inspired by the Decalogue (Exod 20:13-16, Deut 6:5; see Matt 22:37), a direct reference has been identified, both in the sequence of precepts and in the addition of the prohibition against corrupting boys, to the *Didaché* (2:2). However, there is also another possibility. Since there is no evidence elsewhere in Clement's work of his knowledge of chapters 7-16 of the *Didaché*, scholars have hypothesized that, in the passage we are examining, he was referring to the Jewish treatise on the *Two Ways*, which is the source of chapters 1-6 of the *Didaché*.⁴⁴

Immediately, Clement continues, "There are also the complements of these [*toutōn ta paraplēromata*], wise laws and holy sayings inscribed in the very hearts of men: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,' and, 'to him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other,' and, 'thou shalt not lust, for lust by itself is an act of adultery.'"

These other laws, referred to in the translation as "the complements" have special characteristics: they are *logioi* "wise," i.e., conforming to reason, that is, they are universal principles, "holy words" inscribed in hearts (see e.g., Jer 38:33; Ezek 11:19; Rom 2: 14-15; 2 Cor 3:2-3). The examples of these other laws are love of neighbor (Lev 19:18, Matt 19:19 and 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8), offering the other cheek (Luke 6:29 and Matt 5:39), not coveting so as not to commit adultery (Matt 5:28).⁴⁵ All of these are defined as *paraplēromata* of the laws in the Decalogue, that is, additional precepts that complement them and have the characteristics listed above. It certainly does not escape our notice that the root, compounded with the preposition *para*, is the same as the verb *plēroō* in Matthew 5:17.

My hypothesis is that Clement of Alexandria, who was closely following the Treatise on the *Two Ways* or the *Didaché* here, also had Matthew 5 in his mind. Clues to this effect are the use of the root *plēr-* and the common references to offering the other cheek and not desiring a woman in order not to commit adultery. We need to consider also that, "there is widespread recognition that elements in Matt 5:17-48 closely agree with items in the Two Ways of the *Didaché*."⁴⁶

All things considered, the argument that Clement wants to assert the superiority of the New Testament over the Old seems unfounded.⁴⁷ Moreover, the first of the *paraplēromata*, the one on love of neighbor, is a biblical precept (Lev 19:18). On the contrary, Clement attests that even in the second century the precepts of the Decalogue, which represent the Torah, were normally associated with *paraplēromata* without any substitutionary function whatsoever. Thus, the concept of fulfillment was not seen in any way as a substitute for the Torah, but rather as additional norms that were in perfect continuity with it. The convergence among

⁴⁴ See Clement and Franzo Migliore, *Protreptico ai greci*. Introduzione, traduzione e note a cura di Franzo Migliore (Roma: Città Nuova, 2024), 192 and Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache*, 83. For the prohibition against corrupting children see also the Letter of Barnabas, 19:4 and, again in Clement, *Stromateis* 3:4,36,5 and *Paedagogus* 2:10,89 and 3:12,89.

⁴⁵ It should be noted that the last two also found in Matt 5 in the so-called antitheses section.

⁴⁶ Sandt and Flusser: *The Didache*, 193 with further bibliography.

⁴⁷ See Clement and Claude Mondésert, *Le protreptique*. Introduction, translation and notes by Claude Mondésert (Paris: Cerf, 1976), 176.

Matthew 5, the *Two Ways* in the *Didaché*, and Clement is situated within a Jewish context in which the idea that the Torah could forever be fulfilled and have multiple “fulfillments” is widespread.

There is another passage by Clement that is even more explicit on this matter, found within the *Stromateis*. Clement is refuting the views of the Encratites, who were opposed to marriage and procreation, believing that no more people should be brought into this unhappy world. This, of course, violates the Law.⁴⁸ He says (3.46.1–2):

The design of the Law is to divert us from extravagance and all forms of disorderly behavior; this is its object, to draw us from unrighteousness to righteousness, making us responsible in marriage, engendering children, and living well. The Lord “comes to fulfill, not to destroy the Law.” Fulfillment does not mean that it was defective. The prophecies which followed the Law were accomplished through his presence, since the qualities of an upright way of life were announced to people of righteous behavior before the coming of the Law by the Word.⁴⁹

In his polemic, Clement praises the benefits of the Law, and shortly afterward he will affirm that one can practice continence even within marriage, through proper sexual conduct, and will allude again to Matthew, in this case to 5:28. What matters to us here is the citation of Matthew 5:17, and especially *the rejection of the idea that fulfillment implies that the Law is defective*. The coming of Jesus had the effect of perfecting—fulfilling—the prophecies that were in accordance with the Law. Clement, in other words, sees a perfect continuity and conformity between the Torah, the prophecies, and their fulfillment by Jesus, without his act of completing (*plēroō*) implying any deficiency (*endeē*) in the Law, which retains its beneficial value intact.⁵⁰

Conclusion

One can debate the exact meaning of the Matthean Jesus’s use of the word “fulfill.” Did it refer to his practice, his teaching, or to an eschatological fulfillment uniquely personified in him (which would also justify the mention of the prophets alongside the Law)? What seems clear is that his action to fulfill the Law was not

⁴⁸ Clement and Giovanni Pini, *Stromati: Note di vera filosofia*. Introduzione, traduzione e note di Giovanni Pini (Milano: Paoline, 1985), 383–384.

