

## What Does πληρῶσαι (“to fulfill”) Mean in Matthew 5:17?

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The issue of “The Law and the Believer” continues to foster debate among evangelicals and challenges us to look again and again at crux texts which inform this debate. One such text is Matthew 5:17-20, the words of Yeshua in which He corrects an erroneous teaching about His own position on the enduring relevance of the Law and Prophets. I have offered thoughts on this subject before<sup>1</sup> and continue to ponder the difficulties this debate raises.

Recently I was reading the now well-known translation of the New Testament into ancient Hebrew by F. Deilitzsch.<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:17 is translated:

אַל תַּחֲשְׁבוּ כִּי בָאתִי לְהַפֵּר אֶת הַתּוֹרָה אוֹ אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים לֹא בָאתִי לְהַפֵּר  
כִּי אִם לְמַלְאָתָהּ. כִּי אֲמַר אֲנִי לָכֶם עַד כִּי־יַעֲבְרוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תֵעָבֵר  
יּוֹד אַחַת אוֹ־קוֹץ אֶחָד מִן־הַתּוֹרָה עַד אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הַכֹּל.

I remembered having read something different in the ABS translation of the New Testament<sup>3</sup> into modern Hebrew, and quickly turned to make the comparison:

אַל תַּחֲשְׁבוּ שֶׁבָאתִי לְבַטֵּל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה אוֹ אֶת הַנְּבִיאִים; לֹא בָאתִי לְבַטֵּל כִּי אִם  
לְקַיֵּם. אֲמַן. אוֹמֵר אֲנִי לָכֶם, עַד אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבְרוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ אֵף יוֹד אַחַת אוֹ  
תֵּג אֶחָד לֹא יַעֲבֹרוּ מִן הַתּוֹרָה בְּטָרֵם יִתְקַיֵּם הַכֹּל.

Besides the small syntactical changes from ancient to modern Hebrew, what caught my attention was the use of מָלָא in Delitzsch as compared to the hifil of קִיַּם in the ABS translation to render πληρῶσαι in the opening verse. One could speculate that the theological perspective of the translators determined the choice of verbs in this instance, but it raised a much deeper question in my mind, namely, what Hebrew / Aramaic word of Yeshua lay behind the Greek of the text.

Pondering the semantic ranges of מָלָא or קִיַּם and how this might affect one's understanding of the text, I went to the *Even Bohan* Matthew<sup>4</sup> to check its translation:

בעת ההיא אמר ישׁוֹׁׁ לתלמידיו אל תחשבו שבאתי להפך תורה אלא  
להשלים. באמת אני אומר לכם כי עד שמים וארץ אות אחת ונקודה אחת לא  
תבטל מהתורה או מהנביאים שהכל יתקיים.

[At that time Yeshua said to his disciples, “Do not think that I have  
come to destroy the Torah but to fulfill it. Truly I am saying to you  
that until heaven and earth (depart) not one letter or dot shall be

<sup>1</sup> *Law in the New Covenant* (NW Regional MJAA Conference, 1993); *Can We Speak of “Law” in the New Testament in Monolithic Terms?* (NW ETS Regional, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> F. Delitzsch, *הברית החדשה נעתקים מלשון יון ללשון עברית* (London: The Society for Distributing the Holy Scriptures to the Jews, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> *הברית החדשה* (The Bible Society in Israel, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> George Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* (Mercer, 1987).

abolished from the Torah or the Prophets, because all will be fulfilled.]<sup>5</sup>

Here I was met with another suggestion: the concept of “fulfill” in v. 17 is represented by the hifil of מִשָּׁלֵם while v. 18 has the hitpa’el of קִיֵּם. Yet another Hebrew text of Matthew in a manuscript called *B’sorot Matti* (בְּשׁוֹרֵת מַתִּי) from the middle ages<sup>6</sup> has מִלֵּא in 5:17. Did the translators of these various texts have a reason for the words they chose? Was it a theological statement about the meaning of “fulfill”?

It was only a short time later that I began to read a paper written by Gerry Breshears. The paper, entitled “The Place of the Law in the Life of the Believer in Christ”, touched on the meaning of πληρῶσαι in Matthew 5:17. After stating that “the Law and the Prophets” emphasized not only commands but also the whole prophetic tenor of the Old Testament, and that secondly, “one should not build too much from the antithesis between ‘not abolish’ and ‘fulfill’”, he writes:

Third, the question how Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets constitutes the most critical question in the passage. The verb “fulfill” is most often used in the so-called formula quotations which declare the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy or event in the life of Jesus. The meaning is to bring into being that which was promised. Matthew has used this understanding repeatedly in the first two chapters of his Gospel. That the “Law and Prophets” can prophesy is seen in Matt. 11:13 . . . .

Jesus is the one to whom the Old Testament was pointing. As His person and actions brought into being what the Old Testament promised, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy, so His teachings fulfill Old Testament Law.<sup>7</sup>

Breshears goes on to note that the Greek πληρῶ regularly translates מִלֵּא in the Lxx and not קִיֵּם, and thus should be understood in the sense of “fulfill” rather than “establish” in this text. Immediately I thought of the translations I had read and wondered if the translators (Delitzsch excepted) had really done their work if, in fact, πληρῶ is connected with מִלֵּא and not with קִיֵּם.<sup>8</sup>

What follows, then, are the data gathered from a study of (1) πληρῶ, particularly in Matthew and the Lxx, (2) מִלֵּא and its use in the Tanakh, (3) and the structure of Matthew 5:17-20.

### *Πληρῶ in Matthew*

The verb πληρῶ is used 16 times in the Gospel of Matthew, the majority of which

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>6</sup>See James Scott Trimm, *B’Sorot Matti* (Hebrew / Aramaic New Testament Research Institute, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Gerry Breshears, “The Place of the Law in the Life of the Believer in Christ, (unpublished paper, n.d.), 3-4.

<sup>8</sup>Delling (*TDNT*, 6.293) substantiates what Breshears has written. Delling notes as well that ἵσταμι, not πληρῶ is consistently used when the concept of “to confirm”, “to execute” or “declare to be valid” are intended (cp. Rom 3:31; Heb 10:9).

deal with the fulfillment of prophecy. Of those occurrences where the verb describes fulfilled prophecy, 10 times it shows up in the 3rd person aorist passive subjunctive form (1:22; 2:15; 2:23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35, 48; 21:4; 26:54, 56), and twice in the 3rd person aorist passive indicative (2:17; 27:9). Besides our text (5:17), the 3 remaining occurrences are:

Matt. 3:15 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν· ἄφες ἄρτι, οὕτως γὰρ πρόπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην. τότε ἀφίησιν αὐτόν.

