

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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Matthew 5:17-19

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How can you say that the Law of Moses is still to be followed by Christians today, when it is quite clear that “Jesus fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Law.”

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Pastor: Matthew 5:17: Jesus fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Law.

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

According to Yeshua the Messiah’s words here in Matthew 5:17, delivered within His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chs. 5-7, the Savior clearly states what His views are regarding the Torah of Moses. Along with Psalm 23 and the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), Matthew 5-7 includes the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:2-12) and the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), the four passages together composing the most frequently read and valued sections of the Bible for most evangelical Christians.^a *Yeshua’s statements about the Torah are not at all hidden away in some obscure place.* Yeshua (Jesus) says very plainly that His purpose was not to “abolish” the Torah or Law of Moses, but to “fulfill” it. The challenge for theologians over the centuries has been in what context Yeshua “fulfills” the Law.

Many think that Yeshua’s “fulfilling” of the Law is to be equated with some kind of abrogation or abolishment of it. But the Messiah’s words run contrary to this: “Do not suppose that I came to throw down the law or the prophets” (YLT). He by no means came to “destroy” (KJV) or “demolish” (The Message) Moses’ Teaching. The Greek verb *kataluō* (καταλύω) has a variety of important connotations, as *TDNT* indicates, “From the basic sense ‘to put down,’ *katalýō* means ‘to destroy’ in various contexts...A second meaning is then to ‘invalidate,’ e.g., the law in Mt. 5:17.”^b In Matthew 5:17 Yeshua asserts, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets” (RSV), so any claim that the Messiah came to do away with the Torah or significantly devalue it in some way, must be rejected. He clearly tells us that He did **not** come “to end” or “bring to an end” (LS)^c the Law of Moses.

If Yeshua the Messiah did not come to abolish the Law of Moses, as many errantly conclude, then what was His purpose regarding “fulfillment”? The Greek verb *plēroō* (πληρώω), commonly rendered as “fulfilled,” in the most general sense means “to make full, fill (full)” (BDAG).^d While this can relate “to bring to completion that which was already begun, complete, finish” (BDAG),^e likely via the fulfillment of prophecy, *plēroō* can notably also mean “to perfect, consummate,” in the context of “to make complete in every particular; to render perfect” (Thayer).^f AMG describes how the verb *plēroō* can imply “Figuratively, to fill, supply abundantly with something, impart richly, imbue with.”^g

When Yeshua came to “fulfill the Law,” it was with the expressed intention to demonstrate how valuable the Torah is for the instruction of the faithful, because His very Sermon on the Mount is predicated upon the validity of Moses’ Teaching. *He came to perfect it.* Yeshua surely came to show His generation the great spiritual dynamic of the Torah, that had

^a Cf. Allen, *God’s Psychiatry*.

^b F. Büchsel, “*katalýō, katályma*,” in *TDNT*, 544.

^c *LS*, 410.

^d *BDAG*, 828.

^e *Ibid*.

^f *Thayer*, pp 517-518.

^g Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1177.

either been lacking or skewed in the previous generations (even though there had been various Jewish teachers who also recognized certain religious and social problems needing to be fixed). Yeshua the Messiah, as the Word of God made manifest in the flesh (John 1:1), came to fulfill the Torah for humanity **by embodying it to its fullest extent** in His teachings, actions, and deeds. In His ministry Yeshua demonstrated how to live the Torah properly and embody its principal emphasis: the great love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5; cf. Mark 12:30; Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27). By His perfect obedience to the Torah, Yeshua could be regarded as being without sin, and thus be acceptable as atonement before the Father.

Further on in Matthew 5:18, Yeshua dismisses any idea that by fulfilling the Torah, its importance and validity will somehow end by His work. He says, **“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.”** Yeshua the Messiah says the Torah is not going to pass away until Heaven and Earth pass away. Not only does He say that the Torah will not pass away, but that “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law” (KJV), or “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (RSV). These are references to the minutest strokes of the Hebrew letters of the scroll of the Torah, which can sometimes change the meaning of a word, clause, or sentence—indicating that the finer details of what the Torah says are very important to our Heavenly Father. The Messiah similarly says in Luke 16:17, “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.”

The pastor’s words, “Jesus fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Law,” is quite misleading when kept within the larger context, because it would assume that *all has been fulfilled when it surely has not*. “All” was certainly not “fulfilled” following the ministry, execution, resurrection, and ascension of Yeshua—as *much more* is still to come in future salvation history. In particular, there are still Messianic expectations in the Law and the Prophets that we are waiting to see manifest, as God’s people urgently desire to see the Messiah return and establish His Millennial Kingdom on Earth.

