

House of David School of Biblical Studies
Q16 – Matthew 5:17

Introduction

This study is a re-examination of Matthew 5:17. Some might ask why we are doing this since pretty much every possible position has been more than abundantly proposed.

For us, the motivation is clear. It seems that no one connects all the dots. In other words, the research we have read seems to draw conclusions without consistent methodologies or a thorough consideration of all pertinent data. For this reason, we have embarked on this study.

Before we begin, it might benefit us to list some of the questions that need to be addressed.

1. What impact does it have to recognize that these words were not originally said in English?
2. What role does the context of the section and historical evidence play in comprehending what the original writer wanted his audience to understand?
3. Is ‘fulfillment’ in the sense of ‘complete, terminate’ the only meaning of the Hebrew word מְלֵא **#4390** ‘malei’ translated into Greek by the word πληρωω ‘pleroo’?
4. Is Klyne Snodgrass correct when he says that Matthew has determined that the most important part of Jesus ministry is his teaching on the proper understanding of God’s law?
5. What is Dr. Brad Young asking when he writes, “Was the Torah ‘fulfilled’ in such a way as to undermine its practical meaning?”
6. How important is the use of the active/passive voice of the Greek πληρωω ‘pleroo’ in Matthew’s gospel?
7. Why does Kittel (TDNT) say “The one who put Matthew 5:17 into Greek [from a Hebraic/Aramaic original] found in πληρώσαι ‘plerwsai’, not στησαι ‘stesai’, the correct term for what was meant?”

With these questions in mind, let us allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth.

This is a Q16 study examining the English word fulfil as found in Matthew 5:17, translated from the Greek πληρώσαι.

KJV Matthew 5:17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to **fulfil**.

GNT Matthew 5:17 Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι.

Q1. What is the type of text?

Teaching (of Christ). During this time period there were many 'sages' who formed a small group of disciples and went about teaching the common people what they thought was God's original intent concerning the commandments.

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Q2. What appears to be the surrounding context of the section (primary as opposed to secondary)?

Beginning at verse 21, Christ embarks on a section (through chapter 7) where he clarifies the true understanding of the stated legal material restoring the original meaning intended by God.

Q3. Who were these words spoken to and what would they have understood in these words conceptually, using a first century Hebraic dictionary? (Take into consideration the ‘Defined Biblical Terms’ as understood in First Century Mainstream Palestinian Judaism)

(a) His disciples and the multitude that were interested in hearing his spin on things.

(b) At 4:17, we learn that in Galilee he began his preaching ministry instructing the people to ‘repent’. At 4:23, we learn he taught in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom. In addition, he healed all manner of sickness and disease among the people.

At 4:24, it mentions that the news of his teaching and healing went throughout all Syria.

The first century Jewish concept of ‘*repentance*’ (see next paragraph) enjoins the listener to turn from sin and come back under the instructions of the Torah. With this in mind, the first half of the statement that he came not to abolish the law and the prophets would tell them that he did not come to annul the laws of God, depriving them of their force. The second half of the statement, being preceded by the contrast word ‘but’, would tell them he intended to do the opposite, that is, ‘not annul’ them.

(Below is taken from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*)

Repentance: 2. To Repent--"to Turn" or "Return":

It is used extensively by the prophets, and makes prominent the idea of a radical change in one's attitude toward sin (transgression of the law/Torah) and God. It implies a conscious, moral separation, and a personal decision to forsake sin and to re-enter into fellowship with God. It is employed extensively with reference to man's turning away from sin to righteousness.

Q4. Does the phrase that contains the word(s) also have a figure of speech meaning, metaphorical use, and/or an ellipsis?

Yes.

To interpret incorrectly (abolish/annul), to interpret correctly (fulfill), as concerning how God originally intended for His commandments to be obeyed, or carried out. From *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* by Dr. David Flusser [Hebrew University], pp. 378-379, we read:

These were originally two terms used in Jewish biblical exegesis. According to the rabbinic terminology the two terms are used in connection with a right or false interpretation of a biblical verse: if it is interpreted wrongly, you ‘abolish’, make void the word of the Law; if you succeed to find the original meaning of the verse, you ‘fulfill’ or establish it.

See also footnote 4 and especially footnote 5 where Dr. Flusser relates that the true solution was found by F.A. Albright and C.S. Mann in *Matthew, The Anchor Bible*, New York, 1971, pp. 58-59. The same explanation is found in the book *Paul, The Jewish Theologian* by Dr. Brad Young, p. 64; Many other authors have found this same ‘figure of speech’ meaning when examining it from a historical contextual perspective including Dr. James Trimm in *The Semitic Origin of the New Testament*, p. 24.

Concerning Figures of speech, we must remember it is ‘a designed and legitimate departure from the

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laws of language, in order to emphasize what is said'. See also 'Figures of Speech' by E.W. Bullinger, quoted from Appendix 6 in The Companion Bible, at the end of this paper.