But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him.

Matt. 13:48 ἦν ὅτε ἐπληρώθη ἀναβιβάσαντες ἐπὶ τὸν αἰγιαλὸν καὶ καθίσαντες συνέλεξαν τὰ καλὰ εἰς ἄγγη, τὰ δὲ σαπρὰ ἔξω ἔβαλον.

And when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away.

Matt. 23:32 καὶ ὑμεῖς πληρώσατε τὸ μέτρον τῶν πατέρων ὑμῶν.

Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers.

Of these three, 13:48 and 23:32 speak of filling the measure of something—a fishing net in 13:48, and the measure of guilt in 23:32. This spacial concept is not far removed from the sense of prophesy being “filled up”.

Matthew 3:15, however, utilizes the infinitive of πληρώω in a construction not unlike the text under study. When John the Baptizer hesitates at Yeshua's request to be baptized, He persuades him with the phrase “it is fitting (πρέπω)<sup>9</sup> for us to fulfill all righteousness.” John's hesitation was no doubt due to the fact that he, the lesser, was performing a religious ceremony upon the greater—the tables should have been turned. Yeshua's insistence, however, is based upon the need to perform those acts of righteousness which were considered essential for the work He was about to do.

The general consternation of Christian commentators to explain why Yeshua sought John's baptism (characterized as a baptism for “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” [Mk 1:4]) exists because (1) the baptism of John is viewed through the eyes of the later, Christian ritual, and (2) because the idea of repentance (תשובה) and ritual impurity are not understood within the contexts of 1st Century Judaism.

Ritual impurity was not, and should not, necessarily be interpreted as the results of the sin of the unclean individual. A *niddah* (woman impure by menstruation) was not ritually impure because she had sinned, but because *she was a person created in God's image who, because of her humanness, was a participant in the cycle of life and death.* It was impossible to exist in 1st Century Israel and not, in one way or another, contact ritual impurity. *This was simply a function of humanity within the context of Jewish law.* While it may wound the sensitivity of Christian dogma, we should face the inevitable fact that Yeshua must certainly have contacted ritual impurity while

<sup>9</sup>The verbal form is a *hapaxlegoumena* here as far as the Gospels are concerned. It is found elsewhere in 1 Co 11:13; Eph 4:3; 1 Ti 2:10; Tit. 2:1; Heb 2:10; 7:26. In classical Greek, “οφείλω and δεῖ express necessity and obligation, while πρέπω expresses that which is proper and appropriate.” C. Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Zondervan, 1967), 2.668.

upon the earth, either through corpse contact or through secondary impurities through contact with items made unclean by others. If He is the sin-bearer, why does it seem impossible that He should bear the marks of sinful humanity before the ultimate bearing at the cross? That He should fulfill the Torah's prescriptions<sup>10</sup> to deal with impurities in no way renders Him a sinner. It simply identifies Him as one of mankind, living in a fallen world.

That such an identification could, in the end, be seen as a foreshadowing of His sin-bearing role on the cross is obvious. But to find a *sensus plenior* here by a retrojection of Pauline theology and an insistence to satisfy the demands of systematics is to miss the fact that John understood “to fulfill all righteousness” as the answer to his quandary, when he responded “I have need to be baptized by You . . . .” Yeshua's response was immediately accepted by John and resulted in his carrying out the baptism. Thus, “to fulfill all righteousness” must have been understood by John to mean “to do what is right, to do what is prescribed.” To “fulfill all righteousness” is to “do” righteousness, to take it out of the realm of words and put it into actions.

The parallel between this baptism saying and our text as regards the word “fulfill” seems strong. In both cases πληρώ is used, and in both cases how one acts or lives is the issue. If a parallel does exist, and if “to fulfill all righteousness” means “to do what is right”, then to “fulfill the Law and Prophets” means to “do” them, to take them out of the realm of mere words and put them into actions.

#### *Πληρω in the Lxx*

The root πληρης and its verbal counterpart πληρώ are used in the Lxx to translate the adjective מָלֵא (47 times) and its verbal counterpart מָלֵא (27 times, including the infinitive absolute מְלִיֵּא). Other Hebrew verbs which the πληρώ word group translates are שָׂבַע “satisfied” (7 times) and its verb שָׂבַע “to be or become satisfied” (4 times). שָׁלֵם “intact, whole” is translated by πληρης 7 times, along with עָבַר “overflowing, flowing abundantly” (Cant 5:5, 13) and כָּבַד “heavy, weighed down” (Is 1:4).

As noted above, conspicuously missing is any instance of πληρώ translating the verb קָיָם. But what should we derive from the fact that the verb πληρώ most often translates in the Lxx is מָלֵא? What range of meaning does מָלֵא carry in the Tanakh which might inform our text?

#### *מָלֵא in the Tanakh*

In general, מָלֵא in the qal can be transitive or intransitive, and mean “to fill” or “to be full”.<sup>11</sup> It is also used in the sense of “fill up, complete”, as in “complete the week of the bride” (Gen 29:27). Expressions which utilize the verb are מָלֵא הַיָּמִים “fill up the days (Gen 25:24; 50:3; Est 2:12, etc.), מָלֵא כְבוֹד יְהוָה “glory of Adonai filled . . .”

<sup>10</sup>The Torah does not specifically describe a *mikvah* as the means by which ritual impurity was cleansed, but Num 31:23 (cf. Zech 13:1) does indicate “purging in water” as the requirement for a *niddah*, and this has been taken as therefore applying to other forms of ritual impurity. The halakah of the 1st Century Jewish community recognized the *mikvah* as a necessary step in regaining ceremonial cleansing.

<sup>11</sup>Snijders, “מָלֵא” in *TDOT*, 8.298.

(Ezek 43:5; 44:4; Hag 2:7, etc.), מָלֵא אַחֲרֵי יְהוָה “be full after Adonai” [i.e., have one's heart wholly following after Him] (Num 14:24; 32:11ff; Josh 14:8, 14; 1Ki 11:4, 6, etc.), מָלֵא אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים “fulfilling the words” (1 Ki 8:15, 24; 2 Chr 6:4, 15; 36:12; Jer 44:25, etc.) and מָלֵא אֶת־יָד “to fill the hand” (of the priest), [an expression for ordination], (Ex 28:41; 29:9, 29, 33, 35, etc.).