Contrary to what some may not realize, Heaven and Earth are still with us today. We can walk outside and see the ground and see the sky *and* even look at the wider cosmos. If Heaven and Earth are still with us today, why do we have those who say that the Torah or the Law of Moses has been totally abolished? Are its principles regarding human conduct and behavior so irrelevant for our modern condition?

The Messiah issues a great warning to those who teach others to disobey God’s commandments in the Torah. In Matthew 5:19, He further says, **“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.”** What we may assume from these words is that one’s status in the Kingdom of God is determined by how one handles or approaches the Torah. If one teaches from the Torah, affording the Torah its due respect and honor, and encourages others to keep its commandments, such a person will be considered great in the Kingdom. If one teaches against the Torah and its commandments, that person will be considered the least.^h

Interestingly enough, a dispensational theologian like John F. Walvoord, who believes that the Law of Moses was only to be in place for Israel until the cross and the emergence of the so-called “Church Age,” still has to conclude,

^h Note that there is some debate over what Yeshua specifically means when He refers to “these commandments.” There are some theologians who recognize that Yeshua does not speak against the Torah, but believe that “these commandments” He speaks of only relate to those specific commandments He talks about in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chs. 5-7, not all of the commandments in the Torah.

Certainly, the commandments that Yeshua specifies in His Sermon on the Mount **are those that we should not dispute are absolutely imperative to keep**. Anyone, especially in a Messianic community that claims to be “Torah observant,” who fails to keep them will most certainly be considered “least.” Nevertheless, Yeshua as a First Century Jewish Rabbi and our example for living upheld the validity of all the commandments of the Torah as key instruction for His followers.

“The spiritual and moral principles of the Law...continue...Accordingly, though the Mosaic Law as a direct application was terminated, the moral and spiritual principles involved were to continue forever....Building on this revelation, Jesus declared that breaking the commandments and teaching others to do this will call for judgment, resulting in some not entering the kingdom. On the other hand, those who obey the Law and the moral principles of the kingdom ‘will be called great in the kingdom of heaven’ (v. 19).”ⁱ

One of the most sobering words from our Lord appears in Matthew 13:41-42, speaking of His return. Yeshua says that there will be a day when,

“The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” He also says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS’ [Psalm 6:8]” (Matthew 7:21-23).

These references to lawlessness or *anomia* (ἀνομία) regard how the condemned handled or approached the Law of God. Even though they attempted to serve God, did they at all eschew or disregard obedience to His commandments? Some have interpreted being “least” in the Kingdom as not being in the Kingdom at all. And unfortunately, there are voices you will encounter in the Messianic community who make it their job to judge the salvation of many Christians who are not pursuing a Torah observant lifestyle *as they are*. **It is not our job to judge the salvation of anyone** (a job *only* God Himself has, as Creator being able to fairly judge the human heart). Many evangelical Christian people are not “lawless,” although they may have an under-developed view of the Law.

It is surely our job to take the words of the Messiah very seriously. If we are not pursuing compliance with what He has told us concerning the Torah, then will we be spending an eternity separated from Him? The Torah is God’s standard of what He considers acceptable and unacceptable. If we are not pursuing an acceptable lifestyle in accordance with His holiness and righteousness, then are we in rebellion to God? Are we making ourselves out to be God? *Thankfully, only He knows...*

Reading Yeshua’s words in **Matthew 5:17-19** has caused many Believers, at the very least, to reexamine and reevaluate many of the teachings and views of modern Christianity in relation to the Law. Upon reading these three verses, many have been convicted by the Holy Spirit that the Torah is relevant instruction for Believers today, and is to be followed. *These are the primary verses that relate to Torah obedience for us today*, because if we do not understand the Messiah’s position on the Law, then we are likely to misunderstand what the Apostles’ position on the Law is as well. Perhaps even more important as it relates to the development of our theology, if one comes from the position that Yeshua did away with the Torah, various passages of Scripture will be *translated into English* to reflect this presupposition.^j But if the Messiah did not do away with the Torah, then diligent Messiah followers will have to do some digging, to see where major Christian Bible translations may come up short, or where various passages need to be considered further for context, historical analysis, and theological synthesis.

Few Christians realize this, but Judaism’s rejection of Yeshua as the Messiah primarily has to do with the fact that the institutional Church widely teaches that He abolished the Law of Moses. As author Michael Brown validly summarizes, using the vantage point of the American presidency,

ⁱ John F. Walvoord, *Every Prophecy of the Bible* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), pp 365, 366.

^j Christian Bibles that may translate various verses of Scripture from an anti-Law or anti-Torah perspective (i.e., Mark 7:19; Romans 10:4; Ephesians 2:15), are no different than Jewish Bibles that translate Scripture from the perspective that Yeshua is not the Messiah (i.e., Isaiah 7:14; Psalm 22:17).