Q5. Apply each meaning of the primary word(s) and observe the effect it has on the immediate context.

A) Do not think that I have come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) them but to **fill them up**.

Observation: This does not fit because it does not answer how the law and the prophets are filled.

B) Do not think that I have come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) them but to **finish them, bringing them to an end**.

Observation: This does not appear to be the best fit for the following reason: From the perspective of the relationship, doing away with them and bringing them to an end is an agreement, not a contrast.

C) Do not think that I have come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) them but to **give true meaning to them**.

Observation: This fits because of two reasons: 1) He clearly demonstrates this beginning at verse 22 with eight examples and 2) It agrees with the relationship required by the contrast when abolish is understood as a figure of speech.

D) Do not think that I have come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish (*do away with, annul, abolish*) them but to **perform them correctly**.

Observation: This does not appear to be the best fit for the following reason: From the perspective of the relationship, how does obeying them as they were originally intended to be performed contrast with doing away with them altogether? Would not a better contrast then be "I have not come to perform them incorrectly. . .?", which is not contained in the word translated 'abolish.'

Conclusion:

Best choice based on just the context of this individual verse initially appears to be C.

Q6. Determine the pivotal word/words in the verse. Do the word/words in Greek have more than one significantly different literal meaning?

Yes

Friberg gives 4

1-make full, fill up completely; 2-complete, finish, reach an end; 3-give true meaning to; 4-carry out, perform the will of God.

USB gives 4

1-make come true, bring about; 2-fill, make full, bring to completion; 3-complete, accomplish, finish; 4-make fully known, proclaim fully.

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Louw-Nida gives 7

1-fill; 2-make complete; 3-finish; 4-provide fully; 5-proclaim completely; 6-give true meaning; 7-cause to happen.

Liddell & Scott gives 3

1-to fill full; 2-to make full or complete; 3-pay in full.

Strongs gives 6

1-to fill full; 2-to make complete; 3-to carry through to the end; 4-to perform, execute; 5-to bring to pass, ratify; 6-to cause God's will (as made known in the law) to be obeyed as it should be.

Robertsons Word Pictures

Fulfil is to fill full. 'He came to fill the law, to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold' (McNeile).

Conclusions: 1-fill up; 2-finish, reach an end; 3-give true meaning; 4-perform the will of God.

Q7. How do other versions translate this verse and what observations are there?

KJV,NIV,NASB,RSV,Youngs Literal

destroy/abolish, throw down; fulfil

They all basically say the same thing.

The following are from the (late) Hebrew versions of Matthew in existence.

See *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* by George Howard, pp. 166-168

Gemara (Babylonian Talmud) Shabbat 116b:

Not to curtail the Torah of Moses have I come, nor to add onto the Torah of Moses have I come.

Nestor:

I have not come to pull down or subtract a saying from the Torah of Moses or the Prophets.

Rome #53:

Do not think that I came to uproot the Torah or the Prophets

Nizzahon Vetus #71:

I didn't come to cancel the Torah of Moses or the oral-sayings of the Prophets, but rather to reconcile them

Nizzahon Vetus #157:

I didn't come to reduce the Torah of Moses

Nizzahon Vetus #221:

I didn't come to uproot the Torah of Moses nor the oral-sayings of the Prophets.

Shem-Tob (EB):

Don't think that I came to violate Torah but rather to reconcile it in truth.

DuTillet:

This is the only Hebrew version to support the Hebrew word מַלֵּא (millei).

Note: In Shem-Tob (comment after 6:1):

In all these words not to add a word to the words of the law nor to subtract any.

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Q8. Discuss how this word is used in the rest of this book, by this author (if he wrote other books), the New Testament as a whole, the OT Greek (LXX), and the Greek Classics?

Examining the Greek words in Matthew that have as their root πληρωω ‘pleroo’, there are 17. Matt. 1:22, 2:15, 2:17, 2:23, 3:15, 4:14, 5:17, 8:17, 12:17, 13:14, 13:35, 13:48, 21:4, 23:32, 26:54, 26:56, 27:9. Of these, the passive voice is found 14 times and the active voice 3. Concerning the prophecy fulfillment quotation formula found in Matthew, there are 13. In each case, the Greek word ‘πληρωω’ is found in the passive voice. The 14th occurrence refers to a net that had been cast into the sea and filled.

On the other hand, 5:17 contains the active voice. It would seem to follow that if the author intended a prophecy-fulfillment meaning, the passive voice would have been used.

So here we see that Matthew chose not to use the accepted Greek word for ‘establish or confirm’, στησαι ‘stesai’, but instead uses the word that was generally known to mean ‘complete a measure’. In addition, he chose to distance himself from the prophecy-fulfillment concept by using the active voice. This still leaves us with some questions:

1. The context supports ‘establish or confirm’ but
2. The Greek word used carries a meaning that is more in line with filling or completing.
3. The active voice removes it from prophecy-fulfillment consideration

Moving on, we find this word in the New Testament in the exact form as in 5:17 in Colossians 1:25.