The idea of “filling up a specific number of days or time period” does not directly relate to the statement of Yeshua in Matthew 5. It is not time but “Law and Prophets” which are being fulfilled in our text. Nor does the expression “the glory of Adonai filled . . .” bear directly on our passage. “To be full after the Lord” could have a connection, but the Lxx in the places where this phrase is used does not have πληρώω but usually ἐπιακολουθεῖν.<sup>12</sup>

The phrase מָלֵא אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים “to fulfill the words”<sup>13</sup>, however, is interesting in connection with Matthew 5, particularly since the Lxx uses πληρώω to translate this idiom. “To fulfill the words” means “to strengthen and actualize them by an event”.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, מָלֵא can be replaced by הִקִּים (hif. of קִים) in the idiomatic phrase, as in Isaiah 44:26 (cp. Num 23:19; 1 Sa 3:12). Snijders comments about this phrase:

Nothing new occurs in such fulfillment; rather, a word is made full, or is empowered. It then acquires unavoidable validity and will certainly come to pass. Thus, Martin Noth does not understand the expression in the sense of ‘substantively amplify’ or ‘complete,’ but rather as ‘implement fully.’

Dnl. 4:30(33) shows clearly how closely related are prediction and occurrence: ‘In the same moment [that the voice sounded from heaven] the word was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar.’ The word was implemented. It is not ‘empty,’ but rather brings about that which Yahweh has willed, and effects that for which he sent it (Isa 55:11)

Finally, in 1 K 1:14 Nathan says that he will come in to the king after Bathsheba, and while she yet speaks with the king he (Nathan) ‘will fulfill your words.’ His message is the same as that of Bathsheba, his story the same. For just this reason he lends her words power and validity, since through two or three witnesses a word or matter is ‘sustained’ (*yaqum dabar*, Dt 19:15). Thus it is hardly correct when C.F.D. Moule denies the meaning ‘confirmation’ and translates ‘I will tell the whole story,’ as if that story contained gaps to be filled.<sup>15</sup>

Of particular interest is the use of this phrase in Jeremiah 44:25

כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה־צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם וְנִשְׁיֵיכֶם וַתְּדַבְּרֶנָּה בְּפִיכֶם  
וּבִידֵיכֶם מִלֵּאֲתֶם לֵאמֹר עָשֵׂה נַעֲשֵׂה אֶת־נִדְרֵנוּ אֲשֶׁר נִדְרְנוּ לְקַטֹּר לְמִלְכַּת  
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלַהֲסֹדָה לָהּ נִסְכִּים הָקִים תְּקִימָנָה אֶת־נִדְרֵיכֶם וַעֲשֵׂה תַעֲשִׂינָה  
אֶת־נִדְרֵיכֶם

thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, as follows: ‘As for you and your wives, you have spoken with your mouths and

<sup>12</sup>Num 14:24 (ἐπιακολουθεῖν); 32:11ff (συνεπακολουθεῖν); Dt 1:36 (προσκεῖμαι); Josh 14:8 (ἐπιακολουθεῖν), 14 (ἐπιακολουθεῖν).

<sup>13</sup>1Ki 1:14; 2Ki 2:27; 2Chron 36:21.

<sup>14</sup>Snijders, Op. cit, p. 301.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

fulfilled it with your hands, saying, “We will certainly perform our vows that we have vowed, to burn sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her.” Go ahead and confirm your vows, and certainly perform your vows!’

What is striking in this text is the combined use of מִלֵּךְ and עָשָׂה, which exactly parallel πληρώω and ποιέω in Matthew 5:17-20. In the Jeremiah passage it is clear that to “fulfill” with one's hands what has been spoken by the mouth is to “perform” the vow and thus to “confirm” (הִקְדִּים) it.

Πληρώω, then, in Matthew 5:17, could very well carry the meaning of “implement” or “bring to action” on the basis of its Lxx translation of מִלֵּךְ. When prophecy is “fulfilled” (מִלֵּךְ) it implies it is implemented or brought into action. This perfectly corresponds with what Yeshua was expressing. He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to implement them—to cause them to be performed, both by Himself and those who were His disciples. What is more, this interpretation fits well with the structure of the pericope.

### *The Structure of Matthew 5:17-20*

Breshears makes the interesting statement that

... one must not build too much from the antithesis between “not abolish” and “fulfill.” It does not mean there is no sense in which Law may be terminated. For example, Jesus' similar antithesis, “Do not think that I came to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34) cannot mean there is no sense in which Jesus brings peace. Similarly, His word here cannot be understood that Jesus means to establish the Law and there is no sense in which He abrogates the Law. One need only think of the termination of the sacrificial system to know this is not true.<sup>16</sup>

My initial question is “how much can we build” on the structure. Breshears warns us not to build too much, but can the structure teach us anything about the meaning of the text? What light can the parallels in the passage shed on the meaning of “fulfill”?

The repetition of key terms in the passage create a discernible structure.” **ἔρχομαι** is repeated in order to emphasize the goal of Yeshua's interpretation of the Tanakh which He is about to give, and **καταλύω**, what He does not intend to do in the following exposition and interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

Do not think <i>I have come</i> <u>to destroy</u> the Law and the Prophets		<u>but to fulfill</u>
<i>I did not come</i> <u>to destroy</u>		

In good semitic fashion, Yeshua gives a summary or outline in His opening statement of the point He intends to make. The following lines, then, work to expand and explain the opening statement, further describing the negative, what

<sup>16</sup>Breshears, Op. cit., 3.

<sup>17</sup>“Come” ἔρχομαι does not necessarily speak of His incarnation, but of His public ministry as teacher, cf. 9:13; 10:34f.

Yeshua *did not come* to do, or the positive, *what Yeshua did come to do*. In the opening phrase, the negative is described in the word “destroy” (καταλύω), while the positive is in the term “fulfill” (πληρώω). How far we may be able to take this antithesis remains a question, but it seems clear that to one extent or another, πληρῶσαι stands in contrast to καταλύω, since the one summarizes the intent of Yeshua's subsequent teaching, while the other clearly does not.