“What would we think of a presidential candidate who assured his voters that he would only *uphold* the requirements and *fulfill* the goals of the Constitution and never *abolish* our country’s customs and laws, yet two years after his election, plunged the country into complete anarchy? Would this be *fulfillment* of the Constitution or *abolition* of the Constitution? It is the same with the Law of God. If Jesus promised to fulfill it but instead abolished it, then He would be a liar and not the Son of God.

“Do you know this is one of the greatest objections to the gospel that religious Jews have had? If Jesus was truly the Messiah, why did He do away with the Law?”^k

Indeed, why do many Christian theologians assert that Yeshua abolished the Torah or Law of Moses, when all of the Messianic prophecies of the Tanach or Old Testament speak to the contrary? Do these prophecies not tell us that when the Messiah comes to establish His Kingdom that the Torah will fully go forth from Zion? One of the most important missional admonitions in the Bible, which is also employed within the traditional Sabbath liturgy of the Jewish Synagogue,¹ speaks of the Torah going forth to the nations and world peace being enacted:

“And it will come about in the last days that the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, and the peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ For from Zion will go forth the law, even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between many peoples and render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war” (Micah 4:1-3).

“Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war” (Isaiah 2:2-4).^m

Prophecies such as these hardly sound like the Messiah coming to abolish the Law—especially if the Messiah is to rule and reign over Planet Earth, and the Torah is to go forth from Jerusalem! And more to the point: no good Bible teacher or theologian is ever going to honestly argue against world peace.

Various Jewish Rabbis of the past century, as a result of interreligious dialogue, have certainly been able to examine the New Testament as a valuable historical and philosophical text. Many have properly recognized, at least from a factual perspective, that Jesus did not abolish the Torah. Alfred J. Kolatch states the following in *The Second Jewish Book of Why*:

“During his career as preacher to his fellow Jews in Palestine, Jesus was careful to point out that he had no intention of promoting the idea that observance of Jewish law should be abandoned. The Synoptic Books of the Bible (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) portray Jesus

^k Brown, *Our Hands Are Stained With Blood*, 82.

¹ Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2007), 139; cf. J.H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960), pp 473-475; Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Ashkenaz* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984), pp 432-433.

^m For a further examination of Micah 4:1-3 and Isaiah 2:2-4, consult the author’s exegesis paper “The Torah Will Go Forth From Zion.”

as a practicing Jew....Given Jesus' portrayal as an observant Jew in the Synoptic Gospels, the total abandonment of Jewish ritual by the Christian Church seems strange. It is explained as an attempt by Church Fathers to draw a sharp distinction between Jew and Christian and thereby strengthen the Church. The abandonment is also the result of the great resistance encountered by Paul (and others) in his missionary activity among the Gentile population outside of Palestine. Paul found himself unable to win converts to Christianity when he insisted on adherence to biblical laws such as those pertaining to the Sabbath, family, purity, and especially circumcision."ⁿ

To Kolatch and many other Jewish teachers and researchers, their problem is not with Jesus and His Torah observance. *Rather, their problem is with Paul.* Kolatch goes on and says, "Paul condemned as his enemy those Christians who continued to follow the Old Jewish law of circumcision, because by their actions, he said, they were shaking the faith of ignorant Christians and were turning away Gentiles from the new message he brought them."^o To only compound the complexity of this dilemma, it is not at all helpful when one witnesses the thoughts of a Christian theologian like R.T. France, who in his Matthew commentary (NICNT 2007) actually says, "Matthew took a very conservative line on legal observance, believing that the Christian disciple was bound to continue to obey all the commandments of the Torah just as much as, or indeed more meticulously than, those Jews who had not followed Jesus....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..."^p

Many of the New Testament verses we will examine in this section of *The New Testament Validates Torah* are found in the Pauline Epistles. We are not to interpret what Yeshua says about the Torah in light of what we think Paul might say. Rather, we are to interpret and examine the Apostle Paul's words through the lens of what Yeshua the Messiah says! *Paul himself would agree with this.* He wrote his disciple Timothy that Yeshua's revelation and words on matters remain primary, and that one's doctrine must be in alignment with the Messiah's doctrine:

"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; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

Yeshua's words in Matthew 5:17-19 **about the Torah being valid instruction for His followers**, remain primary to whatever else is said in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) about the Law of Moses.^q You will find that it is not as difficult as you might think, to view passages that may appear or have traditionally been interpreted as anti-Torah, to actually not be anti-Torah. More than anything else, the pastor's mistake and the mistake of many others, has been in not carefully examining the relevant verses.

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ⁿ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1985), pp 80-81.

^o *Ibid.*, 81.

^p R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 179.

^q Given the importance of these verses within the debate over the Torah's validity, a more detailed analysis of Matthew 5:17-19 is provided in Chapter 9, "Has the Law Been Fulfilled?"

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