KJV Colossians 1:25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil [πληρώσαι] the word of God. Once again this is the active voice.

Commentary from Robertson’s Word Pictures on this passage

To fulfil the word of God (πληρώσαι του λογον του θεου). First aorist active infinitive of purpose (πληρωω), a fine phrase for a God-called preacher, to fill full or to give full scope to the Word of God.

Now we will examine the LXX (Greek OT).

The Hebrew word **קִוַּמ** quwm #6965 which means establish or confirm is never translated into the Greek as πληρωω. Instead, πληρωω is usually translated from the Hebrew word **מָלֵא** #4390 malei, which typically means fill or fulfill. However, there is one verse that may help us.

KJV 1 Kings 1:14 Behold, while thou yet talkest there with the king, I also will come in after thee, and **confirm** thy words.

LXT 1 Kings 1:14 καὶ ἰδοὺ ἔτι λαλούσης σου ἐκεῖ μετὰ τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ἐγὼ εἰσελεύσομαι ὀπίσω σου καὶ πληρωσω τοὺς λόγους σου (LXT is the BibleWorks Software abbreviation for the LXX Septuaginta edited by Alfred Rahlfs, Copyright (c) 1935, Copyright © 1998 BibleWorks, LLC.)

Here we have the same Greek word (as in Matthew 5:17) translated from the Hebrew (**Strongs #4390**

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malei). This Hebrew word is translated fill 107, full 48, fulfil 28, consecrate 15, etc., and here it is translated ‘confirm’. So in a sense, applying this ‘translation’ to the verse in Matthew 5:17, one could say that Christ came to ‘fully confirm’ that which is true concerning God’s word.

The following is another perspective concerning this Greek word. It comes from Dr. Brad Young, who is a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Theology at Oral Roberts University serving as Associate Professor of Judaic-Christian Studies. This excerpt comes from his book, *Paul, the Jewish Theologian*, pp. 62-66.

He begins his discussion on the Greek word translated ‘fulfil’ with this question: “Was the Jewish Torah fulfilled by Jesus in such a way as to undermine its practical meaning?” Dr. Young asks this question:

“How can one observe God’s law if one does not comprehend what it requires?”

Later, he goes on to say that

“If one misunderstands the proper meaning of Torah, one may not obey the Lord’s will and therefore will cancel the law. Hence, a person may abolish Torah by misconstruing the divine revelation. On the other hand, when one understands the proper meaning, one can obey God’s will and therefore fulfil Torah.”

He next moves on to Paul’s letter to the Romans, at 3:31 to show an interesting relationship. He begins by adding a statement from his professor at Hebrew University, Dr. David Flusser.

[It] has [been] observed that Paul is very close to the spirit of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:17 when the apostle declares, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” Romans 3:31 *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, pp. 494-507.

Then he concludes his observations about ‘establishing’ the law. He writes:

The word *uphold* translates the Greek term *histemi* ‘to stand’ which in Hebrew is equivalent to *kiyem*, ‘cause to stand’. The New English Bible better captures the essence of the idea by translating *histemi* ‘to place on firmer footing’. Paul is saying literally that his message strengthens the true meaning of Torah.

If we apply the root meaning of the Hebrew word here in an expanded translation of this verse, we would get the following:

Romans 3:31 Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we place it [the law] on a firmer footing.

An in depth discussion on Matthew 5:17 and its relationship to Romans 3:31 and 10:4 (Christ is the end/goal of the law [Torah]) is beyond the scope of this study but see the exhaustive work of Clyde Thomas Rhyme in *Faith Establishes the Law: A Study on the Continuity between Judaism and Christianity, Romans 3:31*. We will be covering these verses in a future Q16 study.

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Q9. What do the other key words mean (on their face)?

1. destroy/abolish (καταλῦσαι)

From the basic sense *put down, loosen, destroy*.

Figuratively, as invalidating an institution such as law or sacrifice *do away with, annul, abolish*.

2. law (νομον)

The first five books of the OT, the Mosaic system of legislation as revealing the divine will (the Torah) *the law (of Moses)*.

3. prophets (προφητας)

The 2nd division of the OT, *the prophetic books*.

Q10. Can any relationships be determined between the key word(s) and/or phrase(s) such as contrast, condition, comparison, result, purpose, etc?

Yes. *Contrast* in the word ‘but’.

Q11. What situation, event, statement, or argument possibly led up to this passage or resulted from this passage?