The structure of the pericope is also strengthened by the connective particles γάρ in v. 18, οὖν in v. 19 and γάρ in v. 20. Expanding the concepts of “abolish” (καταλύω) and “fulfill” (πληρῶσαι), the following verses have (v. 18) “pass away”<sup>18</sup> (παρέρχομαι), which aligns with “abolish,” and “is accomplished” (γίνομαι), which corresponds to “fulfill”. Likewise, in v. 19, “destroy” (λύω) is parallel to “abolish” (καταλύω) while “keeps” (ποιέω) corresponds to “fulfill”. It may be laid out as follows:

NEGATIVE	POSITIVE
Do not think that I have come <u>to abolish</u> (καταλύω) the Law and the Prophets; I did not come <u>to abolish</u> (καταλύω)	but <u>to fulfill</u> (πληρώω)
For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke <u>shall pass away</u> (παρέρχομαι) from the Law	until all <u>is accomplished</u> (γίνομαι)
Whoever then <u>annuls</u> (λύω) one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others shall be called <u>least</u> (ἐλάχιστος) in the kingdom of heaven;	but whoever <u>keeps</u> (ποιέω) and teaches <i>them</i> , he shall be called <u>great</u> (μέγας) in the kingdom of heaven
you <u>shall not enter</u> (οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃτε) the kingdom of heaven	For I say to you, that unless your <u>righteousness</u> (δικαιοσύνη) surpasses <i>that</i> of the scribes and Pharisees,

This structure is obvious: “to abolish” is to cause aspects of the Law to pass away and thus to annul its affect and reality in the lives of people. Conversely, “to fulfill” is to see the commandments and precepts of the Torah and Neviim implemented in the lives of those waiting for the kingdom, paralleled by the word ποιέω. The summary verse is all important: citizens of the kingdom will be characterized by a righteousness which surpasses those most scrupulous about performance of even the least of the commandments. It seems incredible that Yeshua should use the benchmark of the “scribes and Pharisees” if He intended His listeners to understand that He really was expecting them to obey a Law which had little or no connection to the scribes and Pharisees.

To say that one must be careful not to “build to much” from this structure is not really that helpful. What is too much? Where are the boundaries? Is not παρέλθῃ in v. 18 at least in some way better understood by its opposing γένηται? Does it not

<sup>18</sup>Using the NASB translation throughout for the English.

seem clear that the term *λύω* is at least in some measure opposite of *ποιέω* in v. 19? And if one “annuls” a commandment by not doing it (*ποιέω*) and teaching others the same renders such a person “least” in the kingdom, should it not be the purpose of every true child of God to strive to be “great” in the kingdom by doing the commandments and teaching others to do the same? Clearly, the commands in view are those contained in the Torah and Neviim! This structure seems unavoidable to me.

### *Structure and the Larger Context*

Breshears thinks that the “antitheses” which follow (Matt 5:21-48) buttress his interpretation, that “fulfill” means that the Law pointed forward to Messiah, and that He is the fulfillment of it in that “His demands move in a different sphere above and apart from the law, whose continuing validity exists only in and through him.”<sup>19</sup>

Jesus' demands in these antitheses go beyond the Mosaic Law and are different in kind. For example, His proscription of divorce (vv. 31-32) is not mere exposition of Moses, looking for its spiritual heart. Where Deuteronomy allowed divorce, Jesus prohibited it. He charges ones who initiate divorce (except in the case of *porneia*) with causing adultery. Again, where the Law allowed and regulated oaths, Jesus prohibited them (vv. 33-37). His command is different in kind from the Old Testament command which He quotes. The truthful character of the members of His kingdom makes oaths unnecessary and wrong. As a final example, while His command to love one's enemies (vv. 43-47) does not specifically abrogate any command of the Law, neither can it be construed as an exposition of the Law. Jesus gives a command of quite a different order from those in the Law.<sup>20</sup>

I would like to suggest another way of approaching this text, one which takes into consideration the data already collected on the semantic range of *ἄλγῃ* / *πληρόω*, attempts to allow the literary structure of the pericope to aid in its interpretation, and considers the social and religious context out of and within which Yeshua makes these statements.

I think an alternative suggestion is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the antitheses must be understood as they are given. For example, to state that Yeshua prohibited divorce over against Deuteronomy which allowed it, and then to admit the exception clause (*παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας*)<sup>21</sup> as a case in which He does allow divorce, is confusing at best. Secondly, it is easy to make clear antitheses out of what is really not so clear. To say that Yeshua prohibited the taking of oaths as unnecessary and even wrong does not deal with a number of issues: (1) what the current debate about oaths entailed, and how His prohibition differed from that of the Sages who likewise condemned vain oaths, (2) what different ideas the various vocabulary might convey. Why, for instance, is there a switch between oath (*ὄρκος*)

<sup>19</sup>Breshears, Op. cit., p. 3 (this is a quote from Moo “Jesus and Authority of the Mosaic Law”, p. 102).

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>The parallel in Matt 19:9 has *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ*.



and vow (ὄμνῶ) and is this significant?<sup>22</sup> and (3) how it was that oaths continued to be used by the followers of Yeshua without comment, in spite of what appears to be a very straight-forward prohibition. Paul, for instance, at the direction of James, entered into a vow as a means of proving his righteous behavior in the gospel (Acts 21:23ff).<sup>23</sup> He also uses an oath formula in his letter to the Thessalonians (1Thess 5:27). And Yeshua Himself instructs the Pharisees regarding oaths but does not teach them that they are wrong to make them (Matt 23:16-22). If the words of Yeshua in Matthew 5 are so plainly understood as prohibiting any and every oath, does it not seem strange that He instructs His colleagues about them without every telling them that they are wrong or at least undesirable?

### *Least and Greatest Commandments*

An important issue in the discussion of Matthew 5:17-20 is the repeated emphasis upon the smallest or least commandment. The text speaks of “not the smallest letter or stroke” passing away. Doubtlessly the smallest letter (Greek ἰῶτα) refers to the Hebrew Yod (י), while the term “stroke” (κεραία) could have a number of translations. Some consider it the Hebrew *vav* (ו), others the serif that distinguishes several Hebrew letters (כ / ב; ח / ת) while still others the crowns (embellishments) on certain letters in the Torah scrolls. Whatever the case, it is clear that Yeshua makes special reference here to the written Tanakh.

The Talmud agrees with Yeshua's insistence upon the integrity of the written text. Furthermore, the Yod is the center of much Rabbinic discussion, being the smallest letter in the Hebrew aleph-bet.

R. Honna said in the name of R. Acha, The letter Yod which God took out of the name of Sarai our mother was given half to Sara and half to Abraham. A tradition of R. Hoshai: The letter Yod came and prostrated itself before God, and said, ‘O eternal Lord, thou has rooted me out of the name of that holy woman.’ The blessed God answered, ‘Hitherto thou hast been in the name of a woman, and that in the end [viz. in Sarai]; but henceforward thou shalt be in the name of a man, and that in the beginning.’ Hence is that which is written, ‘And Moses called the name of Hoshea, Yehoshua.’”<sup>24</sup>

The Rabbis also speak directly to the absolute importance of every stroke in the text.

It is written [Lev. 22:32] לֹא תַחַלְלוּ אֶת־שֵׁם קֹדֶשׁי *Ye shall not profane my holy name: whosoever shall change ח into ה, destroys the world [for then לֹא תְהַלֵּל written with ה, makes this sense, Ye shall not ‘praise’ my holy name.]* It is written [Ps 150:6] כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְהוָה *Let every spirit praise the Lord: whosoever changeth ח into ה destroys the*

<sup>22</sup> A common Greek term for vows is *ευχη* which is cognate to *ευχομαι / προσευχομαι*, “to pray”. Is this included in Yeshua's prohibition?