⁴⁹ Translation from Clement and John Ferguson, *Stromateis. Books 1–3* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991). I follow the Reading *endeē* in this translation.

⁵⁰ In the course of discussions of the papers within the research project I have already mentioned, it was noted that a non-supersessionist understanding of “fulfillment” in relation to Matthew 5:17 is also found elsewhere in the patristic literature. Yonatan Moss, for example, pointed out to me a passage in Severus of Antioch in which baptism signifies the culmination of Jesus’s perfection of the law. Severus also alludes to the “law-fulfillment” verse in Matthew (Severus, *Hom.* 10.7 [PO 38]). Michael Azar drew my attention to other passages in Clement in which the Law is preserved by affirming its common origin with the Gospel (e.g. *Stromateis* 3.80, 83).

foreign to the Judaism of his time and therefore could not have had any substitutionary intent. Even the way in which all of this is expressed finds its place within Semitic rhetoric. From a Jewish perspective, I think the situation is perfectly explained by Steven Fraade: “Central to the lasting and renewing vitality of the Rabbinic ‘conception of Scripture’ is its pedagogical pairing of the closed and open, fixed and fluid, the timeless and the timely, of the Written and the Oral [...] by which Jewish society and culture were to understand themselves along the continuum of reenacted revelation and awaited redemption.”⁵¹

To go back to the tensions and contradictions illustrated at the outset, critical exegeses of Matthew 5:17, rabbinic understandings of “fulfillment,” and the evidence from Clement provide crucial resources to refine Catholic documents regarding Matthew 5:17. Future statements should stress the revelatory importance of the Torah and that its continuous “fulfillment” through ongoing interpretation means that it is never obsolete. This does not negate the Christian understanding that the revelation through Christ is definitive and complete, however, it is also true that Christ’s work remains unfinished:

Typology further signifies reaching towards the accomplishment of the divine plan, when ‘God will be all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28). This holds true also for the Church which, realized already in Christ, yet awaits its definitive perfecting as the Body of Christ ... Salvation and liberation are already accomplished in Christ and gradually realized by the sacraments in the Church. This makes way for the fulfillment of God’s design, which awaits its final consummation with the return of Jesus as Messiah ... Furthermore, in underlining the eschatological dimension of Christianity we shall reach a greater awareness that the people of God of the Old and the New Testament are tending towards a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah—even if they start from two different points of view.⁵²

Such a statement offers a non-substitutionary view of fulfillment, which is also pertinent to Christianity’s eschatological self-understanding.

In my view, Jesus’s message is one of eschatological fulfillment, but this does not exclude other possibilities. I endorse Dale Allison’s statement that Christians must not forget the identity of the speaker in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount is the Messiah. For Christians, he is the fulfillment of eschatological expectations, inaugurating the culmination of Israel’s history. This should lead them to speak of “messianic Torah.” As Allison puts it, “Jesus is the Moses-like Messiah who proclaims the eschatological will of God on a mountain typologically equated with Sinai [...] Matthew probably associated Jesus’s office as teacher with his status as Messiah. This follows from the expectation, attested in many texts from diverse

⁵¹ Steven D. Fraade, “Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism: Oral Torah and Written Torah,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture : A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: New York University Press 2012), 31–46, 44.

⁵² Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church (1985), II, 8-10.

times and places, according to which the Messiah and/or some other eschatological figure will bring eschatological instruction.”⁵³ This idea is also compatible with David Flusser’s previously discussed thesis, which sees the Jesus of Matthew 5 as an interpreter whose great originality lies in presenting himself as the authority behind his own interpretation.

What is excluded—according to the very words related in Matthew—is any intention of abolishment. Jesper Svartvik observes, “Christianity is never fulfillment at the expense of the promises given to the Mothers and Fathers of the covenant in the Scriptures.”⁵⁴ And as Clement put it, “Fulfillment does not mean that the Law was defective.” Christians must take seriously the linguistic fact that the Greek preposition *para* (the *paraplēromata* mentioned by Clement) means not “in place of,” but “along with.”

Let us conclude by returning to the question that began this study: is the Jewishness of Jesus relevant to the concept of fulfillment? I believe that the texts we have examined inevitably lead to an affirmative “yes.” Jesus, a practicing Jew, did not propose a replacement of the Law. Indeed, in a variety of ways, it was his own Jewish context that enabled him to see himself as fulfilling the Torah. In other words, it is because of his identity as a Jew that Jesus himself, and Matthew as well, understood that the Torah was always being “fulfilled.”

⁵³ Allison, *The New Moses*, 185; see also p. 187 and n. 105.

⁵⁴ Svartvik: “‘Not to Abolish but to Fulfill,’” 9.