(a) For him to respond with this statement (abolish the law and the prophets), perhaps someone thought, because his teaching was not like that of the scribes, that he was going to annul them. It must be noted here that concerning annulling the prophets, he certainly would not attempt to annul the prophecies that identified who he was, so with the separation of the ‘law’ and the ‘prophets’, it would appear that in this is meant the ethical requirements of the prophets. Therefore, he was making his position clear that he was not planning to annul either.

A hint as to why his words might have been seen as ‘destroying’ the Torah may possibly come from an understanding of what teachers were ‘supposed’ to do.

In the book *Rabbi Akiba’s Messiah: The Origins of Rabbinic Authority* by Daniel Gruber, p. 109, he states:

According to the tradition, a tradition that cannot be attributed cannot be *halakha* (the way to walk, that is, the proper way to live, the correct interpretation of what God requires for righteous living).

Then he quotes an event which demonstrates what may have happened here.

“Hillel himself had a discussion with other teachers for a whole day, and until he thought of saying that he had been taught so by his teachers, he was not believed.”

Since he never quoted another sage’s support for his interpretation, some may have understood this as ‘destroying’ or ‘interpreting the Law incorrectly’.

(b) As Christ continued teaching, he would state something they could identify with and then would

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interpret what the deeper/correct meaning was. This goes on through chapter 7. More could be said here but most will concur that in these chapters he is correcting mis-interpretations.

Q12. Since “God does nothing except it is revealed to His prophets first” (Amos 3:7), are there any OT prophecies that can give any insight to the subject being discussed?

In Isaiah 42:21, it states “The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will magnify the law (Torah), and make *it* honourable.” From this Messianic Prophecy, it appears to state that the coming Messiah would magnify the Torah, that is, make its’ meanings more clear.

Q13. Are there any old Hebraic writings including Rabbahs, Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls), the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, Sibylline Oracles, Rabbinic, and/or Early Church Fathers writings (in the first six centuries) that reflect on this passage?

The concept of the Messiah coming to correct errors in interpretation of the Torah was not new. From the Midrash Rabbah of Genesis 49:11-12, we read: He washeth his garments in wine, intimates that he [the Messiah] will compose for them words of Torah (1) and his vesture in the blood of grapes that he will restore to them their errors (2).

- (1) Propound new meanings and interpretations of the Torah
- (2) He will point out where they have misunderstood the Torah

As quoted in Messiah, Volume I, Avi Ben Mordichai, p. 188.

Q14. What is the history of the interpretation of this passage?

Currently, the English word ‘fulfil’ in this passage has come to mean ‘cessation of obligation’. But has that been the case from the beginning? Lets go back to the history of the Early Church.

We begin in the 2nd century with Marcion. In the year 140, Marcion created the first New Testament. Concerning this passage, he reversed some of the words. His translation said: “*Think not that I have come to fulfill the Law. I have not come to **fulfill** it, but to **abolish** it*”. Now this reversal begs the question: If the original wording already meant (and was understood by the 2nd century believers to be) ‘cessation of obligation’, why did Marcion feel the need to invert the order of the clauses? E.C. Blackman, in his work *Marcion and His Influence*, answers:

“undoubtedly adopted Matthew 5:17, after inverting the order of the clauses so as to give exactly an **opposite** sense”. P. 48 (Emphasis mine).

An ‘opposite sense’ would clearly show that ‘cessation of obligation’ was not the understood meaning in the 2nd Century. Marcion was eventually labeled a heretic and cast out of the church for his translation effort (among other things). But has the ‘spirit of Marcion’ continued to haunt us? In other words, if this passage was understood by the believers of his day as one that clearly demonstrated that the ‘Law’ was abolished, why the need to invert the clauses?

So how did we get from there to here? Consider the following which represents traditional Christian

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teaching (Marcion notwithstanding):

1. The Greek word πληρῶσαι is translated most of the time by the English fulfill, fill full, complete, to fill up, to satisfy, to pay in full.
2. The Greek word στησαι is translated most of the time by the English establish, confirm, cause to stand.
3. The Hebrew word קָוַם quwm #6965 which means establish or confirm is never translated into the Greek as πληρωω.
4. The Hebrew word מָלֵא malei, which typically means fill or fulfill, is usually translated into the Greek πληρωω.

Let us add Kittel (TDNT) to this mix. In D. 2. a. (under the heading πληρωῶ), he puts in plain words that ‘to establish or confirm by obedience’ and ‘to complete a measure’ are two different ideas. Then in D. 2. b., he starts out by saying that “The meaning of πληρωω in Matthew 5:17 cannot be determined simply by the contrast with καταλῦσαι in the sense of ‘to do away’, ‘to set aside’.” Then he makes this statement: “The one who put Matthew 5:17 into Greek [from a Hebraic/Aramaic original] found in πληρῶσαι, not στησαι the correct term for what was meant.” This is a very strong statement.

Currently, we have the four material facts presented just above plus Kittel’s “correct” insight. Then, traditional Christian teaching continues by lessening the impact of the following three points.