<sup>23</sup> The text contains questions, for sure. A Nazarite vow required a minimum of 30 days (m.Natzir 1.3), yet it is not clear that Paul had already been observing such a vow, and he could not have entered into it for only 7 days (cf. Ac 21:27). The language would indicate, nonetheless, that Paul participated in the Nazarite vow, for the Greek *ἀγνισμος* is the technical term for the completion of the Nazarite vow. Note the comments of Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 611-13, who, though he concludes Luke has mixed up the story, still has profitable insights to the itinerary of this chapter.

<sup>24</sup> b. *Sanhedrin* 20.3.

world. [It would read “*Let every spirit profane the Lord.*”] It is written [Jer. 5:12], כָּהֲשִׁי בַיהוָה כָּהֲשִׁי *They lied against the Lord: whosoever changeth* כ into כ destroys the world. [It would read “*Like the Lord they lied.*”] It is written [Deut. 6:4], יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד, *The Lord our God is one Lord: he that changeth* ד into ד, destroys the world. [It would read “*The Lord our God is another (god).*”] <sup>25</sup>

But the primary emphasis, as the subsequent context shows, is not on the integrity of the written text *per se*, but on the value of even the smallest commandment. The evaluation of the commandments was a significant topic in early Judaism, if the subsequent literature (Mishnah, midrashim, Talmudic) is any indication. As Urbach shows, there were various viewpoints among the Sages.

The question of the relative value of the commandments found expression in many varied forms in the teaching of the Sages. On the one hand we find dicta that proclaim the absolute equality of all the precepts, and on the other we encounter clear distinctions drawn between more important and less important commandments, and methods of classifying precepts and transgressions according to various criteria.<sup>26</sup>

Various Sages and schools gave a different criteria of evaluation for the commandments. For instance, in the Amora Rav Judah's comments on m.*Shevuot* 1.6<sup>26</sup> he says:

This is the meaning . . . the light (transgressions) are those involving positive or negative commandments; and the grave (transgressions) are those punished by “extinction” or death by sentence of the court.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, he based the criteria for valuation of the *mitzvot* on the severity of the penalty that the transgressions entail.

R. ben 'Azzai saw it differently. On the verse “Only be steadfast in not eating the blood . . .” he remarked:

Now there are three hundred similar positive precepts in the Torah! It comes to teach us, therefore, that if in regard to blood, than which there is no lighter precept among all the commandments, Scripture admonished you thus, how much more so in the case of the other precepts.<sup>28</sup>

Urbach explains:

The eating of the blood is something repulsive; consequently it is easy to abstain from it. Lightness and stringency are not measured

<sup>25</sup> Tanchum 1.1. [*Tanchuma* is a compilation of midrashic comments which feature the *derashot* of Rabbi Tanchuma Bar Abba, a Palestinian *amora*. His principal teacher in *halakhah* and *aggadah* was R. Huna.] See the comments in John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, 4 Vols. (Baker Book House, 1979), 2.102.

<sup>26</sup> Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Harvard, 1979), p. 345.

<sup>27</sup> b.*Shevuot* 12b.

<sup>28</sup> *Sifre Deuteronomy* §76.

by the extent of the reward or punishment involved in doing the precept or transgression, but according to the effort required to fulfill the commandments or to refrain from the transgressions. So, too, a precept not entailing expenditure of money, or involving danger to life, is called “a light commandment”.<sup>29</sup>

Along these same lines R. Simeon b. Yochai explained the stringency of the commandment to honor one's parents. The effort required to keep this commandment elevates it to a high position.

For it is taught, R. Simeon b. Yochai said: Great is (the precept of) honoring father and mother, for the Holy One, blessed by He, put it above the honor due to Him. It is stated, “Honor thy father and thy mother”, and it is said “Honor the Lord with thy substance” (Prov 3:9). With what should you honor Him? With the substance that He graciously bestows upon you—setting aside the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, the corners of the field; separating the heave-offering, the first tithe, the second tithe, the poorman's tithe, and the dough-offering; preparing a booth, a palm-branch, a ram's horn, phylacteries, and fringes; feeding the poor and the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty. If you have, you are obligated to do any of these things; but if you have not, you are not obligated to do any of these things. But when we come to the commandment of honoring parents, whether you have substance or not, you must “honor thy father and thy mother”, even if you have to go begging.<sup>30</sup>

We know that Yeshua had also come to a conclusion on laws which were light<sup>31</sup> and those which were heavy, and that He agreed with those who made a law such as honoring father and mother an extremely stringent or heavy one, for it is on this very basis that He rebukes the Pharisees, and admonishes them not to neglect the “weightier” matters of the Law by becoming entangled in the “lighter” precepts (Matt. 23:23)—“but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” Thus, Yeshua was fully aware of, and participant in, the debate over the valuation of commandments. In the end, however, the majority opinion coincided with Yeshua's own position, as we read in *Avot*:

And be heedful of a light precept as of a weighty one, for you know not the reward given for the precepts.<sup>32</sup>

The righteous or pious will obey from the heart, which means they will desire to keep all the precepts of God regardless of whether they are light or weighty. One's rewards come from pleasing God, and this means doing what He commands.

This same idea is reflected in the Prayer Book. For instance:

These are the precepts, the fruit of which man enjoys in this world [while] the principle [reward] is preserved for him in the World-to-

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<sup>29</sup>Urbach, *Op. cit.*, p. 346.

<sup>30</sup>*Pe'ah* i, 1, p. 15d (*ad init.*). Quoted from Urbach, *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>The Greek text of Mt 5 speaks of the “least” commandment, but the common Hebrew terms are a “light commandment” (מצוה קלה) and a “weighty commandment” (מצוה חמורה).

<sup>32</sup>*Avot* 2.1.

Come. They are: honoring father and mother, [performing] deeds of kindness, early attendance in the House of Study morning and evening, providing hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, participating in making a wedding, accompanying the dead [to the grave], concentrating on the meaning of prayers, making peace between fellow men—and the study of Torah is equal to them all.<sup>33</sup>

Each of these would not have been classed as “weighty” by the Pharisees Yeshua rebukes, yet in the end the stance of the Sages is that “the study of Torah is equal to them all”, meaning that the end of true Torah learning is the performing of these deeds. Thus, these deeds, which might have at one time been considered “light,” have gained a high or weighty status. And in the majority they may be grouped under the heading of “love” or showing of “mercy”.