5. Context of Matthew chapters 5-7: (Don’t put too much emphasis here!)
6. The historical beliefs of the Christians in the Asian Churches (established by Paul) through the end of the 2nd century are a deviation from the truth.
7. The active/passive voice pattern for prophecy-fulfillment is of little or no consequence.

With the above in place, how would traditional Christian reasoning go?

The meaning of πληρῶσαι for the most part is to fill full, complete, to fill up, to satisfy, to pay in full. Anything that is full or filled up cannot contain more. Anything paid in full requires no more payments. Anything that has run its course does not continue (if it continues, it has not run its course or been fulfilled). If a promise or other obligation has been fulfilled, it is satisfied or appeased and no additional attention is required. Again, if additional payment is required or the obligation continues, then it cannot in any context have been fulfilled.

I see a particular danger in declaring that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets but we are still obligated to adhere to them. One of the greatest purposes of the Law and Prophets is to show the need for Jesus to die for the sins of mankind. If he fulfilled that requirement, but ‘fulfill’ does not mean the requirements are satisfied and no longer apply, then must we not conclude that Jesus’ sacrifice was not applicable to us and that we must still die for our own sins? That clearly contradicts scripture.

I don’t think we can assume ‘fulfill’ sometimes means the end of obligation, but can sometimes imply a continuing obligation. **I see nothing in the definition of ‘πληρῶσαι’ that suggests a continuing obligation;** quite the opposite.

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With that established, a more dynamic/expanded translation of Matthew is then given. It goes like this:

New Paraphrase -> Matthew 5:17 “Do not think that I have come **to annul the laws of God, depriving them of any force**: I am not come to do that, but to **bring about the cessation of obligation to obey them.**”

However, does this not raise the question: How is the cessation of obligation to obey them (the laws of God) not the same as annulling the laws of God, depriving them of any force?

Q15. Is there any additional light shed from a grammatical analysis of the Greek parts of speech or the reverse engineering/reconstruction of the Greek back into Hebrew/Aramaic?

The following is an excerpt of an article written by Dr. David Biven for the Jerusalem Perspective. (© Copyright 1987-2002 Jerusalem Perspective)

In Israel, the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels is creating a Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary. This work is known as the *Reconstructed Hebrew Life of Jesus*. They plan on presenting the following concerning passages in the three synoptic Gospels:

- **The Greek** (probably MT but they did not say)
- **The Literal Translation of the Greek**
- **The Hebrew Reconstruction**
- **The Literal Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction**
- **The Plain English Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction**
- **The Dynamic Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction**

The Greek and Literal Translation can be found at the start of this paper.

Their Hebrew Reconstruction (using English letters) is:

al taḥshevu shebati levatel et ha-torah oh et ha-nevi'im; lo bati levatel ki im lekayem.

Their Literal Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction is:

“Do not think that I have come to cancel the Torah [the five books of Moses] and the Prophets [the second section of the Hebrew canon]. I have not come to cancel but to sustain”.

Their Plain English Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction is

“Do not think that I have come to weaken the Torah and the Prophets. I have not come to weaken them but to strengthen them”.

Their Dynamic Translation of the Hebrew Reconstruction is

“Do not suppose that I have any intention of undermining Scripture by misinterpreting it. My purpose is to establish and maintain the knowledge and observance of God’s Word, not undermine it”.

After giving these, the author goes into a discussion of the different phrases of the verse. Of interesting note is the discussion about the word translated ‘destroy’ and ‘fulfil’.

Destroy the Law

Katalusai ton nomon

Levateḥ et ha-Torah

The translators of the King James Version rendered this phrase ‘destroy the law’. However,

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levatel, (literally ‘cancel’), the probable Hebrew equivalent of the Greek verb translated ‘destroy’, was used in Jesus’ day as a technical term in scholarly debate.

When a sage felt that a colleague had misinterpreted a passage of Scripture, he would say, ‘You are canceling the Torah!’ In other words, “You are so misinterpreting Scripture that you are negating or canceling part of it.” Needless to say, in most cases his colleague strongly disagreed. What was ‘canceling’ the Torah for one rabbi was ‘fulfilling’ it for another

What one encounters in Matthew 5:17 is a rabbinic controversy. Someone had apparently accused Jesus of ‘canceling’ the Torah. He was being charged with so misinterpreting the Scriptures as to nullify their intent.

Fulfill the Law

Plehrosai ton nomon

Lekayem et haTorah

The probable Hebrew equivalent of the Greek verb translated ‘fulfill’ is *lekayem*. In this period it was usually the antonym for *levatel* and used in the sense of ‘preserve or sustain’. Here, as a rabbinic technical term, it means, ‘to sustain by properly interpreting’.

Dr. Biven’s conclusion: From English versions of the New Testament one might get the impression that Jesus was being accused of intending to abolish or replace the Torah. However, when Matthew 5:17 is placed in its Hebraic context, one sees that this is simply a typical rabbinic controversy.

Q16. What have the commentators and scholars written about this passage?

1. The Greatest Texts of the Bible by James Hastings (1914) p. 117

“It is not the Law or the Prophets that Jesus proposes to abolish, but the traditional misinterpretations of these authorities.” (Quote of A. Plummer)

“The πληρῶσαι of the law and the prophets is their fulfillment by the re-establishment of their *absolute* meaning, so that now nothing more is wanting to what they ought to be in accordance with the Divine ideas which lie at the foundation of their commands.” (Quote of H. A.W. Meyer)

2. The Broadman Bible Commentary of the Bible (1969) p. 107

“By fulfillment is meant not just the carrying out of predictions but the accomplishment of the intention of the Law and the Prophets. In contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus brought out the true and deeper meaning of the Law, and he actually lived up to its intention.”

3. The Gospel According to Matthew, a Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical Commentary by John Peter Lange (1865) p. 109.

“But to fulfil ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι - The expression is differently interpreted, as meaning a) actually to fulfil; b) complete doctrinally, to interpret more fully, to perfect, *i. e.*, to bring out its spiritual meaning; c) combining the two views: to make perfect as doctrine, and to exhibit perfectly in the life.”

4. The Anchor Bible by F. A. Albright and C. S. Mann (1971) p. 58

“Much hangs on the meaning of the verb (to fulfil). The verb can and frequently does convey the meaning of ‘to clarify the true meaning of’ something. Certainly, it can be argued that what Jesus is doing in this legal material of Matt v-vii is trying to restore the original meaning of the Law where this

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seemed to be obscured by the accretions of commentary.”

5. A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature by Baur, Arnat, Gingrich (BAG)

“In the broadest sense and in contrast to καταλῦσαι; depending on how one prefers to interpret the context, πληρῶσαι is understood here either as *fulfill*=do, carry out, or as *bring to full expression*=show it forth in its true meaning, or as *fill up*=complete.”

6. The Gospel According to S. Matthew by Bertram Thomas Den Smith (1927) p. 76

“It is not obvious at first sight what Christ means by 'fulfilling (πληρῶσαι) the Law.' He does not mean taking the written Law as it stands, and literally obeying it. That is what He condemns, not as wrong, but as wholly inadequate. He means rather, starting with it as it stands, and bringing it on to completeness; working out the spirit of it; getting at the comprehensive principles which underlie the narrowness of the letter. These the Messiah sets forth as the essence of the revelation made by God through the Law and the Prophets. Through them He has revealed His will, and it is impossible that His Son should attempt to pull down or undo this revelation of the Father's will.”

7. Matthew 5:17-20 Form/Structure/Setting, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33A, 1993, pp. 103-105

“Jesus’ corrections of the mistaken understandings involve the presentation of the true meaning of the Torah, not its cancellation as might at first seem to be the case.”

“One other related saying which refers to the passing away of heaven and earth in contrast to the permanence of Jesus’ words, occur in verbatim agreement in all three Synoptics (Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).” (Emphasis mine)

“The meaning in this instance cannot be determined by word study alone but must be established from the context and in particular must be consonant with the statement of v. 18.”

(Emphasis mine)

8. Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33A, 1993, pp. 104-107

“‘Do not think that I came’ presupposes the existence of the opinion that is denied.”

“Here it is fair to assume that Jesus’ sovereign interpretation of the law was so out of step with contemporary interpretation that it seemed to many that Jesus was going against the law.”

“Jesus therefore denies that he has come to cancel or to do away with the law or the prophets.”

“It is best to understand πληρῶσαι here as ‘fulfil’ in the sense of ‘bring to its intended meaning’. This view is consonant with the expectation that the Messiah would not only preserve the Torah but also bring about its meaning in a definitive manner (see Davies, Settings, 161-72).”

“In other words, the law, as interpreted by Jesus, will remain valid until the close of this age.”

9. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 1993, pp. 46-47.

“Our starting point for uncovering Matthew’s understanding of the passage must be the context in which he has placed it. It serves as a preface to the antitheses (vv. 21-48), which present Jesus as the God-authorized interpreter of the law.”

“The central issue in the exegesis of verse 17 is the meaning of πληρῶσαι (‘fulfill’). It has been argued that, since Matthew regularly uses this verb with respect to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (1:22, etc.) and because the verse explicitly includes ‘the prophets’, the verb is used here in a salvation-historical way (‘I am the fulfillment of what is prophesied in the law and the prophets’). This

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proposal, however, ignores the immediate context, which is concerned with the law and its proper observance.”