It was not only Yeshua who saw in the main-stream Pharisaism something in need of rebuke. The Qumran society had also taken a stand against them in regard to the valuation of commandments. In 4QPs<sup>a</sup> 1:27 it is stated that the Pharisees “have chosen the light matters” (כִּי־אֵל בָּחֵרוּ בַקִּלּוֹת).<sup>34</sup> By this we might understand that they had chosen those commandments which required the least sacrifice on their part—those which could be performed without a humbling of the soul.

With this before us, then, it is possible to interpret Yeshua's teaching as addressing the issue of commandment evaluation. The Pharisees had chosen to do the “light” commandments, those which required the least amount of effort to fulfill, while they were constantly neglecting (and thus breaking) the weightier ones, those which required a greater sacrifice to fulfill (see below). In stating at the opening that each and every commandment (regardless of its valuation) was important to live righteously, Yeshua sets the stage for His antitheses. But He does it in a most intriguing way. He states a law which all would agree was valued as weighty (introduced by “you have heard it said”), and then shows that the inward, heart attitude is just as weighty a commandment (introduced by “but I say to you”).

To read these words of Yeshua as “transcend(ing) the Old Testament” and “move(ing) in a different sphere above and apart from the law” simply does not take into account the data, both textual and historical. Granted, to the conformists of His day His teachings might have seemed particularly contrary to the “mainstream,” but even in these cases He would by no means have been described as an innovator. In fact, He would not have wanted so to present Himself, which is why He opens His discourse with such a strong statement on the Law and Prophets and their enduring relevance. Rather, what He teaches is that, while there are Laws designated light and those designated heavy, *all the precepts of God are important and must be carried out from the heart. And to live life with the notion that one can maintain the lighter laws and not fall prey to breaking the weightier ones is very misguided.*

This brings us to the issue of Torah observance as a “heart issue.” Once again, Yeshua's emphasis upon the inner realities of piety are not new or revolutionary. Mercy and piety were enjoined by the Sages as that which goes “beyond the strict letter of the Law” (זֶה לְפָנִים מִשְׁוֹרֵת הַדִּין),<sup>35</sup> and as what characterizes all who are truly

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<sup>33</sup>From the *Shacharit Service*, *The Complete Metsudah Siddur*, (Metsudah Publications, 1990), p. 14-5.

<sup>34</sup>DJD V., p. 43.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. b.*Bava Metzia* 24b, 30b; b.*Avodah Zera* 4b.

righteous. For example, in expounding Ex 18:20, “then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk, and the work they are to do”, R. Eleazar of Modi'im says of the last phrase:

*And the work, meaning along the line of strict justice; That they must do, beyond the line of strict justice.*<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, R. Yochanan said,

*Jerusalem was destroyed only because they judged therein (strictly) according to Torah law.*<sup>37</sup>

The Talmudic discussion which surrounds this statement makes it clear that one who is pious acts not merely to accomplish the letter of the Torah, but that he acts “beyond the strict letter of the Law” because it is within his heart to do so. What is more, a *tzaddik*, a righteous person acts this way as the natural outworking of his character. The Talmudic argument tells the story of R. Yishmael who, as an elder, was exempt from helping a poor man load his wagons. Yet in spite of this exemption, R. Yishmael acquires the load for the stated price and then renounces ownership. The poor man retains his goods plus the value in money, and R. Yishmael retains the honor of an elder. But the point for our discussion is this: the Sages recognized the need to allow mercy to govern halakic decisions. So much was this the case that some feared these decisions which went “beyond the strict letter of the Law” might be construed as enduring halakah.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the Sages expected acts of mercy, which went beyond the strict letter of the Torah, to characterize the righteous person. As Urbach notes in respect to *Avot* 5.10, “the pious man forgoes his rights, and acts beyond the requirement of the law, and this is the attribute of piety.”<sup>39</sup>

*You have heard . . .*

The antithetical statements of Yeshua which follow His opening teaching on the vitality of the Law and Prophets are each introduced with the statement “You have heard . . .” In two of the instance, however, “you have heard” does not introduce a quote from the Tanakh. The phrases “he who kills shall be liable to the court” (v. 21) and “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (v. 43)<sup>40</sup> Thus, in what context does Yeshua teach “you have heard”?

An interesting parallel is found in the midrash on Exodus.<sup>41</sup> Here, in reference to the commandment “honor thy father and thy mother”, the writer says: “I might understand, ‘honor them with words only’”. The phrase “I might understand” is *יֵאָמֵר*, *“I hear”*, or “I might hear”. The midrash goes on to refute this proposition and to show that the commandment refers not only to respectful speech but also to the

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<sup>36</sup>Jacob Z. Lauterbach, trans. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 3 vols., (JPS, 1933), 2.182.

<sup>37</sup>*b.bava Metzia* 30b.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *b.Ketubbot* 50b.

<sup>39</sup>*Avot* 5.10-14; Cf. *b. bava Metzia* 83a;

<sup>40</sup>The first edition of the NASB puts the phrase “and hate your enemy” in small caps to show that it is a quote from the Tanakh, but this is in error.

<sup>41</sup>*Mekhila* on Exod 19:20.

duty of maintaining your parents. Daube shows that the early, rabbinical technical terms for “literal meaning” were שְׁמוּעַ and מִשְׁמַע, “that which is heard”.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore,

הַשְׁמוּעַ, “he who hears”, is used in the sense of “he who sticks to the superficial, literal meaning of Scripture” in the hermeneutical rule according to which “a general summary (like the notice concerning man's creation in the first chapter of Genesis) may be followed by detailed facts (the story of man's creation in the second chapter) which are merely a repetition giving more particulars; he who hears—i.e., he who takes Scripture literally—will form the erroneous belief that the second account refers to different facts, but in reality it is merely a repetition with more particulars.”<sup>43</sup>

Note in this regard another example from R. Yudah HaNasi in his comments on the phrase “And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai:

I might hear this as it is heard, I might understand this according to its literal meaning (שְׁמוּעַ אֲנִי כְּשִׁמוּעַ). But thou must say, (אֶמְרָתָ): If the sun, one of the many servants of God, may remain in its place and nevertheless be effective beyond it, how much more He by whose word the world came into being.”<sup>44</sup>

This, then, gives a setting for Yeshua's exposition. It is academic life, dialectic exegesis, in which the text is considered from comparative texts and ideologies rather than from a narrow, “surface” reading. Yeshua follows the Rabbinic pattern of “hear” and “say”, not to contrast a new teaching with that which is out dated, but to move a surface reading of the text to an informed one, one which incorporates the principles and truths of comparative scriptures and teachings.

#### *Hatred & Murder (Matthew 5:21ff)*

Yeshua, then, puts the issues of the heart (which would have been considered light) on equal standing with what would have been considered one of the weightiest commandments, i.e., prohibition of bloodshed. Murder, a commandment which carried the death penalty, and hatred are linked together as a light and heavy pair. The neglect of the one leads to the violation of the other. Some of the Sages agree:

Rabbi Eleazar says, “He who hates his neighbor is considered a murderer, for it is said, ‘But if any man hates his neighbor and, lies in wait for him, and wounds him mortally so that he dies’ (Dt 19:11)”<sup>45</sup>

This is paralleled in *Sifre Deuteronomy* 19:11—

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<sup>42</sup>Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1956), p. 56,

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. This is from the 32 principles of interpretation of Eliezer ben Yose HaGelili. These are listed and expounded in R. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide* (Random House, 1989), pp. 147-154. The principle alluded to here is number 13.

<sup>44</sup>*Mekhilta* on Ex. 19:20.

<sup>45</sup>*Tosefta Derech Eretz* vol. 2, p. 117. Quoted from David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Magnes Press, 1988), p. 501.

If any man hates his neighbor, and lies in wait for him, and attacks him (and wounds him mortally so that he dies) [Deut 19:11]. From there it was deduced: if a man has transgressed a light commandment, he will finally transgress a weighty commandment. If he transgress (the commandment): "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18), he will finally transgress (the commandment) "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge" (ibid.), and the (commandment) "You shall not hate your brother" (Lev 19:17), and the (commandment) "that your brother may live beside you" (Lev 25:36)—until he will (finally) be led to bloodshed. Therefore it is said: "If any man hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him."<sup>46</sup>

### *Adultery / Divorce (Matthew 5:27ff)*

The words of Yeshua regarding adultery "contain nothing new or off the Rabbinic line."<sup>47</sup> Adultery is forbidden "both with the eye and in the heart"<sup>48</sup> In Midrash Rabbah Lev (xxiii.12 on xviii.3) Resh Lakish, alluding to Job 24:15, said, "The verse is intended to indicate that one can commit adultery with the eye as well as with the body." In a Talmudic story a man had an illegitimate longing for a certain woman, the doctor said he could not be cured unless his desire was gratified or at least partially gratified. However, the Sages said, "Then let him die. Evil thoughts (i.e., lustful thoughts) are even worse than lustful deeds".<sup>49</sup>

The same may be true for Yeshua's teaching on divorce, though His restricting even the already strict school of Shammai (as over against the wide understanding of עֲרוֹת דָּבָר in Deut 24:1 by Hillel) was a matter of amazement to His disciples. Still, the antithesis is not between the "old Law" and the "new", but between a body of halakah which had been constructed for the sake of the few, and the abiding and enduring word of God which was fair to all.

The Sages attempted to diminish divorce, for they saw that its abuse was devastating. In commenting on Malachi 2:16-17, R. Eleazar taught that "the very altar drops tears on every one who divorces the wife of his youth"<sup>50</sup> and from the same text R. Johanan gave the interpretation "Hateful (to God) is the man who puts away his wife."<sup>51</sup> The schools of Hillel and Shammai differed on what constituted a legitimate ground of divorce, showing once again that almost nothing enjoyed a universal agreement among the Jewish communities of the 1st Century.<sup>52</sup>

The significant aspect of Yeshua's teaching at this point is the manner in which

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<sup>46</sup>*Sifre Deut.* to Deut. 22:13. Quoted from Flusser, *Ibid.* Cf. also Tosefta Sotah 5:11, cp. b.*Kidd* 41a). Note also the many references Flusser lists as pertaining to hatred leading to and thus equal to murder in n. 34, p. 501 and his comments on pp. 502-3.

<sup>47</sup>C. G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (KTAV, 1970), p. 41.

<sup>48</sup>*Mechilta* R. Simeon p. iii, quoted from Montefiore, *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>b.*Yoma* 29a. See the many examples given in J. Foote Moore, *Judaism* 3 vols (Hendrickson, 1997), 2.267ff.

<sup>50</sup>b.*Gittin* 90b.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>m.*Gittin* 9.10; *Sifre Deut.* §269.

He grounds His halakah regarding divorce on Genesis 2:24 rather than Deuteronomy 24:1. In bringing the discussion back to the creative purpose for mankind, He once again fulfills the Law and Prophets by implementing what they had always taught. Thus, rather than pitting His own teaching as new and therefore going beyond what the Torah taught, He instead seeks to implement the true heart of the Torah, displacing the traditions which had usurped the Torah's effectiveness and spiritual dynamic.

#### *Oaths and Vows (Matthew 5:33ff)*

By many authorities, the misuse of vows by ancient Israel is well attested. Outrageous vows ("may I lose my sons if . . ."; "may I not see the comfort [of the Messianic age] if . . ." <sup>53</sup>) were common. This problem prompted some of the Sages to make strong statements against false or hasty vows. After a typical Talmudic story of a person who swears and suffers, the Sages conclude, "Be you guilty or innocent, do not swear." <sup>54</sup> In like manner we read,

Be careful with vows, and not hasty with them, for he who is hasty with vows will end by false swearing (מועל בשבועית), and he who swears falsely, denies me, and will never be forgiven. <sup>55</sup>

One need only read the Mishnah tractate *Nedarim* to begin to understand the tangle of halakah which the Sages had created in attempting to keep the people from hasty vows. So involved were the laws that they could be twisted and used to one's sinful advantage. The misuse of *korban* is what prompted Yeshua's rebuke in Matthew 23, and is clearly attested in the primary sources. Thus, a system of oath-taking which had become useless as to righteousness had lost its value. Note carefully that Yeshua prohibits swearing *by* things, whether by heaven or earth, Jerusalem or the altar or one's head. The matter of whether a vow was valid and binding depended, in great measure, by what the vow had been attached to, and many other factors. In such a tangle of halakah, Yeshua instructed His followers to make their vows simple and honest: "yes, yes" or "no, no".

But Yeshua is not alone in such a stance. In b.*Bava Metzia* 49a we read "Let your nay and yea be both *zedek*" . R. Huna said, "The yea of the righteous is a yea; their no is a no." <sup>56</sup> According to Montefiore, "Yes, yes and no, no may be regarded as equivalent to oaths." <sup>57</sup> He bases this upon Rabbinic statements: R. Elazar said, "Yea is an oath, and nay is an oath": Raba said, "But only then if yea and nay are said twice." <sup>58</sup> According to Mechilta, the Israelites answered "Yea, yea and nay, nay to the commands at Sinai." <sup>59</sup>

It seems very possible that what Yeshua demands in this case is a complete avoiding of oaths or vows which required a person to bend to the hopeless web of

<sup>53</sup>b. *Shabbat* 116a; b. *Bava Metzia* 85a; b. *Makkot* 5b.