(The summation of the second point is mine). The second point which is discussed is that ‘fulfil’ could mean obey, as for example, in Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will be (obeying) fulfilling the law of Christ.” However, this requires us to translate ‘destroy’ as ‘disobey’, or ‘transgress’. It is unlikely that anyone thought that Jesus’ mission was intentional disobedience to as many laws as possible.

Third point. “If καταλῦσαι means ‘abrogate’, however, it is probable that πληρῶσαι means ‘establish’ or ‘confirm’.” He then goes on to describe the example found in 1 Kings 1:14, already examined above.

He concludes by saying: “Accordingly, Matt. 5:17 anticipates a misunderstanding of the antitheses (vv. 21-48) as utterances abrogating laws found in the Mosaic code. We can paraphrase verse 17:

‘Do not suppose that my mission is to abrogate the law or the prophets’ interpretation of the law; my mission is not to abrogate but rather to confirm the law and the prophets by interpreting Scripture in terms of God’s ultimate will.’”

10. The International Critical Commentary (1907) pp. 45-46

“The meaning of the words is clear. Christ did not come to overthrow the authority of the Mosaic Law, which was to be eternally binding upon the hearts and consciences of men. So long as the world lasted its authority was to be permanent. Commentators have exhausted their ingenuity in attempts to explain away this passage, but it’s meaning is too clear to be misunderstood.”

He concludes this section by presenting his own paraphrase:

“I came to fulfil it by emphasizing its true meaning, and as being the Messiah whom it dimly foreshadowed. (v19) So far from depreciating it, I tell you that your ‘righteousness’ must be more fundamental than the ‘righteousness’ of the scribes and Pharisees, based not upon external adherence to the letter of the law, but upon insight into the principles which underlie it.”

Other texts consulted that the reader might be interested in:

Robert Banks: “*Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*”

C.F.D. Moule: “*Fulfillment words in the New Testament: Use and Abuse*” in the *Journal of New Testament Studies* #14 (1967-68) pp. 293-320.

David E. Holwerda: “*Jesus and Israel : One Covenant or Two?*” pp. 113-145

Klyne Snodgrass: “Matthew and the Law” in *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers*, pp. 536-554

For an opposing opinion, I refer the reader to *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, by R. C. H. Lenski, 1864-1936, pp. 199-201

“When Jesus is through, the whole Old Testament will be fulfilled.”

“In view of the exposition of various commandments (v. 21 etc.), ‘fulfil’ cannot be made to mean that the work of Jesus consists in adding the true spiritual exposition to the Old Testament commandments or teachings in general.”

“To ‘fulfil’ cannot, with Luther and others, be restricted to Christ’s teaching, just because Christ teaches in this sermon. It includes all for which Christ ‘did come’.”

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And let us not forget what Kittel said before (which we quoted in Question 14). But even he closes his thought with this:

“The meaning of πληρωω cannot be deduced in the first instance from a supposed Aramaic Original; it must be determined from context.”

So here too we see the importance of context.

List any other Considerations, the Weight of Evidence Summary, Conclusion, Observances, and your Expanded “Commentary” Translation.

Points for consideration.

Nothing at this time.

Weight of Evidence Summary

1. The text is teaching - **Even**

2-3. There is more than one literal meaning (as well as a figure of speech meaning). Therefore, by rule, context must be evaluated to determine which one fits best. – **Advantage interpret correctly**

4. The context that follows this verse is clearly a lengthy example of correct interpretations of misconstrued meanings. **Advantage interpret correctly**

5. By placing the different possible definitions into the verse and evaluating the context, the one that best fits is ‘give true meaning (reveal their true intent) to them’. **Advantage interpret correctly**

6. English translations of the Greek sources did not offer any advantage to either side but the English translations of the different Hebrew Matthews in existence did. **Advantage interpret correctly**

7. There are more verses that demonstrate the word ‘fulfil’ using its literal meaning of ‘to complete’.

Advantage cessation of obligation

8-9. The key word ‘destroy’ means abolish or annul. Combined with the contrasting word ‘but’ and with the opening statement ‘Do not think I have come ’, the initial impression would be that he was not planning on annulling the law. **Advantage interpret correctly**

10. With the teaching of the need for repentance (return to Torah) taking place prior to these words and with the knowledge that the punishments that Israel had suffered in the past being caused by not observing Torah properly, the listeners would have had little tolerance for one advocating the end of Torah observance. **Advantage interpret correctly**

11. Although there is no clear Biblical record of someone questioning his teachings prior to this verse being spoken, it is entirely possible that with the many ‘traditions of the elders’ being propagated, he had already explained something to someone that was in conflict with those ‘traditions’. This could have caused this statement to be spoken. **Advantage interpret correctly**

12. It seems odd that the Messiah would come and ‘magnify’ the Torah, that is, make its meanings more clear if it was to be abolished in just a few months. **Advantage interpret correctly**

13. It is interesting to find out that there were some sages that recognized that there would be places where they might have misunderstood the Torah and thereby given an incorrect interpretation of it to others. **Advantage interpret correctly**