<sup>54</sup>j. *Shevuot* vi. §6, 37a. Quoted from Montefiore, Op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>55</sup>*Tanchuma* B.1; b. *Mattot* 79a.

<sup>56</sup>Midrash Rabbah Ruth vii. §6, on 3.18.

<sup>57</sup>Montefiore, Op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>58</sup>b. *Shavuot* 36a.

<sup>59</sup>*Mechilta* on Exodus, 20:1,2.



regulations governing vows in the 1st Century. It was not necessary to take a vow by some object, region, or person. But nothing in the written Torah required the Nazarite vow, for example, *to include a mention of a "witness". Such a vow could be strictly between a man and God.* The Rabbinic "fences" surrounding vows, however, is yet another example of how the traditions of the elders had set aside the Law of God, i.e., made it practically impossible to "keep". Yeshua's intention was to fulfill the Law by making it possible for God's people to implement it.

*Eye for an Eye (Matthew 5:38ff)*

Once again, Yeshua does not introduce something new, but puts what would have been considered either a light precept or one which went beyond the strict letter of the Law on equal par with a recognized weighty law. Justice depends upon equitable retribution to the evil doer. But in a fallen world mercy and forgiveness must likewise be extended or justice becomes harsh, even cruel.

The Sages clearly enjoin mercy and kindness upon the nation of Israel. "He who is yielding—who ignores a slight or a wrong—has all his sins forgiven him."<sup>60</sup> In another place we read:

If your fellows call you an ass, put the saddle on your shoulders.<sup>61</sup>

As the people say, If some one says, Your ears are asses' ears, give no heed; if two say it, get you a halter<sup>62</sup>

"Both the Mishnah and Mekhilta reject any literal interpretation of 'eye for eye' and lay down that the wrongdoer has to pay damages."<sup>63</sup> Significant for our study, however, is the obvious fact that in quoting Exodus 21, Yeshua begins with "eye for eye" and leaves off the opening "life for life". Clearly, the Rabbinic stance was to administer retaliation in kind for the taking of a life. The other measures, however, were not on the basis of retaliation but on equivalent valuation for damages rendered. Thus, the Rabbinic mind on the matter of *lex talionis* was moving in the direction of mercy and forbearance.<sup>64</sup> Yeshua, on the basis of His understanding of God's mercy, champions this emphasis with a fervor.

It is also noteworthy that the examples which Yeshua brings to His teaching do not include any form of mutilation. "Smiting on the cheek" is clearly an indication of personal insult, while the other two examples (suing for a coat, request for companionship on a journey) are matters of personal loss (in the first case, of a material possession, and in the second, of time, i.e., wage earning ability). Furthermore, the loss of material possessions did not require legal action, though such was just. And in the request to accompany on a journey, the issue is a

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<sup>60</sup>b.Yoma 23a.

<sup>61</sup>b. Bava Kamma 92a.

<sup>62</sup>Genesis Rabbah xlv. 7, on xvi. 9.

<sup>63</sup>David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1956), p. 255.

<sup>64</sup>It is true that there are several examples in the Rabbinic literature which might be brought forward as examples of pure retaliation, but these regard Sadduceans, and it does not appear that Yeshua has this group in mind during His discourse in Matthew 5. For a discussion of these, see Daube, *Op. cit.*, pp. 255-56.

willingness to give up something not yet attained (wages which those hours while on a journey would otherwise accrue.) Yeshua, then, is teaching His disciples to favor the life of kindness and mercy, and to entrust themselves to the care of the Father Who would meet all their needs. This teaching is not foreign to the general tenor of Rabbinic literature.<sup>65</sup>

The examples of teaching by the Sages which enjoin the disciple to a life of kindness and mercy are numerous. Perhaps Montefiore summarizes best when he writes:

... it will not do to maintain that Jesus' spirit of forbearance, of gentleness, of goodness, of charity, is wholly opposed to the teaching of the Rabbis. It is the same spirit which inspired the best teaching of the Rabbis, carried to an extreme; couched in vivid and hyperbolic language, expressed with intense earnestness, enthusiasm, and conviction, as central features of the teaching as a whole. The Rabbis taught that a man must be forbearing; that he must not stand upon his rights; that not to reply to reviling and insult was the highest virtue; that to give freely was a duty. Jesus teaches the same things with burning passion, and as part of a rounded whole of self-sacrifice and devotion.<sup>66</sup>

### *Summary*

In this paper I have attempted to show (1) that πληρόω and the Hebrew מִלֵּא which it most often translates in the Lxx can have the meaning “confirm” or “implement”. In the phrase מִלֵּא אֶת הַדְּבָרִים “fill the words” the meaning is “to make actual what was previously spoken.” This meaning for πληρόω is seen as well in the parallel text, Matthew 3:15, of Yeshua's statement to John at His baptism, “it is necessary to fulfill all righteousness.” (2) This sense of “fulfill” also fits the structure of the opening statement in Yeshua's sermon, since the verb ποιέω is used to demonstrate what πληρόω entails. (3) The larger context of the antithetical statements of Yeshua flow from the opening statement on the enduring nature of the Law and Prophets. In these statements Yeshua takes what might have been considered a light commandment or precept, i.e., what one thinks or believes in one's heart, and puts it on an equal level with those commandments which were generally recognized as weighty. The emphasis He gives is strong and passionate, but not innovative in terms of the current rabbinical debates. He therefore does not introduce a teaching which is entirely antithetical to His community, but urges them to a way of life which takes the word of God seriously and seeks to please Him by obeying from the heart. In so doing, He stresses the sacred nature of all of God's precepts, and enjoins these upon His disciples. Thus, He establishes the Law and Prophets just as He stated—He teaches the true, spiritual nature of the Torah .

<sup>65</sup>Daube, pp. 263-64 notes that there were changes in the evolving Rabbinic discussion on compensation for insult, and that the halakah was in flux during the 1st Century. That it eventually moved closer to retaliation on the basis of “her hand shall be cut off” does not alter the fact that the earliest discernible Rabbinical stance was that of compensation. Daube's conclusion is, “At any rate, the fact that this provision is introduced from outside furnishes strong support for the second alternative, (i.e., compensation), for the view that when the author of the utterance we find in Matthew started from ‘an eye for an eye’ as demanding compensation in the case of insult, he was in agreement with the then prevailing Rabbinic law.” Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Montefiore, Op. cit., p. 52.