14. While I agree that the meanings (for the most part) favor a fulfill/complete interpretation, the

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analysis that follows is flawed when it states that if this word in this verse doesn't mean 'fulfill/complete', then the sacrifice for sin requirement has not been satisfied. Furthermore, a discussion about 'fulfill' sometimes meaning the end of obligation and sometimes not, is defective in that 1 Kings 1:14 clearly demonstrates a translation that not only doesn't mean 'fulfill', it has nothing to do with completion or the filling full of anything except the confirming of the fullness of truth in what had been previously presented by Bathsheba. See Polycrates response to Victor in 195 for additional historical evidence. **Advantage interpret correctly**

15. The conclusions found in a Hebrew reconstruction of the Greek text agree with the context of the passage as a whole. **Advantage interpret correctly**

16. While there will probably never be a 100% agreement on any theological issue in Biblical research, a scholarly consensus still carries some weight. And now, an advertisement for *The International Critical Commentary*. It has long held a special place among works on the Bible. It has sought to bring together all the relevant aids to exegesis: linguistic and textual, archaeological, historical, literary, and theological, with a comprehensiveness and quality of scholarship unmatched by any other series. This set is the standard that Scholars have used throughout the 20th century. Their conclusion, as set forth above, is crystal clear. **Advantage interpret correctly**

Conclusion

I conclude that the phrase 'interpret correctly' is the best choice for a dynamic translation of the Greek word πληρῶσαι normally translated 'fulfil' in our English Bibles.

I have concluded this because the evidence in this case is substantial and overwhelming on the side of 'interpret correctly' over 'cessation of obligation'. The problem with the 'cessation of obligation' interpretation is that the supporting evidence is simply insufficient. I must admit that I was surprised at the number of Christian Scholars that concur with that position.

Observances

In Matthew 22:40 we read: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Did he say this so that we would draw the conclusion that these two commandments were the only ones left of the 613 or is it possible that what he was intending for us to understand was that the love of God and the love of neighbor as the expressed will of God are what lies at the root of each and every commandment? Furthermore, could he have been giving us the hermeneutical key to correct interpretation, that is, true righteousness is not based upon external adherence to the letter, but upon insight into that foundational principle which underlies it.?

I think that it is interesting to note that the Talmud agrees with this and even states that Jerusalem was destroyed for not following what Christ taught:

Babylonian Talmud - Bava Mezia 30b - "*For R. Johanan said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they gave judgments therein in accordance with Biblical law. Were they then to have judged in accordance with untrained arbitrators? But say thus: **because they based their judgments [strictly]***

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upon Biblical law, and did not go beyond the requirements [letter] of the law”.

Then what say ye?

My [Expanded] Commentary Translation

Do not suppose that I have any intention of undermining the Torah and the Prophets by misinterpreting them. My purpose is rather to place them on a firmer footing by interpreting them correctly in terms of God’s ultimate will as He originally intended for His commandments to be obeyed.

Figures of Speech (Quoted from Appendix 6 in The Companion Bible)

I believe Dr. Bullinger states it quite well when he says:

A “Figure of speech” relates to the *form* in which the words are used. It consists in the fact that a word or words are used out of their ordinary sense, or place, or manner, for the purpose of attracting our attention to what is thus said. A Figure of speech is a designed and legitimate departure from the laws of language, in order to emphasize what is said. Hence in such Figures we have the Holy Spirit’s own marking, so to speak, of His own words.

This peculiar form or unusual manner may not be true, or so true, to the *literal* meaning of the words; but it is more true to their *real* sense, and truer to the truth.

Figures are never used but for the sake of emphasis. They can never, therefore, be ignored. Ignorance of Figures of speech has led to the grossest errors, which have been caused either from taking literally what is figurative, or from taking figuratively what is literal.

Closing

I think it is fair to say that there will be those who, for different reasons, will not like the conclusion I have reached. So my message to you is, “Please present your evidence that you think can overturn this verdict so that I might examine it and correct my errors.”

I recognize that no one (including myself) is truly objective, but at least we should try to wrestle with the evidence in an honest manner. I hope that I will not be found guilty of an over-eager exegesis - one that wants to see things a certain way, whether the evidence truly supports it or not.

For those who have adhered to this interpretation (‘cessation of obligation’), I must ask if this is something you reached on your own study or was it an exegetical tradition that has been handed down to you? I submit that if my conclusions are found to be sound, exegetes in future studies should consider seriously the possibility that he said what he meant (he would give the correct interpretation) and meant what he said (this interpretation will last until heaven and earth pass away, v.18).

In order to not be guilty of non-sequiturism, that is, stating conclusions that do not follow after the facts the supposed conclusion is based on, I would ask all readers to critique this work so that my striving for

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a correct understanding of what God has spoken might continue. Thank you.

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